

**From Adversity to Alliance:
Greece, Yugoslavia and Balkan Strategy, 1944-1959**

Greek-Yugoslav relations is a subject of pivotal importance for understanding the shaping of twentieth century Balkan balances. In the post-war period this relationship became even more interesting: Greece and Yugoslavia had radically different political, economic and social systems; they were bitterly divided in 1944-1948, but then they normalized relations, participated in a Balkan alliance together with Turkey, and when this alliance broke down, they continued their co-operation on a bilateral basis. In this paper it will be argued that the factor which divided Greece and Yugoslavia in 1944-1948 was not ideology, but strategy; and it was strategy that brought them closer after Tito's split with Stalin. After 1948 both countries shaped their policy on the basis of a mild realism, and their relationship was dominated by their perception of their respective national interests. In this paper, emphasis will be placed on Greek perceptions and assessments, but Yugoslav views will also be mentioned.

I

During the inter-war period Greece's major problem with Yugoslavia derived from the latter's great size: Belgrade was a powerful neighbour, capable of pressing Athens and of attracting support from the great powers, mainly France. At that time Greece was afraid of Yugoslavia's hegemonist tendencies in the Balkans, as well as of its desire to pose as the protector of the Slav-speaking minority of Greece and as a suitor for the port of Thessaloniki. It was clear that, facing Bulgarian revisionism, it would be impossible for Athens to resist pressures from both its northern neighbours; this was why the possibility of a Bulgarian-Yugoslav rapprochement was the nightmare scenario of the Athens policy-makers¹.

1. On the Greek perceptions of the security problem in the inter-war period see Constantinos Svolopoulos, "Le problème de la sécurité dans le sud-est européen de l'entre-

By 1944 the advent of Bulgarian and Yugoslav communists to power and the civil conflict in Greece seemed to convince many Greek policy-makers that they were facing this nightmare scenario in a radically worse version: Athens's fear about security in Greek Macedonia and in Western Thrace was now coupled with a pressing *internal* threat against the country's social and political order. Even during the war, an increasing number of Greek opinion leaders expressed concern at a Soviet descent in the Balkans and at the probable emergence of a Soviet-backed communist Slav (i.e. Bulgarian-Yugoslav) axis against Greece². Many were also suspicious about the intentions of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) regarding Macedonia. It is not a coincidence that the forged "agreement", according to which the KKE was to "sell out" Greek Macedonia, easily convinced great parts of the Greek people about the supposedly "treacherous" intentions of the Greek communists³. By the end of the war and in the first post-war period —during the Greek civil war— anticommunism as well as the fear of a "Slav menace" were strongly evident among Greek policy-makers and great parts of the public. This was more so in Greek Macedonia: a recent study has showed that anticommunism and Slavophobia largely coincided; political clubs which projected these views sprang all over Greek Macedonia from "below", not as a result of central party planning⁴.

deux-guerres: à la recherche des origines du Pacte Balkanique de 1934", *Balkan Studies* 14 (1973) 247-292; idem, *Το Βαλκανικόν Σύμφωνον και η Ελληνική Εξωτερική Πολιτική, 1928-1934: Ανέκδοτον Κείμενον του Ε. Βενιζέλου* (The Balkan Pact and Greek Foreign Policy: an Unpublished Document by E. Venizelos) Athens 1974; idem, *Η Ελληνική Εξωτερική Πολιτική* (Greek Foreign Policy), volume I (1900-1945), Athens 1992; Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, *Ο Ελευθέριος Βενιζέλος, η Ελληνοτουρκική Προσέγγιση και το Πρόβλημα της Ασφάλειας στα Βαλκάνια, 1928-1931* (Eleftherios Venizelos, the Greek-Turkish Rapprochement and the Problem of Security in the Balkans), Thessaloniki 1999.

2. See the views of two prominent personalities in Procopis Papastratis, "Ο Γεώργιος Καρτάλης στην Κατοχή" (George Kartalis during the Occupation), in *Ο Γεώργιος Καρτάλης και η δύσκολη δημοκρατία*, (George Kartalis and the Difficult Democracy), Athens 1998, pp. 55-84; Giorgos Theotokas, *Τετράδια ημερολογίου (1939-1953)* (Diary Notebooks), Athens, n.d., (15.2.1942), p. 337, (27.10.1942), p. 375, (6.1.1943), p. 389.

3. See Evangelos Kofos, *The Impact of the Macedonian Question on Civil Conflict in Greece (1943-1949)*, ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ, occasional Paper No. 3, Athens 1989.

4. Basil K. Gounaris, *Εγνωσμένων Κοινωνικών Φρονημάτων: Κοινωνικές και Άλλες Όψεις του Αντικομμουνισμού στη Μακεδονία του Εμφυλίου Πολέμου* (Of Known Social Beliefs: Social and other Aspects of Anticommunism in Civil War Macedonia), Thessaloniki 2002.

In the second half of the 1940s Yugoslavia's size, power and the personalities of its leaders loomed large in these Greek fears. Tito's strongly anti-western line, his close relations with Moscow, his claim on Greek Macedonia, his aid to the KKE during the civil war, and mostly, the fact that he could probably count on superpower support in a bid for territory, alarmed Greek officials⁵. These fears found their expression in a strongly anticommunist rhetoric: no Greek official or journalist —nor, for that matter, any of their western colleagues— made a distinction between Yugoslav and Bulgarian interests. For western analysts, there was little difference between Tito and Georgi Dimitrov: both were communists and therefore loyal servants of the new power centre of Moscow. In the western perception of communism as a "monolith", strategic and ideological rivalries seemed to coincide.

But this was why the Tito-Stalin split proved a turning point for the shaping of post-war Balkan balances. Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform showed that it was possible for a communist regime to resist Stalin's directives. At the same time, the Tito-Stalin split deprived Yugoslavia of Soviet support and thus denied to Tito the means to pursue territorial change. For Athens, this was a very interesting situation, which called for a crucial strategic decision: would communist Yugoslavia be an acceptable partner, if it were not under Soviet control? It was now, during a period when there could be a choice between strategy and ideology, that the predominance of the former was displayed.

A recent study in the reactions of the Greek Press to the Tito-Stalin split has shown that initially the news were received in Athens with strong disbelief: it was difficult for Greek analysts to imagine that a hard-line communist leader in Eastern Europe could disagree with Stalin; it was even more difficult for them to believe that Tito could survive a quarrel with Moscow. But in the second half of 1948, as Tito remained

5. Basil Kondis, *Η Αγγλοαμερικανική Πολιτική και το Ελληνικό Πρόβλημα, 1945-1949* (Anglo-American Policy and the Greek Problem), Thessaloniki 1984; Basil Kondis and Spyros Sfetas (eds.), *Εμφύλιος Πόλεμος: Έγγραφα από τα Γιουγκοσλαβικά και Βουλγαρικά Αρχειά* (The Civil War: Documents from the Yugoslav and Bulgarian Archives), Thessaloniki 1999; Basil Kondis, "The 'Macedonian Question' as a Balkan Problem in 1940s", *Balkan Studies* 28 (1987) 151-160; Evangelos Kofos, *The Impact of the Macedonian Question*, *op.cit.*; Amikam Nachmani, *International Intervention in the Greek Civil War: the United Nations Special Committee on the Balkans, 1947-1952*, New York 1990.

in power despite some Stalinist attempts to oust him, the Greek Press changed its line, and noted that since the Yugoslav leader clashed with Moscow and Sofia, Greece's strategic position dramatically recovered. In this context, Greek analysts argued, Athens would have every motive to wish for Tito's survival. It was indicative that this argument first appeared in the newspaper *Hellas*, of George Papandreou's Democratic Socialist Party, then in *Hestia*, strongly connected with Alexis Kyrrou, the Greek Permanent Representative at the UN; other dailies such as the conservative *Kathimerini*, simply followed⁶. As for official Athens, its cautious and pragmatic response to the Tito-Stalin split could also be attributed to the influence of a profoundly realist diplomat, Panayiotis Pipinelis, the Permanent Under-secretary of the Foreign Ministry.

Indeed, it is difficult to adequately describe the sense of relief that the Tito-Stalin split created in Athens: to put it simply, the nightmare scenario was put aside. The Greeks and the Yugoslavs then started a cautious rapprochement, which was delayed because of their disagreements on the Macedonian Question. In 1950 the two countries exchanged Ambassadors. But again it is notable that even after the Tito-Stalin split, the Greek-Yugoslav rapprochement was delayed because of a security problem, the Macedonian Question, not by any ideological second thoughts⁷.

II

After Greece's and Turkey's accession to NATO in 1952, Yugoslavia again tended to acquire a pivotal role in Greek policy. Athens was strongly in favour of defence co-operation with Belgrade and Ankara. The need for a tripartite arrangement was pressing, because without Yugoslav participation in the common defence, the Turks were reluctant to commit large forces in their European territory⁸. Once more, for Athens, this was a simple problem: without the Yugoslavs, the Turks

6. Zafiris Rossides, "Η Πήξη Τίτο-Στάλιν μέσα από τα Δημοσιεύματα του Ελληνικού Αστικού Τύπου" (The Tito-Stalin Split through the Greek Civic Press), M.A. Thesis, Dept. of History, University of Athens, 2001.

7. Ioannis Stefanidis, "United States, Great Britain and the Greek-Yugoslav Rapprochement", *Balkan Studies* 27 (1986) 315-343.

8. For this Turkish position see Peurifoy to State Department, 6 May 1952 and McGhee to State Department, 6 February 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, VIII, pp. 592-593 and 616-619.

would retreat in Asia Minor in the early stages of a war, and Greece itself would stand little chance against Bulgaria; but together with Yugoslavia and with Turkey's participation, the pro-western forces would enjoy a clear superiority against Sofia, and Greece's territory would avoid a new Bulgarian invasion. In early 1952 Belgrade notified Athens that the federal army would defend the whole of the country's territory, instead of concentrating in the Bosnian and Montenegrin mountains⁹. This opened the road for a common defence effort with Turkey as well. For Greek security, this Yugoslav decision signalled the transition from a state of desperate military inferiority to a position of regional supremacy.

The Yugoslav decision to hold their ground in the Balkan mainland started a frenzy of visits of political and military leaders in the Athens-Belgrade-Ankara triangle, aiming at the conclusion of a defence agreement¹⁰. But this created a further problem, regarding the nature of this tripartite arrangement: other NATO countries would not accept an "automatic" guarantee, which could draw the western alliance into a world war in case of a Yugoslav conflict with a Soviet satellite, for example Hungary; in other words, an automatic guarantee in a Greek-Turkish-Yugoslav Treaty could amount to a NATO blank check to Belgrade. Greece and Turkey were also afraid that an automatic guarantee might bring them into conflict with Italy, in case a crisis erupted over Trieste. It is indicative that the US government and most NATO members were against such a provision in a tripartite defence treaty¹¹.

Thus, the first tripartite agreement was a Pact of Friendship, signed on 28 February 1953. Yet, it also provided for common examination of defence issues and paved the way for meetings between the military planners of the three countries¹². Following that, discussions started on a defence Pact, with the Yugoslavs evidently in favour of an automatic

9. Record, Averoff-Birgi, Athens, 24 April 1952, in Constantinios G. Karamanlis Foundation, Evangelos Averoff-Tossizza Political Archive, file 111.

10. See the US comment in Anschuetz to State Department, 22 January 1953, NARA, State Department papers, RG 59, 665.81/1-2253.

11. See Acheson to US Embassy Athens, 5 December 1952, and 7 January 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-54, VIII, pp. 598-600 και 605-607.

12. On the 1953 Balkan Pact and its provisions see John O. Iatrides, *Balkan Triangle: Birth and Decline of an Alliance across Ideological Boundaries*, The Hague - Paris 1968.

guarantee. The Greek policy-makers appeared reluctant to accept this. In November 1953, the Greek Defence Minister, Panayiotis Kanellopoulos, speaking in the Greek Parliament, referred to the “ongoing effort of the armed forces of the three Balkan Pact countries to prepare to act in a co-ordinated manner in case [...] they would sustain an attack in the common area and in case they would become co-belligerents”¹³.

Kanellopoulos’s position was extremely careful: the attack would have to take place in the “common area”, namely the south of the Balkans, not in Yugoslavia’s central European borders; and even then, some other step would be required for the three countries to become “co-belligerents”. This Greek position was also stressed by Prime Minister Alexandros Papagos in various occasions, such as his visit to Paris in January 1954; at that time, Papagos also described Tito as a “conservative” (which was a bit hypocritical, coming from the leader of the Greek Right and the victor of the civil war), and rejected the idea of an automatic guarantee which would come into conflict with Greece’s obligations in NATO¹⁴.

Mutual realistic cynicism reached its peak during Tito’s visit to Athens in June 1954, at a moment when the Yugoslav leader wanted to further the idea of a defence Pact with Greece and Turkey. Tito, the most successful Balkan communist leader and the statesman who had claimed Greek Macedonia less than a decade ago, was triumphantly welcomed by the conservative and the liberal Greek Press as the leader of “an allied country” (which Yugoslavia *was not* at that time); the prominent conservative daily *Acropolis* hailed him as “a symbol of resistance to red imperialism”¹⁵. Tito himself established an excellent personal relationship with the Greek Royals, namely the only surviving royal family in the Balkans; Queen Frederica later noted in her memoirs that the Yugoslav leader had made an excellent impression on them¹⁶.

13. Greek Parliament, *Official Records of the Debates*, Period III, Synod II, p. 43.

14. Rumbold (Paris) to Cheetham, 28 January 1954, PRO FO 371/112834/4.

15. On the visit see Peake to FO, 4 June 1954, FO 371/112826/12; Royce (Athens) to Eden, 11 June 1954, and Peake to Harrison, 11 June 1954, FO 112838/3 and 4; John O. Iatrides, *Balkan Triangle*, *op.cit.*, pp. 128-129. On the Greek Press see Constantinos Karamanlis Foundation, Anastasios Kanellopoulos Collection, file 22.

16. Queen Frederica, *Μέτρον Κατανόησης* (A Measure of Understanding), Athens 1971, pp. 228-230.

The final phase of tripartite defence talks took place in the summer of 1954, and was complicated by an ill-tempered last-minute Turkish attempt to bring Italy in the alliance, which provoked strong Yugoslav reactions. At that time, according to the Secretary General of the Greek Foreign Ministry, Alexis Kyrou, Belgrade was in such a dangerous psychological state, that Greece considered signing a bilateral Greek-Yugoslav Treaty; the leading daily *Kathimerini* also came up with a similar suggestion. In the following days the Greeks tried to impress on the Yugoslavs that Turkey did not try to trap them, and Papagos publicly called for a quick conclusion of the tripartite talks¹⁷. Thus, at that moment the Greeks tried to protect the defence arrangement with Yugoslavia, which they regarded instrumental for their security.

Finally the tripartite defence Pact was signed on 9 August 1954 in the Yugoslav city of Bled. It did not provide for an automatic guarantee, and did not touch upon the way that common agreement for a declaration of war would be reached¹⁸. Evidently, the three countries considered that in case of a Soviet attack in the Balkans they would anyway be on the same side. For the Greeks, the 1954 defence Pact was the peak of their success on the field of security. Ironically, this tripartite arrangement was almost immediately neutralized, in 1955, because of the Greek-Turkish dispute over Cyprus and because of the Soviet opening to Tito. But in the next four years, with Greek-Turkish relations in a shambles, Yugoslavia would tend to acquire an even greater importance for Greek policy.

III

The new Greek government under Constantinos Karamanlis was the Greek administration least concerned about ideological differences with Belgrade. For Karamanlis and the Foreign Minister, Evangelos Averoff-Tossizza, who assumed his post in May 1956, strategy was paramount:

17. Lambert to FO, 15 and 16 July, Bowker (Ankara) to FO, 17 July and FO minute (Harrison), 17 July 1954, FO 371/113222/28. See also Scott Fox (Ankara) to Young, 16 July 1954, FO 371/113223/55; John O. Iatrides, *Balkan Triangle*, *op.cit.*, p. 136; "Why not bilateral?", *Kathimerini* (17 July 1954).

18. Greek Foreign Ministry Minute (Matsas), 27 February 1959, in Constantinos G. Karamanlis Foundation, Constantinos Karamanlis Archive, file 8A (hereafter KA/8A); see also the analysis in John O. Iatrides, *Balkan Triangle*, *op.cit.*, pp. 138-141.

they held that Greece, as a coastal state, faced the pressure of the peoples of the Balkan mainland who tried to acquire access to the sea. In this analysis, communism was a threat *complementary* to the main geopolitical challenge; and in this context it was anyway imperative to keep in touch with Yugoslavia in order to deny it to Moscow¹⁹.

Initially, in 1955-1956, the Karamanlis government tried to open the road for a revival of the Balkan Pacts through a settlement in Cyprus, which would restore Greek-Turkish relations. By now the Yugoslavs appeared reluctant to place emphasis on the 1954 military Pact, which could provoke Soviet reactions: Belgrade rather preferred to maintain the framework for political co-operation of the 1953 agreement. The Greeks agreed with this approach: they were always interested in informal military contacts rather than in formal defence treaties with Belgrade; anyway, as the British noted, the Greeks had always tended to be more understanding to Yugoslav sensitivities than the Turks. Yet, the Karamanlis government also made it clear that in case a revival of the tripartite Pacts proved impossible, it would be preferable to proceed to a bilateral Greek-Yugoslav rapprochement. Athens needed regional support to hold its position in the Balkans; if this support could not be found in Turkey, it would simply be sought in Belgrade. Indeed, the Greek-Yugoslav rapprochement actually took place with the visit of Karamanlis and Averoff to Belgrade in December 1956. Developments in the autumn of 1956 had brought the two countries closer: firstly, it became clear that no solution on Cyprus was forthcoming and therefore that Greek-Turkish co-operation would not be restored; secondly, the Soviet invasion of Hungary alarmed the Yugoslavs and convinced them that they should seek co-operation with their southern NATO neighbour²⁰.

The formation of the Greek-Yugoslav axis was confirmed by a succession of high level visits in 1957 and 1958; for example, Svetozar Vukmanović Tempo and Edvard Kardelj came to Athens, while the Greek

19. Karamanlis and Averoff often spoke of this need. See Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, "Security and the European Option: Greek Foreign Policy, 1952-1962", *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (1995) 187-202.

20. Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, "The 1956 Reshaping of Greek Foreign Policy: the Balkans and the Beginning of the 'Detachment' Policy", *Journal of Modern Hellenism* 14 (1997) 119-138.

Royals visited Tito at Brioni. In these meetings, the two governments went out of their way to show that they were largely in agreement on the important international problems of that time, while Karamanlis also insisted that the only issue which could separate them was a possible resurgence of the Macedonian Question on the initiative of Skopje; the Yugoslavs reassured Athens of their intention to maintain bilateral relations on this excellent level²¹.

But the Greek-Yugoslav rapprochement also involved military co-operation and the exchange of military visits, aiming at the co-ordination of common defence²². This was a crucial issue for Athens. It is not a coincidence that the new Greek Ambassador to Belgrade, who assumed his post in 1957, was none other than General Thrassyvoulos Tsakalotos, a former chief of the Army Staff and a leading Greek military personality, who was sent to Yugoslavia exactly to strengthen bilateral military co-operation. According to Tsakalotos's reports from Belgrade, the Yugoslavs showed a similar interest in military co-ordination: "they do not forget, when international needs call for this, to underline the military part of the alliance [with Greece]"²³. This military co-ordination of the two countries proved a great success: when, in 1958, the British asked the Greeks whether they would pursue a bilateral defence agreement with Belgrade, Athens replied that military co-operation had already developed and there was no need for a formal arrangement²⁴.

This political/military rapprochement also allowed Greece to assume a regional role as a NATO member: Greek officials repeatedly stressed to their NATO counterparts that Athens provided a link with Tito and was helping him preserve his independence from Moscow. This Greek argument was projected as early as January 1957, immediately after the start of the bilateral rapprochement²⁵. The US itself was also interested in this

21. On the Vukmanović-Tempo and the Kardelj visits see Constantinos Svolopoulos (gen. ed.) *Κωνσταντίνος Καραμανλής: Αρχείο, Γεγονότα και Κείμενα* (Archive Events and Texts), volume 2 (Athens, 1993), (hereafter *Karamanlis*), pp. 315 and 438-450.

22. Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, "The Greek-Yugoslav Relationship during the Cold War", in *Die Balkanländer im Europa der Gegenwart*, Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki 1994, pp. 83-91.

23. Tsakalotos (Belgrade) to Foreign Ministry, 17 October 1957, KA/4A; see also Tsakalotos to Foreign Ministry 26 April and 7 May 1958, KA/5A.

24. Athens to FO, 2 July 1958, FO 371/136232/4.

25. See the Greek memorandum to the Eisenhower's committee of civilian advisers in

Greek role as a link to Tito. The US National Security Council noted in 1957 and in 1961 that the strategic value of Greece also involved its relationship with Yugoslavia; interestingly, the 1957 document mentioned the 1953-1954 tripartite Pacts, but the 1961 document omitted any such reference²⁶.

On their part, in the aftermath of the Hungarian crisis and as they again quarrelled with the Soviets in 1958, the Yugoslavs repeatedly made it clear that it was Greece's NATO membership that made Athens a valuable partner for them. Thus, during the 1958 Brioni meeting of Tito, Nasser and Averoff, the Yugoslav leader spoke with contempt about Nasser's idea of forming a neutralist Belgrade-Athens-Cairo axis²⁷. Two months later, at a moment when British policy on Cyprus threatened to push Greece out of the western alliance, Tito urged Karamanlis to remain in NATO²⁸. As the Greek Foreign Ministry noted in February 1959, "the value of Greek friendship would substantially decrease for them [the Yugoslavs], if the bonds between Greece and the western powers became looser"²⁹.

IV

The peak of the Greek-Yugoslav rapprochement was recorded in 1959-1960. The tripartite Pacts were not revived after the Greek-Turkish settlement on Cyprus; yet Athens and Belgrade continued their military co-ordination and in June 1959 signed a number of agreements regarding their economic and technical co-operation. But a new crisis over the Macedonian affair erupted again in 1961-1962. It was indicative that this crisis occurred at a period when Yugoslav fears about Soviet policy seemed to have been allayed; and it is similarly interesting that the resolution of the crisis came in the immediate aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis, namely at a moment of international tension. This further displays the primacy of international political and strategic realities in the Greek-Yugoslav relationship: both countries tended to come closer at times when they were afraid of Soviet intentions. To put

Karamanlis, op.cit., volume 2, pp. 256-258.

26. NSC-5718/1, 5 August 1957 and NSC-6101, 4 January 1961.

27. Ankara to FO, 30 July 1958, FO 371/136232/8.

28. Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, "The Greek-Yugoslav Relationship", *op.cit.*

29. Foreign Ministry Minute (NATO Directory), February 1959, KA/8A.

it simply, in the early post-war period the state of Greek-Yugoslav relations tended to be the exact opposite of the state of Soviet-Yugoslav relations. In this context, even emotionally explosive problems, such as that of the Greek children who had been abducted during the civil war, were put aside³⁰.

Throughout 1944-1959, even in later periods, ideology played a minimum role in Greek-Yugoslav relations. It was only in 1944-1948 that it appeared to be a major factor in the rhetoric of the two countries; but at that time, ideological and strategic rivalries largely coincided, and it was the latter, rather than the former, that really played the dominant role. This became clear after the Tito-Stalin split: whenever ideology and Balkan power politics pointed to different directions, both states readily followed the latter. Despite some outbursts (which concerned the Macedonian Question, namely a security, not an ideological problem), after 1948 their policy was pragmatic and aimed at the maintenance of balance in the troubled South-eastern Europe.

30. See Milan Ristović, *A Long Journey Home: Greek Refugee Children in Yugoslavia, 1948-1960*, Thessaloniki 2000; Eirini Lagani, *To "παιδομάζωμα" και οι ελληνογιουγκοσλαβικές σχέσεις, 1949-1953* ("Paidomazoma" and Greek-Yugoslav Relations), Athens 1996.