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Greece's Trilateral Partnerships in the Balkans and the Black Sea Region and its Quest for National Security¹

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Abstract

National security has always been of vital importance for Greece due to its small size and the variety of threats it encountered because of its strategic location. Thus, in an effort to enhance the majority of the components –military, economic, energy, maritime, cultural, domestic, etc.– of its national security, it has established several multilateral cooperative schemes in regional level. The purpose of the article is to briefly present the key events and main fields of cooperation of Greece's trilateral partnerships that have been established in the Balkans and the Black Sea region –namely 'Greece, Cyprus and Armenia', 'Greece, Cyprus and Serbia', and 'Greece, Bulgaria and Romania'– and assesses the contribution of these partnerships to the national security of Greece and the overall regional security.

Keywords: Greece, Cyprus, Armenia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Turkiye, Trilateral Partnership, National Security, Foreign Policy.

Introduction

Greece's strategic location in the crossroads of three continents – Europe, Asia and Africa – and two seas –the Mediterranean and the Black Sea– is the main reason why this small state has always been facing a variety of threats, making national security of vital importance for its existence. It must also be noted that *national security* is a complex term that encompasses the protection of a *state* (national infrastructure and state function) and its *citizens* not only from military threats, but also from economic, energy, maritime, domestic, cultural, health, cyber and several other security threats, according to which national security is broken down to a variety of components such as economic security, energy security, maritime security, domestic security, cultural security, health security, cybersecurity, etc. (Pikramenos & Koukakis, 2023:32).

The purpose of the article is to briefly present the trilateral cooperative schemes that have been established by Greece in the Balkans and the Black Sea (BBS) region in order to enhance its national security. Its importance lies on the fact that the trilateral partnerships of Greece affect regional

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security and stability, and that it provides current information in a systematic way, contributing to the existing literature regarding the Greek foreign policy and multilateralism, while its main conclusion is that the establishment of trilateral partnerships enhances Greece's overall national security. First, it presents the key events and fields of cooperation of the partnership '*Greece, Cyprus and Armenia*', then the key events and fields of cooperation of the partnership '*Greece, Cyprus and Serbia*', and finally the ones of '*Greece, Bulgaria and Romania*', to conclude by assessing the contribution of these partnerships to Greece's national security.

The trilateral partnership of Greece, Cyprus and Armenia

The trilateral partnership of Greece, Cyprus and Armenia was initiated by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) of the three states on June 4, 2019 in Nicosia (Cyprus), in order to enhance political dialogue and cooperation among its members in several policy fields such as trade, agriculture, tourism, and diaspora, which would facilitate the promotion of peace, stability and prosperity (Armenian Freedom TV, 2019). Moreover, it allowed them to jointly address the threat posed by the aggressive Turkish foreign policy, stressing the ongoing illegal Turkish occupation of the northern part of Cyprus, the illegal Turkish maritime activities in the Eastern Mediterranean and Türkiye's refusal to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Table 1. Key events regarding the trilateral cooperation of Greece, Cyprus and Armenia

Date	Key Event	Location	Remarks
June 4, 2019	Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs	Nicosia (Cyprus)	-
February 28, 2020	Meeting of delegations of the Ministries of Defence	Athens (Greece)	1 st Military Cooperation Programme
August 31, 2021	Meeting of delegations of the Ministries of Defence	Nicosia (Cyprus)	2 nd Military Cooperation Programme
May 12, 2022	Meeting of delegations of the Ministries of Defence	Yerevan (Armenia)	3 rd Military Cooperation Programme
June 24, 2022	Meeting of the Armenian High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs, the Greek Deputy MoFA and the Presidential Commissioner for Humanitarian Issues and Overseas Cypriots	Athens (Greece)	Memorandum on trilateral cooperation on diaspora
September 19, 2022	Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs	New York (USA)	77 th session of the UN General Assembly
October 29, 2022	Meeting of the Armenian High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs, the Greek Deputy MoFA and the Presidential Commissioner for Humanitarian Issues and Overseas Cypriots	Yerevan (Armenia)	-

Source: Edited by Georgios Koukakis

On June 24, 2022 the Armenian High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs, the Greek Deputy MoFA and the Presidential Commissioner for Humanitarian Issues and Overseas Cypriots held a second trilateral meeting in Athens (Greece) where they signed a *memorandum on trilateral cooperation on diaspora* (Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs, 2022), On September 19, 2022 the three MoFA met again in New York (USA) –in the sidelines of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly– where they discussed issues related to the security situation of South Caucasus and the Eastern Mediterranean (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022b).

On October 29, 2022 a second meeting was held between the Greek Deputy MoFA responsible for Hellenism Abroad, the Commissioner of the Cyprus Presidency for Humanitarian and Diaspora Issues, and Armenia's High Commissioner for Diaspora in Yerevan (Armenia) (Greek City Times, 2022), where the three officials discussed common historical and cultural issues on diaspora, in addition to the *Pontian Greek Genocide* of 1916-1923 (Meichanetsidis, 2015), *the Armenian Genocide* of 1915-1916 (Hofmann, 2015) and the ongoing illegal occupation of Northern Cyprus that followed the Turkish invasion of 1974 (Pabian, 2021).

As far as the military cooperation is concerned, the three states have signed three trilateral *Military Cooperation Programmes* on February 28, 2020 (Hellenic National Defence General Staff, 2020), August 31, 2021 (Newsroom, 2021c) and May 12, 2022 (Financial Mirror, 2022), regarding the conduction of joint exercises and training/education activities of their military personnel. It must also be stressed that the importance of the trilateral military cooperation was highlighted by the Cypriot side (Financial Mirror, 2022) stating that it:

“[...] reflects the broad network of bilateral and multilateral military cooperation developed by the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence, actively contributing to the common pursuit of consolidating security and stability in the Middle East.”

The trilateral partnership of Greece, Cyprus and Serbia

The first meeting of Greece, Cyprus and Serbia initiating their trilateral partnership was held in Belgrade (Serbia) on April 5, 2021 (Newsroom, 2021a), where the three MoFA of the partner-states discussed international law, migration and energy issues. On September 26, 2022 a second trilateral meeting between the three MoFA took place in New York (USA) –in the sidelines of the high-level week of the United Nations General Assembly (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022c)– where they exchanged views regarding the future of their cooperation, in order to maintain its political momentum.

Table 2. Key events regarding the trilateral cooperation of Greece, Cyprus and Serbia

Date	Key Event	Location	Remarks
April 5, 2021	Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs	Belgrade (Serbia)	-
July 4-10, 2021	Trilateral Special Operations Forces exercise	Niš (Serbia)	Military Cooperation Programme
September 26, 2022	Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs	New York (USA)	United Nations General Assembly (high-level week)

Source: Edited by Georgios Koukakis

As far as the military dimension of the cooperation is concerned, Greece, Cyprus and Serbia have signed a *Military Cooperation Programme* in the context of which Serbia organised and executed a trilateral *Special Operations Forces exercise* on July 4-10, 2021 in the city of Niš (Serbia), in order to increase the level of cooperation and understanding between the three partner-states (Newsroom, 2021b).

The trilateral partnership of Greece, Bulgaria and Romania

The trilateral partnership of Greece, Bulgaria and Romania was established on October 3, 1998 in Delphi (Greece) (Baías, 1999:4) and despite the fact that it is one of Greece's oldest trilateral partnerships, it had remained inactive since March 12, 2018 when the 10th trilateral meeting of the three MoFA was held in Bucharest (Romania) (Greece in Romania, 2018).

The trilateral partnership revived on May 12, 2022 in Athens, where the Greek Alternate MoFA, the Deputy MoFA of Bulgaria and the State Secretary for Global Affairs of the MoFA of Romania held a meeting, after which they issued a *Joint Statement* focusing on the energy crisis due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022a). A second meeting of the same officials was held on October 13, 2022 in Sofia (Bulgaria), where they mainly discussed energy security issues, which –along with the interconnection of the three states– is considered a key priority (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022d). They agreed to exploit energy reserves in order to differentiate their energy sources of supply, expressed their intention to interconnect their networks and pipelines, and confirmed their solidarity with Ukraine emphasizing on the role of international law in establishing good neighbourliness and stability in the Balkans.

In the context of the trilateral cooperation, on December 1, 2022 –during the 22nd World LNG Summit that took place in Athens (Greece) from November 29, 2022 to December 2, 2022 under the auspices of the Greek Ministry of Environment and Energy– Greece, Bulgaria and Romania signed a *Memorandum of Understanding* (MoU) on energy with *Hungary*, expressing their intention to construct a *Vertical Gas Corridor* in order to enable natural gas bi-directional flows between the four countries (Press Center, 2022), building upon the *Joint Statement* of the Ministers of Energy of the four States that was released on September 8, 2016 during the *Central and South-Eastern European Gas Connectivity* (CESEC) meeting that was held in Budapest (Romania) (Directorate-General for Energy, 2016).

Table 3. Key events regarding the trilateral cooperation of Greece, Bulgaria and Romania

Date/Time Period	Key Event	Location	Remarks
May 12, 2022	Meeting of Greek Alternate MoFA, the Deputy MoFA of Bulgaria and the State Secretary for Global Affairs of the MoFA of Romania	Athens (Greece)	Joint Statement
October 13, 2022	Meeting of Greek Alternate MoFA, the Deputy MoFA of Bulgaria and the State Secretary for Global Affairs of the MoFA of Romania	Sofia (Bulgaria)	Energy issues
December 1, 2022	Meeting of Ministers of Energy	Athens (Greece)	Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on energy with Hungary 22 nd World LNG Summit
October 9, 2023	Meeting of the Prime Ministers of Greece, Bulgaria and Romania	Euxinograd (Bulgaria)	Joint Declaration
January 19, 2024	Meeting of Ministers of Energy	Athens (Greece)	Signature of Declaration of Intent Annual meeting of CESEC
March 14, 2024	Meeting of Ministers of Infrastructure and Transport	Sofia (Bulgaria)	Transport corridor
August 22, 2022 - September 2, 2022	Joint Special Forces training exercise ‘Balkan Shield 22’	Plovdiv & Pazardzhik (Bulgaria)	-
Note: The cells in bold letters indicate events participated by the Heads of State & Government			

Source: Edited by Georgios Koukakis

On October 9, 2023 the Prime Ministers (PM) of Greece, Bulgaria and Romania held a trilateral meeting in Euxinograd (Bulgaria) where they reaffirmed the excellent relations of the their states, issuing a *Joint Declaration* stating their intention to further enhance their cooperation, expressing

their support to *Ukraine* and *Moldova*, calling for an immediate end to the unlawful Russian restrictions to freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, reaffirming their support to the Western Balkans' European path (Koukakis, 2022b), highlighting the importance of the *Three Seas Initiative*, agreeing to enhance their cooperation in order to ensure the energy security of *NATO's Eastern Flank* and to establish a Trilateral Working Group in order to develop a multimodal *transport corridor* linking the three states, committing to advance the *Vertical Gas Corridor* project, agreeing to jointly address climate change in a comprehensive manner, and expressing their intention to strengthen their cooperation in combatting illegal migration and organised crime (Prime Minister, 2023).

Finally, on January 19, 2024 the three states signed a *Declaration of Intent* to develop offshore wind installations during the annual meeting of the CESEC (Newsroom, 2024), while on March 14, 2024 the Ministers of Infrastructure and Transport of Greece, Bulgaria and Romania met in Sofia (Bulgaria) where they discussed the development of a transport corridor connecting Alexandroupolis (Greece) to several ports of the Black Sea and the Bulgarian trade routes (Newsroom, 2024b).

As far as the military cooperation is concerned, the Greek, Bulgarian and Romanian Ministers of Defence –on the initiative of the Bulgarian side– met on April 18, 2016 in the sidelines of the Foreign Affairs Council meeting of the EU in the city of Luxembourg (Luxembourg), where they agreed to enhance their cooperation (Newsroom, 2016). After the formentioned revitalization of their partnership, the agreement was implemented through the joint Special Forces training *Balkan Shield 22* (Vodenova, 2022), that was conducted in the regions of Plovdiv and Pazardzhik (Bulgaria) from August 22, 2022 to September 2, 2022.

The trilateral partnerships' contribution to Greece's national security

Taking into consideration the facts presented in this paper, it is concluded that the contribution of the trilateral partnership of *Greece, Cyprus, and Armenia* to Greece's national security is relatively small, as it mainly concerns the enhancement of its *military security* due to the respective cooperation programme and its *cultural security* due to the memorandum on diaspora (**Table 4**).

As far as the trilateral partnership of *Greece, Cyprus, and Serbia* is concerned, its contribution to Greece's national security is even smaller, as the only component that is being enhanced is *military security* due to the respective cooperation programme between the three states (**Table 4**).

On the other hand, the trilateral partnership of *Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania* –despite the fact that it had been inactive for almost 4 years– seems to be the most promising one, as it contributes to the

enhancement of Greece's *military security* due to the military cooperation of the three states, *energy security* due to the MoU on energy with Hungary, *economic security* due to the Working Group and the Declaration of Intent regarding the construction of a transport corridor, *domestic security* due to their statements on combating organised crime, and *maritime security* due to their emphasis on using international law as the main method of resolving disputes among states and on the freedom of movement in the Black Sea (Table 4).

Table 4. The contribution of the trilateral partnerships in Greece's national security

Trilateral Partnership	National Security Component						Remarks
	Military	Economic	Energy	Maritime	Cultural	Domestic	
Greece - Cyprus - Armenia	√	-	-	-	√	-	Memorandum on diaspora Military Cooperation Programme
Greece - Cyprus - Serbia	√	-	-	-	-	-	Military Cooperation Programme
Greece - Bulgaria - Romania	√	√	√	√	-	√	MoU on energy with Hungary (Vertical Gas Corridor) Trilateral Working Group & Declaration of Intent (Transport Corridor) Military Cooperation (Joint Special Forces training Balkan Shield 22)

Source: Edited by Georgios Koukakis

At this point, it must be stressed that the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is of vital importance for Greece, since Türkiye does not acknowledge several of its provisions regarding the continental shelf and the EEZ and in 2019 proceeded in the illegal delimitation of its maritime zones with the Government of National Accords-State of Libya through the signature of a Memorandum (Koukakis, 2022a:3). Besides, the fact that this partnership is expressed in the *highest political level* reveals the strong political will of the partner-states involved.

Conclusion

To conclude, it must be stressed that the establishment of trilateral partnerships in the Balkans and the Black Sea region –in the context of which Greece has signed a significant number of agreements in several policy fields– leads to the development of strong ties among partner-states and eventually to their interdependency, decreasing the possibility of an aggressive foreign policy implementation

towards each other. Therefore, they enhance not only Greece's overall national security but regional security as well, as according to Dimou (2021):

“Trilateral partnerships, the miniature of multilateralism, can significantly contribute to peace, security, and economic development between regional countries. Shared interests, common values, and effective leaderships guarantee coordination to address regional contingencies.”

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