

American Hellenic Institute Foundation Foreign Policy Trip: Democracies Must Stand Together

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As someone who hopes to pursue a career in public service, I have always wanted to ensure that my advocacy on behalf of Greece and Cyprus was strictly rooted in my intention to pursue American interests. I did not want to flirt with the notion that my calls for a new approach to the Eastern Mediterranean stemmed from inherent cultural biases rather than a sincere passion to strengthen American national security. Luckily, my participation in this year's foreign policy trip demonstrated that strong relationships between Greece, Cyprus, and the United States are directly beneficial to American interests and that expanded cooperation between the three countries has become increasingly imperative.

The reasoning for robust relations between these nations is simple. In a global environment where autocratic forces feel emboldened by internal divisions within the world's democracies, like-minded nations would benefit from expanded collaboration between one another. The Eastern Mediterranean may be a long way from Washington DC, but American interests in the region are too long to list, especially with the Kremlin just on the other side of NATO's southern flank. Rather than exemplify the behavior of a reliable ally, however, Turkey's militarized foreign policy and the revanchist sentiment of its strongman leader continue to threaten Greek sovereignty and directly challenge American strength in the region.

My meetings with military and political officials in Cyprus and Greece reinforced the simple truth that wishful thinking does not suffice when confronting a bad faith actor. Were it not for the capabilities and constant readiness of Greek and Cypriot forces in the region, Erdogan's dreams of reincarnating the Ottoman Empire would likely have culminated in expanded occupation of Hellenic territory rather than the current stalemate

between the two sides. The present situation, however, is neither sustainable nor entirely fitting of the word "stalemate." A stalemate implies a standstill. Turkey's actions indicate an intention to instigate conflict and foment instability.

The philosophy of some in Washington, in particular the State Department, is that Turkey must be placated in order to remain anchored to the West. However, this flawed approach is contradicted by Ankara's very conspicuous descent into authoritarianism. Such a viewpoint is grounded in naivety. What will transpire instead is an escalation of current provocations that will spark extensive conflict. There could be few larger problems for the United States than a war between two NATO allies - born out of one nation's spiral into dictatorship - while Washington seeks to prove that its system of international governance is superior to the emerging alternative presented by China. These are the potential costs associated with pursuing the status quo.

Learning more about all these issues cemented my belief that the Eastern Mediterranean issue concurrently presents itself as an American problem as well - one that requires decisive action. In a frightening time where some Americans view the pillars of democracy as a secondary priority to the achievement of political goals, what will our citizens think when our government sits idly by as Turkey - once naively dubbed as the Islamic world's model for democracy - further devolves into authoritarianism and lashes out at the birthplace of democracy? If American leadership fails to stand in favor of democratic values abroad, Americans would have less reason to believe that democracy's decline at home warrants concern or action.

One of the most impactful experiences I had on my trip came when listening to Cypriot officials describe the United States as the lone nation capable of forcing Turkey to halt its aggression and respect the sovereignty of democracies in the region. As Americans, we should absorb such an assessment with extreme humility and draw inspiration to stand up for those who revere the United States as a protector of democracy.

An equally important lesson I drew was that a stronger relationship with Greece would not come at the expense of strategic desires. In other words, abiding by our values will not compromise American interests. Few naval ports offer the strategic advantages that Souda Bay does. Few missile testing sites provide such a wide array of services as NAMFI. Even fewer air forces can demonstrate elite piloting skills quite like the Greeks do. This relationship is one that philosophically and strategically makes sense. It is a relationship deserving of attention.

Pursuing these relationships and altering our approach to the region would send a clear message to the rest of the world: America is still strong, still capable of asserting its power, and still willing to preserve democracy. That same message would hopefully resonate with our own citizens who have lost optimism in the American experiment. In that respect, my most influential takeaway from this trip is that these relationships are not just conducive to our interests in a region thousands of miles away, but important to the preservation of democracy in the free world as a whole.

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