

The Underlying Dilemma in the Greek Referendum

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This week is largely considered a historic one due to the Greek referendum. On July 5th the Greek public will decide whether to accept the troika proposal or not. What is peculiar with this referendum is that the question is highly technical and, at the same time, the government is clearly against that proposal. However, behind the referendum's question lies a dilemma, connected to two distinct narratives of both history and reality that the Greeks haven't been able to resolve for many generations.

1. The Geopolitical narrative

The first narrative is the geopolitical one, i.e. the way that geography influences politics in Greece.

Throughout its long history, Greece was the base of sea power states. Starting with Crete and the Aegean islands to the city states on mainland Greece and, later, to modern Greece, it was the sea that forged the identity of the Greek nation. This is not accidental. The importance of sea power over land power was well established among Greek leaders first in the antiquity, with Thucydides stating “*μέγα το της θαλάσσης κράτος*”, which means the state that controls the sea is a great state. Also, Themistocles consciously urged his fellow Athenians to the creation and manning of a great fleet. An additional evidence for the importance of the Athenian control over sea is the survival of the city under siege for years.

The close ties of Greece with the sea were noted in antiquity, and the historical evidence is corroborated by geography. Greece has 13,676 km of coastline and only 131,957 km² of total area and an abundance of natural harbors. Furthermore, the fragmented geography enabled Greeks to defend their homeland easily against raiders and larger armies, having in the meantime the ability to move freely by sea

and, in some cases, to outmaneuver the enemy, as they successfully have done during the Persian wars.

Greece's sea tradition was reestablished in the 19th and 20th century. This time not as a great sea power itself, but instead in close collaboration with the great sea power. This strategic alliance between Greece and the great sea power of the time against the great land power was made by Greece's leaders, sometimes with great effort and difficulty.

During the 1st World War, this decision created a schism between the Greek King Constantinos and the Prime Minister Venizelos that led to a mini civil war and the intervention of Great Britain. The root of this schism is still debated in Greece.

In the 2nd World War, Greece stood, from the beginning, by the west and consequently at the side of the great sea power. During this war, the Greek government, following the steps of the ancient Athenians, left the country and continued the fight at the North African theater of war. However, by the end of the war the established order was challenged by the Greek communists. In fact, the civil war was about the strategic orientation of Greece: land power over sea power. MacKinder's ideas motivated Great Britain to intervene once again.

Many thinkers have noted the importance of sea power and the importance of the traditional sea states. Greece has kept this tradition throughout the 20th century and still keeps it. The importance of Greece as a sea nation was enhanced furthermore by MacKinder's work. *"The Greeks were the first of our seven peoples of the Middle Tier to achieve their emancipation from German control in this war for the simple reason that they are outside the Heartland and therefore accessible to sea-power. But in these days of submarines and aeroplanes, the procession of Greece by a great Hartland power would probably carry with it the control of the World-Island; the Macedonian history would be reenacted"*, writes MacKinder setting Greece on the side of the great sea power.

2. The cultural narrative

The question of Greece's strategic orientation was never challenged on a geopolitical basis. The only challenge came by the orthodox tradition and the socialist affiliation of some of the Greece's political leaders.

From the naval exploits of Greeks in antiquity to NATO participation in 20th century, described above, there are missing two periods in history. In the first the center of gravity was displaced from Greece to the Asia Minor and in the second Greece was occupied by the Ottoman Empire.

Even though Greeks fashion themselves as continuing the Roman tradition within the Eastern Roman Empire, the reality is that "Byzantine Empire" is a more apt name for it. The Roman Empire displaced the center of gravity to the west, while the Byzantine Empire displaced it to the east of Greece. That transition was closely followed by the projection of naval power with Rome augmenting the control over the Mediterranean while Byzantium lost it to the Saracens and the Venetians. The influence of the Orient was great to Greeks and it got worse when Byzantium fell to the Ottomans.

For four hundred years Greece remained in the sidelines of history. More importantly, Greece lost all the breakthroughs of western civilization. The enlightenment never arrived. So, even though Greece is the founder of the western civilization, is no longer, by some, considered part of it.

This tragic fate was noted by the late Samuel Huntington in his work *Clash of Civilizations*, where he introduced a different aspect for analysis in International Relations. Huntington, even though he acknowledges the contribution of classical Greece, sets apart modern Greece from the western civilization. Instead, he asserts that Greece, along with other Balkan states and Russia, forms the Orthodox world. That means, in geopolitical terms, that Greece is part of the great land power block.

Close ties with the orient remain and deeply influence Greece's perception of reality. The support to Arab and Muslim states, the anti-Americanism, the anti-Western sentiments whenever Greece finds itself in trouble, the threats of changing its

strategic western orientation, and the conspiracy theories involving western powers are common in an oriental way of thinking. This symptom can be detected not only in the Greek public, but also, sometimes, in the governing elites.

The oriental nature of modern Greece is evident in the “Insha’Allah” (if it is the god’s will) attitude shared with its Muslim neighbors. This attitude is the product of a metaphysical belief that some god or a supernatural power protects Greece. Upon this attitude is based most of Greece’s political rhetoric, including that of current Prime Minister Tsipras.

Conclusion

The question that Greeks have to answer in the upcoming referendum has nothing to do with geopolitics or culture. The question is whether the public agrees with an economic proposal made by the troika at some stage of an ongoing negotiation. However, under this highly technical question lies a fundamental strategic choice.

“Yes” is the answer of those that understand and acknowledge the importance of geopolitics in decision making. In contrast, “no” is the answer of those who understand Greece as culturally linked to Orthodoxy or the Muslim world through the lenses of anti-western sentiment.

The Greek government, consistent to its communist ideology that the history is written by the large nation masses, calls for this referendum. Greece in all its modern history followed the decisions of its leaders. Even then, the decisions divided the Greek public and sometimes led to civil wars. For the first time, however, the Greek public must decide on the gravest strategic orientation of their nation. The underlying dilemma of the referendum is the choice between a geopolitical narrative of Greece’s future and a cultural one.