

SPEECH ON CAPITOL HILL
House International Relations Committee Hearing Room,
September 26, 2006, 18.30-21.00

Honourable Members of Congress,

It is my pleasure to be here tonight, in the heart of American Democracy. It is also a great honour to have the opportunity to meet you in this wonderful room, the House International Relations Committee Hearing Room, which carries such significance in the minds of us, Greeks. From this room, the voice of the American people supporting our struggle for freedom and democracy was heard during the difficult years of the dictatorship in Greece. Back then, for those in exile, like my family, this voice provided an important source of moral support, and constituted a source of optimism for the future.

Greece and the US are incredibly long strategic and ideological partners. The Founding Fathers of this nation were inspired by Greek ideals, and the ideals of the American Revolution inspired, in their turn, the Greek Revolution a few years later.

We stood always on the side of liberty together; throughout the twentieth century Greece was one of only three countries in the world, beyond the former British Empire, that allied with the United States in every major international conflict. Today we still work closely together for a stable and prosperous European South-East and we cooperate in facing almost every major global challenge, from Afghanistan to natural disasters. We are close allies and the scope of our cooperation is significant in the economic field too. Greece is a natural strategic partner of this great country: it is the largest economy in the European South-East; the largest merchant marine in the world;

Our country enjoys a geo-strategic position at the crossroads of three continents, a fact which invites both strategists and economic planners to strike fruitful bargains with it. We now work very hard with the US to greatly expand our cooperation in all fields.

The support of Congress for Greek issues continues to this day and, for this, I would like to extend to you my heartfelt thanks. I know

that, for a good number of years, a numerous group of Representatives have formed the "Hellenic Caucus" that is very active and very helpful; I would like to extend to them my deepest appreciation for their support. I would also like to thank you for all the Resolutions regarding a peaceful and just resolution of the Cyprus problem, stability in the Aegean, human rights and the unhindered function of the Patriarchate in Istanbul. I am thankful also for all the relevant correspondence you have exchanged with the Administration concerning these issues.

Honourable Members of Congress,

I would like to take the opportunity today to briefly draw your attention upon a set of issues which we consider to be of utmost importance. These issues may vary in their geographical parameters and scope, yet they have one thing in common: they are all about promoting peace, stability and prosperity.

Let me begin with the crisis in the Middle East; a part of the world that preoccupies us all. I would like to start off by saying that Greece shares with the United States the vision of expanding freedom, democracy and human rights in this area of historic importance for my country. Indeed, over the years, Greece has managed to forge credible links with Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab world in general. As a result we enjoy close relations with all countries and peoples in the region.

We believe that it is the right of both Israelis and Palestinians to live in separate states within secure borders which should be clearly recognized; I also believe that the peace process aimed at resolving the problems between Israel and the Arabs in general should be revived.

Greece, Presiding over the UN Security Council for the month of September, worked hard for peace and stability in the Middle East. Our efforts, I am proud to say, culminated in a extraordinary meeting of the Security Council on a ministerial level – the first of its kind in more than 22 years – where we had the chance to discuss the Arab-Israeli conflict in general and the Palestine issue in particular.

South East Europe is another region which is of utmost strategic, political, and economic interest to us. It is also a region in which Greece plays a pivotal role. The Balkans have often been characterized as a region under EU influence – as "Europe's back yard."

Yet the Balkans and South East Europe in general, are an area in which the EU and the US work alongside one another, complementing each other, and sharing the same vision for the future of the region.

Greece's strategic goal in the Balkans is to create the preconditions for stability, functioning democratic processes and institutions, intra-state cooperation, development and prosperity, as well as the fulfillment of the political criteria which will allow all Balkan countries to eventually become members of the EU and NATO. Indeed, European integration, and the prospect of EU membership is the single strongest soft power mechanism for engaging these countries in reforms, for consolidating democracy and for making their institutions more efficient and compatible with European norms and standards. I would like to draw your attention particularly to Kosovo, which makes, and will continue to make, headline news as it redefines itself.

For Kosovo, we need to devise a win/win solution; a lasting and sustainable solution, which will have the support, or at least the consent, of both Belgrade and Pristina. We want to see a solution for Kosovo based on the fundamental principle of respect for difference.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Turkey, the largest country of South Eastern Europe is, naturally, also a concern of ours. Our bilateral relations with Turkey are set on a new track in the last few years. Cooperation covers a wide spectrum of fields, expands steadily and helps improve the political climate between the two countries.

However, Turkey's military activity in the Aegean is a cause of serious concern to Greece and hinders our efforts to pursue our policy of rapprochement.

Another thorn in our, and of course the EU's, relations with Turkey, is that country's stance towards the Greek-Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul. Despite the fact that the Patriarch is the spiritual leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians in the United States and throughout the world, the Turkish government refuses to recognize the Ecumenical character and historical rights of the Patriarchate, as the Head of the world's Orthodox Christians instead of merely a local Prelate. That poses a series of grave problems

pertaining to the election of a Patriarch, the training of the Orthodox clergy and others.

This is why it is of utmost importance that Turkey be convinced to change its policies by accepting the Ecumenical Patriarchate's international recognition and ecclesiastic authority, by recognizing the right to train its clergy of all nationalities, and by reaffirming the property rights of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The re-opening of the Halki Seminary, which has bipartisan support in the US, should also be addressed.

It is important to stress that the respect shown to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and to its rights, is to the benefit of Turkey herself. It can help demonstrate not only that Turkey is a country safeguarding the freedom of religion, but also the importance of Turkey as the home of Christianity's second largest denomination.

On our part, we reaffirm our political will to work towards consolidating relations of friendship and cooperation with Turkey, based on the full respect of international law and good neighborly relations. Indeed, Greece actively supports Turkey's European orientation. We believe that her European perspective can be conducive to regional peace and stability. Nevertheless, it is now high time for Turkey to prove, in practice, that she can and really intends to conform to the institutional, political and economic acquis of the EU. We hope that she will take all necessary steps in order to fully meet the criteria and the obligations stemming from her European perspective.

This is a prerequisite which all countries wishing to join the Union, including Greece, have been asked to fulfill.

Last but not least, the Cyprus issue is naturally linked with our relations with Turkey, yet it retains its strong independent character. Our government remains steadfastly committed to reaching a just and viable solution for the reunification of Cyprus. The principles that must guide us in seeking a fair, functional, and viable solution are clear: full consideration of all the work done by the UN; international law, and all the relevant Security Council Resolutions. Last, but not least, the *acquis communautaire*; we cannot overlook the fact that Cyprus is now a full member of the European Union and that both Greek and Turkish Cypriots are going to live in the European framework.

Any initiatives that consolidate the separation of the island, by leading to political upgrading of the illegal regime in northern

occupied Cyprus, are counterproductive to the efforts of reunification. We take the view that any new initiative will have to be carefully prepared, so as to ensure real chances for success. Our ultimate goal remains a mutually agreed and certainly not an imposed solution between the two parties.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Greece is, I believe, a pole of stability, peace, and development in South East Europe. Being the only member of both the European Union and NATO in the region, we actively participate in consolidating democracy, peace and stability, the rule of law and in promoting economic prosperity throughout the region.

Today, we are united in the fight against terrorism, in its multitude of forms. We may at times approach this battle differently, yet ultimately, we have a common goal: freedom and the right to live in peace. We have gone a long way in Greece in fighting internal terrorism. In the fight against terrorism, Greece undertook sweeping actions, both to eradicate domestic terrorist networks and to provide wide-ranging assistance in the various fronts of the war on terror. We are an ally of the United States and, moreover, we believe that we are a valuable ally.

This is why Greece's participation in the Visa Waiver Program, which allows citizens from 27 countries to visit the United States as tourists without visas, is of utmost importance for the Greek government.

It is our sincere conviction that Greece's inclusion in the VWP will constitute the missing link to an already far-reaching bilateral relationship. Participation in the VWP will strengthen and cement the security partnership of the United States with a longstanding friend and ally. It will facilitate short-term business travel and enhance tourism between the two countries. In addition, it will be a source of pride for millions of Americans of Greek decent, making it easier for them to welcome their Greek relatives in the United States without difficulties, particularly bureaucratic obstacles.

Distinguished Members of Congress,

As you can see from my brief overview, we consider Greece a key player, a key ally, and a longstanding friend of the United States. We stand solidly and with determination to our deeply held principles and beliefs, defending our ideas and doing our utmost to promote democracy, the rule of law, prosperity, and freedom. We stand united with our European partners, in our efforts to make our world a more prosperous, socially just, and safer place to live.

Thank you.