

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4860 | MAY 23, 2018

The U.S. Must Pressure Greece to Resolve Its Name Dispute with Macedonia

Luke Coffey

As the NATO Summit in Brussels in July approaches, there has been a flurry of activity regarding the long-standing name dispute between Macedonia and Greece. For a decade, Greece has used this dispute to veto Macedonia's NATO aspirations. Macedonia would be a welcome addition to the NATO Alliance, and its membership would contribute to regional stability in southeastern Europe. The U.S. should continue to back Macedonia's goal of joining the Alliance, and pressure Greece to end this unreasonable name dispute in time for the summit.

A Long Road to Independence

The Republic of Macedonia is a small but geopolitically important Balkan nation. The region of modern-day Macedonia has been under the control of several regional empires throughout history. In antiquity, the kingdoms of Paeonia and then Macedon ruled the area. Later, numerous different empires and kingdoms ruled over this region, including the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman Empires.

As the Ottoman Empire was slowly collapsing in the late 19th century, there was a rise in Macedonian nationalism seeking autonomy for an independent Macedonian state. During the 1903 uprising, now known as the Ilinden, this movement was successful

for only a brief 12 days before the Ottomans re-took control. Even though Macedonian independence was short-lived, the Ilinden planted the seed for eventual independence. In the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, this region was divided through the Treaty of Bucharest among Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia.

In 1944, Macedonia became one of the six republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. In 1990, after Yugoslavia changed from a socialist state to a parliamentary democracy, “Socialist” was dropped from Macedonia's name (with which Greece voiced no problems at the time). With the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, Macedonia became an independent state and kept the name—Republic of Macedonia—as its new constitutional name. The United States and 136 other countries around the world recognize Macedonia by this name.

Greece quickly protested on the grounds that the name Macedonia, which is the same as that of Greece's northern province, implied regional territorial claims by the new nation. This claim is unfounded for three reasons:

- The Republic of Macedonia is the size of Vermont and has a population of 2 million. Greece has a population of 11 million and is five times larger in size. Macedonia does not pose a military threat, either practically or rhetorically, to any of its neighbors—especially Greece. Suggesting otherwise is preposterous.
- Historically, regional powers sought to control Macedonia, not the other way around. This was the primary driver of the 1912 and 1913 Balkan Wars, for example.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4860>

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

- To alleviate Greece's concerns, a specific provision has been placed in Macedonia's constitution stating: "The Republic of Macedonia has no territorial pretensions towards any neighboring state."

Greece's Unreasonable Veto

In 1993, Macedonia joined the United Nations under the provisional name "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia." In 1995, Macedonia and Greece agreed to a U.N.-brokered interim accord in which Athens agreed not to block Macedonia's integration into international organizations such as NATO so long as it called itself "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" until both sides agreed on a mutually acceptable name.

Macedonia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1995 and received a Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 1999. Upon completing its MAP in 2008, Macedonia anticipated an invitation to join the Alliance at the NATO Summit in Bucharest. Yet Greece unilaterally vetoed Macedonia's accession over the name issue. In December 2011, the International Court of Justice ruled that Greece's veto was in blatant violation of the 1995 interim accord.

The Current Situation

Recently there has been a new impetus to resolve this name dispute before the July 2018 NATO Summit. The Greeks demand a new compound name with geographical or time designation (such as Northern Macedonia or New Macedonia). One recent suggestion from the Macedonian government for a compromise was that the country be unconventionally renamed as the Republic of Ilinden Macedonia. This would offer a patriotic and time-designated solution. Demonstrating its predictable inflexibility, Athens rejected this proposal.

Macedonia has little leverage in the talks with Athens. Greece is already a NATO member, and Athens's internal political dynamics have complicated the negotiation process. Furthermore, the issue of Macedonia's name has gradually morphed into other issues such as:

- **Language.** The Greeks insist that the autonym "Macedonian" (the English translation of the name of the language spoken in Macedonia), can only be *Makedonski* (the Latinized transliteration of the name into English) in international fora no matter what language is being used. For example, NATO, which has two official languages (English and French) would have to refer to the autonym *Makedonski* instead of "Macedonian" (in English) or *Macédonien* (in French).
- **Constitutional change.** Greece is demanding that any name change be formally made in the Macedonian constitution. This will be particularly challenging for Prime Minister Zoran Zaev as he does not have the two-thirds majority in the parliament required to amend the constitution. Also, amending the constitution at home to appease Greek sensitivities abroad is likely to be very unpopular in the country.

Macedonia: A Solid U.S. Ally

Despite the small size of Macedonia's military (approximately 7,300 service members as part of a Joint Operational Command), the nation has already contributed respectably to the NATO Alliance. Macedonia participated in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission and has supported NATO's Resolute Support Mission since 2002, rotating more than 3,500 troops to Afghanistan during this period.

Macedonia sends forces to Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of the European Union's Operation Althea. Since 1999, it has allowed NATO forces deploying to Kosovo to transit its territory. Further afield, Macedonia participates in the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon, and between 2003 and 2008 it deployed forces in support of U.S.-led operations in Iraq, including a special operations unit. These contributions demonstrate a willingness by Macedonia to contribute to global security.

It is important for the U.S. and NATO to ensure that NATO enlargement takes place for those countries that meet the high standards. NATO's "open-door policy" is critical to mobilizing Europe and its allies around collective transatlantic defense. The open-door policy also promotes democracy, stability, and security in the North Atlantic region by enticing countries to become a part of the Alliance through positive democratic and military reforms. If aspiring

NATO members see the door closed for Macedonia, it could discourage them from undertaking democratic reforms to someday join the Alliance themselves.

Support for Macedonia, Pressure on Greece

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras is focused on deteriorating relations with Turkey, debt talks with the EU, and a general election next year. NATO will want to keep its open-door policy truly open at its upcoming summit. The time might be right for Greece to reasonably and responsibly end this name dispute.

Macedonia met all criteria to join NATO in 2008. Now a decade later, the only thing preventing Macedonia from joining the Alliance is Greece's veto. NATO membership often brings political stability, security, and economic prosperity. In a region like the western Balkans, this is crucial for U.S. and NATO interests. To help find an acceptable and reasonable resolution to the name dispute the U.S. should:

- **Apply reasonable pressure on Greece.** The ball is in Greece's court; 137 countries already recognize the Republic of Macedonia. It is absurd that it has been a decade since Macedonia has been ready to join NATO only to be prevented from doing so due to Greece's behavior.
- **Call for political consensus in Macedonia.** It is in America's interest that there be political stability in Macedonia and the western Balkans. The U.S. should make it clear to the Macedonian government that any name it negotiates with Greece must have a popular mandate of support or it risks instability in the country. This means that Mace-

donians must feel like any agreement with Greece preserves their unique national, cultural, and linguistic identity. Otherwise, there could be bigger problems in the future.

- **Work to invite Macedonia into NATO at the July Summit under the 1995 interim accord.** If talks in the name dispute remain unresolved by the NATO Summit in July, the U.S. should pressure Greece to respect the December 2011 International Court of Justice ruling and allow Macedonia to join NATO under the terms of the 1995 interim accord.
- **Show support for Macedonia.** The U.S. should use the NATO Summit to show its appreciation for Macedonia's contributions to the Alliance and thank the Macedonian people for their patience while they wait to join the Alliance more than a decade after meeting all the criteria.

A Welcome Addition

Macedonia would be a welcome addition to NATO, and its membership would contribute to regional stability in southeastern Europe. Greece's pertinacious opposition over the name issue and the illegality of its position under international law have jeopardized NATO's open-door policy. Greece should work with Macedonia to seek reconciliation, and the U.S. should play a leading role in making that rapprochement happen.

—*Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.*