

For Greece, Confrontation Is Out and Regional Cooperation Is In

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ATHENS—Greece, in a major shift, has traded in its long-standing odd-man-out role in NATO and European Union affairs for more pragmatic and responsible policies toward its neighbors.

Shedding the confrontational tactics of the early 1990s, Prime Minister Costas Simitis seems determined to rely on regional cooperation, budgetary rigor and improving economic growth to define a calmer turn-of-the-century role for Greece's 10 million citizens.

The change reflects painful lessons learned since the Cold War's end and the perceived threat of the growing unpredictability of Turkey, its more powerful neighbor to the east, according to officials, diplomats and academics.

This pragmatic approach may consign to the history books the emotional roller-coaster politics of Simitis's fellow Socialist predecessor, Andreas Papandreou, who dominated Greek political life for two decades until his death last June.

In his heyday in the 1980s, Papandreou stirred Greek hearts, especially by healing the wounds of Greece's 1944-48 civil war and finally recognizing the losing Communists as equal citizens. In the Cold War's final decade he put Greece on the international map by threatening to close U.S. military bases here and otherwise antagonizing Washington, which was concerned about NATO's exposed southern flank and his epis-

odic flirtations with Moscow and Libya's Moammar Gadhafi.

Papandreou first opposed Greek membership in the European Union, and then milked it to the last subsidized drop. Over the years, Greece's 14 EU partners became increasingly annoyed with what a senior official here described as "our spoiled-child" approach of seldom playing by the rules even when receiving aid worth \$5 billion annually.

Climbing back down from such an emotional high-wire act was left largely to Simitis. He proved his political mettle by calling and winning early parliamentary elections last September. During the winter he faced down striking, normally pro-Socialist farmers and teachers opposed to stringent austerity measures designed to bring the Greek economy's performance closer to EU guidelines.

Senior officials insist that the new policy proves Greece's emerging political maturity after decades of turbulence. With three more years of Simitis's stewardship likely before elections, the Athens stock market seems to agree. It doubled in value in the four months following his refusal to knuckle under to the strikers.

Western diplomats voice prudence but credit Athens's new pragmatism with paying diplomatic and political dividends unthinkable barely 18 months ago. Then Greece's foreign policy initiatives—often dictated by domestic political considerations—were backfiring, deepening its regional isolation instead of opening up a major post-Cold War role as Athens had hoped.

"When the time came to reap the harvest"

of being the richest Balkan power and the only one with both EU and NATO membership, Thanos Veremis, a professor of politics at the University of Athens, remarked, "Greece was caught psychologically unprepared for the great transition."

Among examples illustrating Simitis's pragmatic insistence on cutting losses: ■ Greece is enjoying thriving trade relations—and even recently participated in

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joint military exercises—with the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, whose legitimacy Athens had long worked mightily to deny.

■ In volatile Albania, where relations were inflamed less than two years ago because five ethnic Greeks were jailed on espionage charges, a sizable Greek army peacekeeping contingent is deployed as part of the Italian-

led European multinational force. In a move by Athens to show impartiality, the Greek troops are not deployed in the south, where the Greek ethnic minority is concentrated.

■ Greece, last winter, diluted its long-controversial support for Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, joining other Western governments in successfully demanding that he recognize opposition victories in municipal elections that he sought to nullify.

■ In Bosnia, where Athens once openly favored the Serb cause, Greece contributes troops to the international peacekeeping effort and has given \$7 million in reconstruction funds that have gone to the Croat-Muslim federation.

■ Foreign Minister Theodoros Pangalos recently astounded many Greeks by openly dissociating Athens from a virtual German veto on Ankara's EU membership application and insisting that "Turkey's final goal must be unification with Europe."

Coming only 14 months after Greece and Turkey almost went to war over two tiny uninhabited islets in the Aegean Sea in January 1996, Pangalos's remarks encouraged cautious hopes that the abiding tensions between these NATO members could be reduced.

Turkey reciprocated within weeks. For the first time in a decade, its army chief of staff attended Greek national day festivities in Ankara and urged an end to traditional animosities.

Still, Western efforts to capitalize on such gestures proceed prudently.

The Dutch government recently promoted consultations between retired Greek and

Turkish notables to discuss bilateral grievances.

But nationalistic opposition from 32 Socialist legislators apparently prompted the Simitis government to refuse a meeting next month between the experts, deciding instead to exchange written texts.

Such suspicions are scarcely new. But a senior official hinted that Pangalos's remarks reflected a subtle change in traditional Greek evaluations of Turkey and a need to engage Ankara, rather than spurn it.

"We Greeks must get over the old knee-jerk reaction that if something is bad for Turkey, it is good for us," the official said. "We must not pour oil on the fire."

A weak Turkey might eventually strike at Greece, he suggested, to distract attention from its secular politicians' failure to work together, the specter of growing Islamic strength and Ankara's inability to end the 12-year-old Kurdish insurgency.

As a prudent policy maker engaged in contingency planning, he had to foresee further buffeting in Turkey.

But at least he felt that Greece's position was now better understood by both its NATO and EU partners.

Greece had contributed to that result by changing itself. More than a decade and a half of give-and-take inside the EU, the official said, meant "it's no longer just what we can get from Europe."

"Europe has taught us Athens is not the center of the world," he added, "that we're all in the same boat and need to cooperate with our partners—and not just on economic questions."