

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND DETERRENCE: GREECE'S ROLE IN SHAPING THE EUROPEAN DEFENSE PILLAR

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President Emmanuel Macron's April 2026 visit to Athens represents far more than an expansion of bilateral defense cooperation. Instead, it reflects the emergence of a comprehensive strategic relationship that strengthens both Greece's national deterrence and Europe's evolving defense pillar. The analysis explores the political, military, industrial, and technological dimensions of the strategic partnership, including the renewal of the bilateral defense agreement, the mutual defense assistance clause, and the integration of advanced capabilities such as Rafale fighter aircraft, FDI HN frigates, and the prospective acquisition of Blacksworld Barracuda submarines. Particular attention is given to the development of network-centric operations, enhanced interoperability, defense-industrial cooperation, and long-range precision-strike capabilities. The issue brief concludes that the Greek-French partnership constitutes a model for European strategic autonomy, reinforcing deterrence, regional stability, and the credibility of Europe's security architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The recent visit of the President of the French Republic, Mr. Emmanuel Macron, to Athens in April 2026 does not merely constitute an upgrade to the traditionally close relationship between Greece and France. It represents a political and strategic event of broader European significance. At a time when the international order is undergoing transformation, great-power competition is intensifying, and Europe is seeking more credible mechanisms of self-protection, the

Greek-French strategic alignment is acquiring a structural character.¹

Greece is not merely a recipient of advanced French weapon systems; it is a critical partner in shaping a stronger European defense pillar in the Eastern Mediterranean. The symbolic dimension, which centered on Mr. Macron and the Prime Minister of Greece, Mr. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, aboard the newly delivered FDI HN frigate HS Kimon,

demonstrated that the Greek-French relationship has now acquired a clear geostrategic dimension.

More than a Renewal of Partnership

The five-year renewal of the strategic partnership between Greece and France in defense and security confirms that the bilateral relationship has entered a new, more mature phase. The agreement is not confined to the future procurement of French weapon systems, but forms part of a broader framework of diplomatic, operational, industrial, technological, and educational cooperation. The nine agreements signed cover critical areas, including defense, security, diplomatic cooperation, professional and higher education, scientific research, defense innovation, digital ocean technologies, and nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.² In this way, the Greek-French relationship acquires the characteristics of a compre-

hensive strategic partnership, with a depth that goes beyond the narrow defense dimension and links deterrence with technological sovereignty, industrial cooperation and long-term European strategic autonomy.

A central element of this new phase of the strategic partnership is the “mutual defense assistance” clause. Its significance is not only legal, but above all political and deterrent in nature, as the message conveyed to third parties is that Greek security is now more directly linked to French strategic credibility and, more broadly, to Europe’s defense will. Greek Prime Minister Mr. Mitsotakis described the mutual assistance commitments as the “cornerstone” of the agreement, confirming that cooperation between Athens and Paris is not limited to the acquisition of advanced weapon systems, but has acquired a clear institutional and deterrent dimension.

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For his part, Mr. Macron linked the Greek-French agreement to the need to shape a genuine European strategy, stressing that mutual assistance is not merely a political declaration, but a commitment with practical substance. His reference to Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union as a “reinforced concrete” clause, together with his statement that “France will stand by Greece if Greek sovereignty is threatened,” reinforces the message that European defense must acquire more concrete mechanisms for strategic response and defense coordination.³ The essence is not the replacement of NATO, but the strengthening of the European pillar of the Alliance’s member-states, so that European defense functions in a complementary manner to NATO’s collective defense, rather than in competition with it.⁴

In this light, the Greek-French relationship should not be viewed merely as a bilateral defense cooperation framework, nor as a circumstantial defense-procurement choice. It constitutes the prac-

tical application of a broader European strategic concept, according to which Europe must acquire greater strategic confidence, a stronger defense industrial base, and more credible mechanisms of collective response. Within this framework, Greece does not approach its armaments choices as simple commercial transactions, but as part of wider strategic agreements with states that provide political and treaty-based security guarantees.

The objective is to ensure that critical weapon systems and technologies that strengthen Greek deterrence are not transferred, in the same qualitative configuration, to states whose strategic interests may diverge from, or compete with, Greece's core security interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. Mr. Macron's statement that France will be present if Greek sovereignty is threatened further strengthens the political weight of the agreement and confirms that Greece has now become a critical partner in shaping the European defense pillar in the Eastern Mediterranean. France occupies a distinctive position in this process. Following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union after Brexit, France remains the only EU member-state possessing a nuclear deterrent, a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, a global military presence, and a comprehensive defense industrial base.

Mr. Macron's recent reference to the concept of "forward deterrence" adds a new dimension to the debate on European security.⁵ However, this point requires precision. It should be understood less as an immediate extension of France's nuclear deterrent and more as a gradual approach to linking French deterrence with European strategic security, through joint exercises, enhanced interoperability, intelligence sharing, and the strengthening of conventional capabilities that support deterrent credibility. In any case, ultimate authority over France's nuclear forces remains exclusively within the sovereign responsibility of France and its President.⁶

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Greece as a Strategic Hub

For Greece, the significance of this cooperation is immediate and multidimensional. Its geographical position, at the point where Europe converges with the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and North Africa, gives it an enhanced role as a pillar of stability and security. Greece no longer functions as a regional observer. As a member of both the EU and NATO, it constitutes a strategic hub in a geopolitical environment where naval power, energy security, critical infrastructure, sea lines of communication and the deterrence of revisionist behavior are acquiring increasing importance. Viewed in this light, Greek-French cooperation not only strengthens Greece's national deterrent capability, but also serves as an expression of European strategic presence in one of the most critical security theaters on Europe's periphery.

At the operational level, Greek-French cooperation has already translated into a substantial upgrade of the Hellenic Armed Forces. The procurement of 24 Rafale F3R fighter aircraft and four Kimon-class FDI HN frigates does not merely

represent the addition of new assets to the Greek arsenal, but also the acquisition of high-technology platforms that significantly strengthen air superiority, area air defense, surveillance, targeting, and the network-centric operational capability of the Hellenic Armed Forces.

The completion of the delivery of 24 Rafale aircraft to the Hellenic Air Force (HAF) and the handover of the first FDI HN frigate, HS Kimon, to the Hellenic Navy on December 18, 2025 have substantially strengthened the operational credibility of Greek deterrence. The Kimon-class FDI HN frigates, through the integration of the newly acquired CAMCOPTER S-100 unmanned aerial systems, which extend surveillance range and enhance the compilation of a comprehensive tactical picture, and through their cooperation with the seven modern MH-60R anti-submarine warfare helicopters, operate not merely as advanced surface combatants, but as key nodes within a broader network-centric ecosystem of sensors, data links, and weapons. This capability enhances surveillance, early warning, anti-submarine performance, and Greece's deterrent power in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean.

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The Hellenic Navy is entering a new era of digitally enabled surface combatants, with area air-defense capabilities, enhanced anti-submarine warfare capacity, extended surveillance and engagement ranges, and advanced network-centric functionality through Link 16/22. In parallel, the Rafale aircraft provide the HAF with significant capabilities in air superiority, rapid response, and power projection.

The operational value of these assets demonstrates the depth of the broader Greek-French strategic relationship, which is not confined to the procurement of weapon systems, but is directly linked to European deterrence, interoperability, and mutual assistance. This dimension was also reflected in the recent crisis in Cyprus,⁷ where Greek-French military support was presented by Mr. Macron as an example of the practical application of the logic of mutual assistance. In this way, Greece not only strengthens its national deterrent posture, but is also integrated into a broader European framework of strategic response in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Towards an Integrated System

Within the same framework lies the analytical concept of the so-called “triple French shield” in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean: the combination of Rafale fighter aircraft, Kimon-class FDI HN frigates, and, potentially, the future procurement by the Hellenic Navy of new-generation French submarines, such as the Blacksword Barracuda. The strategic value of this concept lies in the formation of an integrated ecosystem of power, linking air superiority, area air defense, maritime strike, anti-submarine warfare, surveillance and network-centric command and control into a coherent framework of deterrence.

As Marinos Gasiamis points out,⁸ the French “triad” of Rafale aircraft, FDI HN frigates, and the

potential acquisition of Barracuda submarines does not merely represent an upgrade to individual firepower assets within the Hellenic Armed Forces. Rather, it constitutes a force multiplier that introduces Greece more fully into the logic of network-centric operations. The essence lies in the interconnection of sensors and weapons, the capacity for data exchange, and the generation of a shared tactical picture.

Furthermore, the Greek-French discussions on the possible future acquisition of an additional Rafale squadron could further strengthen this dynamic, should such an option be adopted as a political and operational decision by Greece. This would not simply amount to a quantitative increase beyond the current fleet of 24 aircraft, but would represent the qualitative deepening of an already critical capability in air superiority, strategic strike, rapid response, and operational persistence.

An expanded Rafale force would significantly increase operational availability in times of crisis, allow simultaneous coverage of key areas in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, and enhance the Hellenic Air Force's ability to operate effectively in a high-intensity environment. When combined with the full delivery of the four FDI HN frigates, which are able to act as nodes for surveillance, command, and area air-defense, the Rafale aircraft acquire greater operational value as part of an integrated network-centric battlespace.

The underwater dimension is arguably the most critical component of the future of Greek deterrence. According to *Naval News*,⁹ Naval Group has proposed the new-generation Blacksword Barracuda submarine to the Hellenic Navy as part of a potential program for the procurement of four new submarines, intended to replace the Hellenic Navy's German-built Type 209 class submarines.

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The same report notes that the Blacksword Barracuda is a conventionally powered variant derived from the Barracuda family, designed around lithium-ion battery technology, a low acoustic signature, extended endurance, the ability to carry up to 30 weapons, and the potential to employ torpedoes, anti-ship missiles, cruise missiles, mines, and unmanned underwater vehicles. Were Greece to select this platform,¹⁰ it would significantly enhance the Hellenic Navy's ability to maintain a discreet presence, conduct surveillance, deny access, and project power across the Eastern Mediterranean.

The potential integration of long-range precision-strike weapons,¹¹ such as the French NCM/MdCN or, in the future, the European Long-Range Strike Approach (ELSA) capability, into the Hellenic Navy's Kimon-class frigates or

possibly into Blacksworld Barracuda-class submarines, would constitute a substantial qualitative upgrade of Greece's precision strategic deterrence model. Such a capability would influence the cost-benefit calculations of any potential adversary even before the outbreak of a crisis.

The same logic is further reinforced by the industrial dimension of the proposal. According to *Naval News*, Naval Group has already developed a cooperation network with more than 70 Greek companies through the FDI HN frigate program, while, with regard to the submarine program, agreements have reportedly been reached with METLEN,¹² creating the prospect of Greek participation in construction and through-life support.

Conclusion

At the geopolitical level, the Greek-French strategic relationship sends a message of stability, without slipping into a logic of direct confrontation. Deterrence does not constitute an aggressive policy; it is a policy of war prevention, based on the creation of credible costs for any actor that might seek to challenge sovereignty, sovereign rights or the free functioning of maritime and energy corridors. Viewed in this light, Greece, strengthened by its strategic relationship with France, gains a greater capacity to project stability, uphold international law, and act as a credible European security provider in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Overall, President Macron's visit to Athens and the renewal of the Greek-French strategic partnership should be understood as part of a broader European strategic readjustment. Europe is seeking greater strategic confidence, France is attempting to give more concrete substance to the European defense pillar, and Greece is emerging as a critical partner in a region where Europe's security is tested on a daily basis.

The value of this cooperation is not limited to armaments programs, whether Rafale aircraft, FDI HN frigates, or the potential acquisition of Barracuda-class submarines. It lies in the formation of a comprehensive framework of deterrence, industrial participation, technological upgrading, interoperability, and political credibility. For Greece, this relationship is not a luxury, but a strategic necessity. For Europe, it offers a model of how the European defense pillar can acquire genuine operational and geopolitical substance.

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Endnotes

- 1 Konstantinos Arvanitopoulos and Konstantinos Filis, *The New World Order: The Law of Power* (Athens: Papadopoulos Publishing, 2026), 132–135.
- 2 “Greece–France: These Are the Nine Key Agreements,” *To Vima*, April 25, 2026, <https://www.tovima.gr/2026/04/25/politics/ellada-gallia-aytes-einai-oi-9-symfonies-kleidi> (accessed April 26, 2026).
- 3 Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union constitutes the institutional basis of the European mutual assistance clause. Its significance for Greece does not lie in the existence of an automatic mechanism of military response, but rather in the establishment of a European framework of political and strategic solidarity in the event of an armed attack against a member-state. This clause, which was invoked for the first time by France following the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015, confirms that the security of a member-state cannot be regarded as an exclusively national matter. For Athens, Article 42.7 functions as an institutional multiplier of deterrence, particularly when combined with the bilateral Greek-French mutual assistance clause and the broader effort to strengthen the European defense pillar. It does not replace NATO, but complements collective defense with a European layer of political commitment, thereby reinforcing the credibility of deterrence in the Eastern Mediterranean.
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- 7 Following the Shahed-type drone strike against the British Military Base at Akrotiri and the subsequent European military support to Cyprus.
- 8 Marinos Gasiamis, “Plan for a Triple French Shield in the Aegean: Why Paris and Athens Emphasise a Common Technological Language,” *Ta Nea*, April 26, 2026, <https://www.tanea.gr/print/2026/04/26/politics/sxedio-gia-tripli-galliki-aspida-sto-aigaio> (accessed April 26, 2026).
- 9 Dimitris Mitsopoulos, “Naval Group Offers Blacksworld Barracuda Submarine to Greece,” *Naval News*, April 8, 2026, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2026/04/naval-group-offers-blacksworld-barracuda-to-greece> (accessed April 28, 2026).
- 10 According to *Naval News*, the Blacksworld Barracuda is a long-endurance submarine, with the ability to remain at sea for up to 70 days, operate submerged for 10–15 days without recharging its batteries, and achieve a range of up to 15,000 nautical miles. With a displacement of approximately 3,300 tonnes, an overall length of 82 metres, a crew of 35, and the capacity to embark special operations forces, such a platform would substantially reinforce the Hellenic Navy’s underwater deterrence posture.
- 11 MBDA, “MdcN / NCM – Naval Cruise Missile,” MBDA Systems. The official MBDA page states that the NCM/MdcN is a long-range cruise missile designed for launch from surface vessels and submarines.
- 12 The Memorandum of Understanding signed between METLEN and Naval Group on March 19, 2026, aims to explore future cooperation in submarine and surface-ship projects and positions METLEN as a strategic partner within Naval Group’s supply chain, thereby strengthening Franco-Greek defense-industrial cooperation and the broader European defense ecosystem. See: METLEN Energy & Metals, “METLEN and Naval Group sign a Memorandum of Understanding related to submarine and frigate projects for the global markets,” Company News, March 23, 2026, <https://www.metlen.com/news/company-news/metlen-and-naval-group-sign-a-memorandum-of-understanding-related-to-submarine-and-frigate-projects-for-the-global-markets> (accessed May 1, 2026).