



The Row between Russia and Greece

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Relations between Russia and Greece remained insulated from the larger tensions between Moscow and the West since 2014. Greece managed to maintain good relations with Moscow despite sanctions. To an extent, Athens had been vocal against sanctions being imposed on Moscow for its interference in Ukraine, which resulted in the annexation of Crimea. Recently, when fresh sanctions were imposed on Russia for its alleged hand in the Skripal poisoning in UK, Greece abstained itself from voting against Moscow. This situation has now changed over the issue of the accession of Macedonia to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

On 6 August, Russia summoned Greece's ambassador to Moscow and told him it was responding in kind to what it called an unfriendly decision by Athens to expel two Russian diplomats. In June this year, Greece had ordered the expulsion of two Russian diplomats and barred the entry of two others for allegedly undermining Athens' national security. There are accusations against Russia for seeking to thwart a deal that allows Macedonia to join NATO by trying to bribe unidentified Greek officials, representatives of the Orthodox Church and members of the military and intelligence services. Following this, protests erupted in Greece over Macedonia's decision to join NATO. The government in Athens thereafter said that they have evidence to prove that Russia instigated the protests. The extent of the emerging had blood between the two countries is illustrated by the fact that a planned visit by the Russian Foreign Minister to Greece in September has been now been postponed to an indeterminate time.

Apart from Russia's objection to Macedonia (a Balkan country) acquiring NATO membership, the other two factors that further impact the relations between Russia and Greece

are (i) Greece's insecurity with regard to the strengthening of Russia-Turkey relations and (ii) influence of Russia-US issues on Greece.

This paper examines these issues in context to growing tensions between Russia and Greece.

Russia, Macedonia and NATO

Russia would be upset with Greece supporting Macedonia's membership to NATO. For Russia, expansion of NATO is a national threat and with Macedonia¹ becoming a member of the alliance, Moscow feels surrounded by more NATO members. The inclusion of new NATO member also means weakening of Russia's influence in the western Balkan, an important region for Russia.

The Russian Foreign Ministry complained on 12 August that Macedonia was being sucked into the NATO military alliance by force and that such moves deepened divisions and increased tensions in Europe. Last year, another Balkan country, Montenegro, joined the military alliance despite strong opposition from Russia. Now, with Macedonia joining the NATO, Russia has enough reasons to² be uncomfortable.

The growing proximity between Russia and Turkey has also an obvious impact on Greek perception.

Russia and Turkey

Over recent years, the relations between Moscow and Ankara, a NATO member, have been strengthening, exemplified by deepening military ties. Significantly, finalisation of the agreement for supply of Russia's S-400 missiles to Ankara illustrates this trend.

This development is unsettling for Greece given its historical rivalry with Turkey, extending beyond the bilateral to the issue of Cyprus.

Cyprus: Cyprus is divided into North and South³ Cyprus, which is being supported by Turkey and Greece respectively for almost five decades. Athens and Ankara are the guarantors of security to the respective sides of the island. Russia has had good relations with the Greek side of Cyprus. Moscow calls for resolving this long-standing issue based on United Nations Security

¹Macedonia feels that joining NATO will bring stability to the country as well as in the region and at the same time does wants to maintain relations with Russia.

²Except for Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia have shown interest in joining the western organisations, the NATO and the European Union. Albania, Slovenia and Croatia are already members of the alliance.

³Southern Cyprus is an EU member but not a NATO member.

Council resolutions and agreements reached by the two communities. Nevertheless, Russia will evidently have to play a delicate balancing game between Cyprus, Greece and Turkey.

While the regional rivalries between Greece and Turkey create complications for Russia, Moscow's own issues with the US further complicate the Russia-Greek equation.

Influence of Russia-US issues on Greece

The Russian Foreign Ministry stated on 13 July that the US was behind the anti-Russian decision taken by the government of Greece. Tensions between Russia and US inevitably have a fallout on Turkey-Greek relations.

Despite being a NATO ally and a partner of the US, Turkey's relations with the US have been deteriorating. Fallout over Syria and ⁴ and the threat of US sanctions on Ankara for trying to procure the Russian S-400 missile defence system are among the factors suggesting a slump in bilateral ties. This situation may get further complicated for Ankara if Washington, in an act of retribution, offers Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)⁵ missile system to Turkey's arch-rival Greece.

Conclusion

The 'row' between Russia and Greece is unusual, given the traditionally close relationship shared by the two countries. Despite expulsions of the Russian diplomats, Athens has said that it wants to maintain friendly relationship with Russia.

Russia, on the other hand, apart from retaliating in kind by expelling Greek diplomats and protesting against the non-issue of visas, has not commented on the current status of the bilateral relations between the two countries. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to the island stands postponed for the time being. This diplomatic friction between Russia and Greece does not attract a very high profile presently. The situation will persist for some time, given the complications involved for both Moscow and Athens.

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⁴In Syrian crisis, the US has supported the Kurds which had a negative impact on the relationship between Turkey and the US. The Kurdish issue is a national challenge to Ankara and support from any country for the Kurds is seen as an unfriendly gesture by Turkey.

⁵US has offered THAAD missile defense system to South Korea and Saudi Arabia.