

To a new foreign policy

COMMENTARY

BY ARISTOTLE TZIAMPIRIS *

Some 10 months after the March 2004 general elections, a series of actions, policies and decisions by the New Democracy administration herald the coming of a new foreign policy that will probably be pursued by Athens in the foreseeable future. Greece continues to view itself as quintessentially European, its national interest best being served by the country remaining at the center of all economic and political integrative efforts. In this respect, there is continuity with previous governments. However, significant points of departure have also emerged.

The resolution of the Cyprus issue has now been disentangled from Greek-Turkish affairs, to the extent that this is of course possible given historic, emotive and political ties. This is probably why it was possible for Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis to become one of the "best men" in the wedding of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's daughter, following the Greek Cypriots' rejection of the Annan plan.

Furthermore, as regards Cyprus, the new administration was faced almost immediately with the challenge of the Annan plan, or "Annan V" to be more precise, since it was actually the plan's fifth version. In reality and despite much rhetoric, Athens was skeptical of the UN secretary-general's efforts. It never sabotaged them outright, but it did not really try to block their defeat in the Cyprus referendum either. If the eventual agreement on Cyprus is better than Annan V, the government will be able to claim vindication of historic proportions. If not, history will be less kind.

In Greek-Turkish relations, Athens is opting for a gradualist strategy, reasonably hoping and expecting that bilateral issues will be resolved more favorably by an increasingly Europeanized Ankara en route to Brussels. The conclusions of the Helsinki summit have been modified as regards the possibility of rigid timetables

and their implicit recognition of bilateral disputes beyond the continental sea shelf. Again, time will demonstrate if this policy will succeed, or else be viewed as one more link in the chain of missed opportunities.

In the Balkans, Athens continues to believe that the national interest will be best served by regional stability, economic growth and democratization. However, a more assertive foreign policy on certain issues appears to be emerging, opting to address grievances and differences instead of merely adhering to multilateral efforts. Greece is now suggesting that it might veto the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's accession to NATO and the EU unless the name issue is adequately addressed first. Although this policy option was implicit in the past, it has now entered center-stage. The unilateral recognition by the US of FYROM with its constitutional name certainly did not help the new Greek administration and it remains to be seen if the talks at the UN (which Athens had requested weeks ago) have been seriously undercut or positively jump-started. One also might expect additional bilateral cooperative efforts, especially with Bulgaria and Romania.

Relations with the United States will probably be somewhat altered. Athens (together with France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Spain) is not sending Greeks as NATO trainers to Iraqi territory, is disappointed with America's unilateral recognition of FYROM as "Macedonia" and lacks the informal channels with Washington that were a hallmark of the previous Greek government. Furthermore, the Greek public seems to be supportive of this subtle but noticeable policy shift.

However, it has to be stressed that Greece will not become hostile vis-à-vis the United States, and cooperation will continue to be strong through NATO, economic



Time for a change. Foreign Minister Petros Kofolyiatis, pictured leaving the Maximos Mansion after a Cabinet meeting last month, has been entrusted with orchestrating a significant shift in Greek foreign policy on many levels since New Democracy came to power.

ties and the Greek-American community.

On the other hand, Greece is seeking a closer strategic relationship with Russia (not as a counterweight to the US), vindicating the analysts who foresaw such a policy change (based on common interests) immediately after the end of the Cold War. Karamanlis's recent visit to Moscow (and its concomitant agreements) highlight this improved relationship, although it has to be kept in mind that Russia is still a country in transition, with a GDP roughly equivalent to one-tenth of that of the US and without a serious naval presence in the Mediterranean.

Greece's new foreign policy is bold, assertive and confident. It might also be increasingly vocal, taking advantage of Greece's two-year stint as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Greece is fundamentally European in outlook and seeks

stability in the Balkans. It will probably be less prone to multilateralism than in the previous decade, bilateral efforts becoming more acceptable. Athens is now closer to Berlin, Paris and Moscow. Such a foreign policy will in all likelihood remain popular at home, unless some major crisis breaks out. But because risk and courage are now essential components of Athens's new approach to international relations, statesmanship of the highest order will be required for the new foreign policy to succeed.

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