

Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias' address to the Lithuanian Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs on 'The role of Greece in the security architecture of South Eastern Europe'
(Vilnius,15.06.21)

«Dear Colleagues,

It is a great honour for me to be here today and address you. And apart from a great honour, allow me to say that it is also a very great personal pleasure.

This is the first such bilateral visit of a Greek Foreign Minister in many years. Long overdue - I said it before – because even if it is not self-evident, our two countries have many things in common.

We are, of course, Partners and Allies and united by strong bonds in the European Union and in NATO. But today, I want to highlight another crucial commonality that has led to our increasingly converging views on the international order and the security architecture of Europe, of our regions, of the world.

I am speaking of the fact that Greece and Lithuania are both countries situated on the external borders of the EU and also the external borders of NATO. This is a reality that we have to deal with on a daily basis. A reality that comes with many severe and sometimes quite urgent challenges. Challenges not only for our countries, but for the EU as a whole.

Both our direct neighbours have a long track record of not playing exactly by the same rules or adhering to the same principles that we, as EU members, consider universal, but also fundamental.

In this regard, Greece fully understands and is instinctively sensitive to the challenges that you are facing with your difficult neighbors to the East. As you know, Greece has traditional relations with Russia dating back to its important role in supporting the Greek fight for Independence 200 years ago. These are relations that we are not ignoring and are not underestimating. But, also, we do not underestimate the challenges that we face today. We do understand them. And we believe that these are challenges for the EU as a whole, and they require a unified and coherent EU strategy and response.

Of course, the future of Russia's relations with the EU and its member-states depends first and foremost on Russia's behavior. There is no doubt that its full compliance with international law and its international commitments, remains a key prerequisite for any substantial progress in our dialogue and cooperation. This was actually one of the main messages that I relayed to Foreign Minister Lavrov during our recent meeting in Sochi.

In a similar way, our own difficult neighbour to the East, Turkey, poses serious challenges not only to Greece, but to the EU as a whole. And as I have expressed to my dear friend Minister Landsbergis many times before and today, and that I wish to express to you today as well, Greece is very grateful for your support and solidarity over the years on this issue.

I am referring in particular to Turkish widespread, aggressive and illegal conduct:

- in the Mediterranean and in the Aegean
- but also, on the instrumentalization of the migration issue, and I am so sorry to find out that you are facing a similar challenge here today.
- on the Cyprus issue
- and in other countries, such as Libya and Syria, supporting extremist groups, such as Hamas, and also in supporting forces in Lebanon and Iraq that do not share with us the same way of seeing things.

Dear friends, this is a region where not only big powers, but also regional players compete to consolidate and expand their influence; Where interventions and violations of the sovereignty of States, under the pretext of safeguarding their interests, has become unfortunately common place; Even refugees and migrants are being instrumentalized in the service of obscure state interests and political and economic gains; Where cultural, religious, sectarian and dogmatic affiliations are exploited to fuel extremism, topple regimes and expand political influence.

We share also a region that has a significant trade and energy transport routes, and if I may say so, we can look back to a few weeks ago and the consequences associated with the blockage of the Suez Canal by one single ship. Our overall region hosts a potential for new energy resources for Europe, but also the ability to diversify our sources and diminish our reliance on the relevant Russian monopoly.

We, Greece, a small-to-medium-sized country, remain a rules-based and principled country. We believe in a rules-based and principled policy. Our policy has been founded on the need for consistent, persistent and full respect of International Law by all countries - be they big, medium or small, without exceptions, without any footnotes.

Having been confronted with repeated and continuous violations of our sovereignty and sovereign rights by a neighbour and ally, we always strive to avoid militarization. We support and promote the peaceful resolution of differences, through dialogue and mutual trust, based on International Law and good neighbourly relations. We consistently point to the need of keeping channels of communication open, even in the most difficult of circumstances. We insist that violations of sovereignty, be they in Syria, in Libya, in Iraq, in Cyprus or in the Aegean, and violations of sovereign rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, must be condemned and ceased immediately. And we believe that a threat to the security of one of us is a threat to the collective security and must be dealt with collectively.

As such, we are sincere proponents of the idea that the EU must prioritize our collective European interests, over those that serve narrow and circumstantial objectives of individual member-states. Decisions of the European Council must be respected first-and-foremost by our own members, if we sincerely wish for them to be respected by third actors; Actors with a long track-record of violations of the international legal order.

Are we expected to stand by idle, while another country pursues the installation of operational Russian air defense systems on its soil, for example? Or, while it maintains a permanent threat of war, "casus belli" against a fellow NATO ally, destabilizing the Alliance's Southeastern Flank?

I take it that the answers to these questions are clear, even though some might prefer to portray the solutions as more complex.

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

Our strategic relations with the US are and will always be crucial. As such, we must ensure that our American friends maintain their focus on Europe and our wider neighbourhood. In this regard, the new Administration's recent re-engagement in the region is a promising and a very welcome development.

At the same time, and always with due regard to our common principles and interests, we should continue to foster cooperation and engage with new players. May I mention India as an example, or even Australia further to the South. Players whose growing impact on world and regional affairs cannot be overlooked and should not be underestimated.

Greece, together with Cyprus, have developed close ties with important partners in the overall region, such as Egypt, Israel and Gulf countries, such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and, also, Bahrain. While advancing our bilateral relations to new heights, we have also pioneered multilateral formats of cooperation dealing with a wide variety of fields: trade, investments, environment, innovative technologies and defense. These initiatives have always had one common denominator: the respect of international law and good neighbourly relations. As such, these relations are flexible and open to any and all that strictly and consistently abide by these basic principles. In this way, they have united the voices and fortified the efforts of all those that are committed to safeguarding peace, stability and development in Europe and the overall region.

This is the Greek response to the many challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean and the wider neighbourhood. Rules-based cooperation for the sake of peace. Peace for the sake of the prosperity of our peoples.

And I know fully well that we share this principled approach and these goals with Lithuania. Thus, allow me to conclude by underlining that we should never hesitate to coordinate our efforts toward promoting our values together. »