

“Building Peace From the Mediterranean to The Gulf”: Greece at the Center of New Transcontinental Geopolitical Order

By [Paul Antonopoulos](#)

Global Research, February 14, 2021

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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A geopolitically changing event took place on February 11 when Athens hosted the Foreign Ministers of Cyprus, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Iraq, as well as the Minister of State for International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates. The French Foreign Minister participated via video link. Their attendance, whether in Athens or via video link, was for the inauguration of the Philia Forum. Officially called the “Philia Forum – Building Friendship, Peace and Prosperity from the Mediterranean to the Gulf,” the name explicitly highlights the intentions of the forum – Philia, coming from the Greek word for friendship.

The forum was the brainchild of Greek **Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias**, who since assuming his role in mid-2019, has been working tirelessly to change the international perception of Greece as an economical and geopolitical nuisance on the periphery of the European Union, to a geopolitical center that connects Europe, West Asia and North Africa together.

Greek **Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis** opened the forum and explained that it is natural for Greece to establish this forum as it is positioned in the middle of two geographical arcs – a horizontal one from Portugal to the Persian Gulf, and a vertical one from the Balkans to Egypt which connects Europe with Africa. Emphasis on Greece’s geopolitical positioning was again made by Dendias, who said “Greece’s ambition is to be a bridge between the Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf.”

The Greeks were the original Eurasian civilization. In fact, Greek civilization spanned three continents when we consider Greek colonies in Ancient Egypt and Libya. However, the modern Greek state, which celebrates its 200th anniversary of independence from the Ottoman Empire on March 25, lays entirely within the European continent. Being reduced to the bounds of Europe and thanks to Russia, France and Britain for their contributions to the War of Independence, Greece has always looked westwards rather than towards their ancient civilizational connections in the east. This was especially consolidated in 1952 when U.S.-backed Nazi-collaborators forced Greece into NATO.

Under Dendias though, the prevalence of Greece’s westward pivot is finally being balanced out by an equal eastward focus. Previous to Dendias, Greek diplomacy and attitude was one of inferiority to their Turkish neighbors – one that believed Greece could not compete with

Ankara because Turkey controls the Dardanelle and Bosphorus Straits, has land borders with Europe, the Caucasus and West Asia, and has access to the Aegean, Black and Mediterranean Seas. This certainly gives Turkey a geopolitical advantage that it leverages to make demands against the Great Powers.

However, NATO's reliance on Turkey against Russia has been significantly reduced as the Alliance now also has access to the Black Sea via Bulgaria and Romania, direct borders with Russia via Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and can block the Dardanelle Straits via the Alexandroupolis Port in northern Greece. NATO's reduced reliance on Turkey is coupled with the country's growing isolation from its neighbors and the Great Powers as it continues to antagonize states through unlawful and unilateral actions in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Cyprus, the Caucasus and the East Mediterranean.

Through these antagonizations, Turkey has a host of adversaries, especially in the Arab World. It is no surprise that Greece has now created a Forum, where it emphasises its newfound confidence and strategic location, to include France, Cyprus and the Arab countries that have issues with Turkey.

"What unites us all today is the condemnation of illegal acts and the condemnation of irrational acts that undermine peace and security," Dendias said at the forum, adding "Our goal is to create a bulwark against threats, violence, extremism, intolerance and distortion of religion."

This again is in clear reference to Turkey's destabilization across the region and its utilization of Political Islam to work towards its ambitions. After highlighting Turkey's destabilizing actions, Dendias said "the Philia Forum on the other hand is the background for the creation of synergies in various fields, such as the economy, energy, transport, tourism, culture, education, civil protection and dialogue between religions."

Most importantly, in preparation of changing Greece's global image as a near bankrupt peripheral and unimportant European Union member, Dendias has prioritized engaging all the Great Powers, not just the U.S., in a positive manner. Whereas the West is consumed by Russophobia and Sinophobia, Dendias opened the path to mend relations with Russia, something Moscow has recognized by acknowledging openly why Athens cannot veto European Union sanctions but can still maintain positive relations, and by announcing 2021 to be the year of Greek-Chinese Culture and Tourism. In addition, Dendias was to be the first Greek Foreign Minister to meet an Indian counterpart since 2003. The COVID-19 pandemic put the meeting on hold, but Dendias emphasized last month that "it is a fact that on many issues of international interest, our positions are identical with those of India."

Through the Philia Forum, Greece is also prioritizing its relations with France and the Arab World. Greece is already acquiring the powerful Rafale fighter jets from France and will likely procure the French-made Belharra frigates. However, it is with the Arab World where Dendias' work has been most impressive, signing a mutual defense clause with the UAE, the first such agreement Greece has outside of NATO and Cyprus, and building military, economic and diplomatic relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Iraq.

Through the Philia Forum, Greece is advertising itself as the geopolitical center that connects West Asia, North Africa and Europe together, thus sidelining Turkey's traditional role as this meeting point. Greece will certainly remain a NATO and European Union

member, and will continue to build its relations with Washington, but it appears that it has taken a much more realistic approach, rather than liberal, to international relations. As part of this newfound confidence, Greece will no longer be bound by the interests of Washington and Brussels, but pursue multipolar policies to its own advantage that includes balancing its relations with the Great Powers and building strong ties with countries to its east. The Philia Forum is the first major step towards not only increasing Greece's importance in the regional chessboard, but a player that can no longer be ignored.

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This article was originally published on [InfoBrics](#).

Paul Antonopoulos is an independent geopolitical analyst.

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