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Drama in the US raises stakes for Greece, too

COMMENTARY | BY CONSTANTINOS FILIS* & KATERINA SOKOU**

Calling the forthcoming United States election as consequential may be an understatement. Some European leaders prefer the term existential, noting that what's at stake is no less than the future of the West. At the very least, the 2024 presidential election is a major geopolitical risk due to its projected impact not just on the future direction of the US, but on the international order too. The assassination attempt on Donald Trump on July 13 has underlined the danger of further polarization in the run-up to the November election, highlighting the destabilizing effect that heightened tensions are exerting on American democracy. It is no wonder that American allies are anxious, given the implications of domestic instability for American leadership abroad, let alone a potential change in US foreign policy at a time when the post-World War II world order is badly shaking, international rule of law is clearly besieged and the model of global governance has gone missing. President Joe Biden's decision to exit the presidential race has only increased the drama, as it kickstarts the process for nominating another candidate, who if elected is expected to continue Biden's foreign policy legacy.

In a paper for the Institute of Global Affairs of the American College of Greece aptly titled "The Cliffhanger," we present the candidates and the polls, analyze the deciding factors and the many unknowns of this election – including the prospect of further political violence, voter participation and the impact of third-party candidates – and focus on the election issues that may determine the outcome of this election. We even predicted that Vice President Kamala Harris was the most likely candidate to replace Biden before he decided to exit the race and endorse her. We also evaluate the likely consequences for the rest of the world, explain America's swing between realism and internationalism, assess the strength of bilateral Greece-US relations and propose a course of action for Greece and the European Union to prepare for all eventualities.

The geopolitical stakes of the American elections are especially high for the transatlantic alliance, as there is a wide concern about how a change of US policy on Ukraine may lead to a strategic defeat for the West that is bound to encourage revisionism and embolden authoritarian leaders around the world. This is precisely where we find one of the most serious problems a

second Donald Trump presidency may cause: facilitating, through his actions or inaction, those who dispute the global status quo that took shape after World War II. Beyond Trump's expressed admiration for authoritarian leaders, his America First agenda may fuel unrest in regions where middle powers are increasingly focused on imposing their agenda.

In the absence of American leadership, or if the US shows an unwillingness to intervene, forces competing with the West – wanting even a radical overhaul of the international system – will seek to fill the power vacuum. In Greece's immediate neighborhood, from the Balkans to the Eastern Mediterranean, a break-

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down of the rules-based international order would undermine stability by emboldening Turkey's revisionism and Russia's meddling in domestic politics and old or existing conflicts. This is one of the reasons why Greece values continued American engagement: not just for the security of the transatlantic alliance but to help stabilize its region and rein in Turkish revisionism.

However, isolationist tendencies are increasing in the US, and are expected to take over if Trump is re-elected. It is still unclear how, if at all, the assassination attempt against him may affect his rhetoric and policies during a second term, as his initial if vague reaction was a promise to "unite" America and the world. However, Trump may still cut the US contribution to NATO and withdraw troops from Europe and the Middle East, accelerating an American retreat from our region. The fallout will be difficult to manage for America's European allies, who will be squeezed between an isolationist US, a threatening Russia and an emerging China. Indeed, a transactional America may divide Europe, especially as different European nations have different perceptions of the Russian threat, or thresholds of resistance to its cheaper energy. Some NATO allies, namely Hungary and Turkey, have close relations with Russia, and the rise of



Then-US president Donald Trump reaches out a hand to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the White House in 2017. Trump's evident admiration for leaders like Erdogan could spell serious trouble for Europe, and Greece, if he is re-elected.

pro-Russian far-right parties in Europe means that more European countries may break ranks in the future. On the other hand, the obsession of some European states and part of the American establishment with Russia needs to be moderated, if anything to help avert a direct confrontation with NATO. At a time when the Franco-German axis is shaking, a strong and consistent transatlantic partnership becomes sine qua non.

Trump has been critical of US support to Ukraine but has promised to continue to support Israel. Halting the two wars, at almost any cost, will be how Trump draws a line between his and Biden's administrations. In Ukraine, US support will dwindle, as Trump is poised to ask Europe to undertake more, if not all, of the cost of Ukraine's defense. As for Israel, his unconditional support for its far-right government would undermine a two-state solution, which is the only path to lasting peace with the Palestinians.

In a precarious geopolitical landscape, with Ukraine losing ground and the Middle East in turmoil, a second Democratic term would continue Biden's legacy. Especially if his vice president, Harris, is confirmed as the presidential nominee, as we consider the most likely outcome, her administration will be focused on safeguarding the transatlantic alliance and helping

Ukraine and Israel win their respective wars. American support for Ukraine will remain, and so will support for NATO. However, Biden's policy on Gaza and US relations with the Israeli government may change, as Harris will also weigh the cost of support for Israel (which will not be unconditional) domestically and in US relations with the Arab world. Harris has been more vocal than Biden against the policies of Benjamin Netanyahu's government in Gaza, and is expected to focus on ending the war as her administration will also consider the impact of the demonization of Washington's image abroad and how it can be exploited by powers such as China and Russia to strengthen their regional footprint.

As regards Greece and Turkey, opportunities as well as risks arise as the current state of affairs gives them higher strategic value, albeit for different reasons. Greece is a firm and credible ally with increased geostrategic importance in an uncertain and unstable neighborhood. For its part, Turkey has developed a voice and role in areas of interest to the US, such as in parts of the African continent, the Caucasus and the Middle East, where it persistently seeks to redeem its strategic importance. The two countries are also important for the implementation of energy projects of US interest, and because this is essentially about

business, it will also interest Trump. Both countries are also loyal customers of the US weapons industry, which Trump values.

In recent years, Greece has gained points as a strategic ally, due not so much to its perceived predictability as to its actions offering solutions to the region's security challenges in line with American interests, as is showcased by the Prespa Agreement and the strategic emergence of Alexandroupoli. Yet even as both candidates have shown interest in lowering the tensions between Greece and Turkey as presidents, an inward-looking US may be too distracted to help avoid a new crisis in the Aegean, while Trump may also be slower to react to one. Under Trump, Washington would be unlikely to get involved in the event of a flare-up of bilateral tensions unless the situation reaches a crisis level where the White House would need to intervene to avoid a war. Hence, it is particularly important to have direct lines of communication to the president and key staff such as his national security adviser.

Under President Biden, the US has worked closer with Greece on energy and defense, while engaging Turkey so that it remains anchored to the West, including by agreeing to upgrade its F-16 fighter jet fleet in the name of NATO interoperability. At the same

time, he has encouraged diplomatic efforts to lower tensions between Greece and Turkey, and it was during his presidency that Turkey all but stopped its overflights in the Aegean. During a second Democratic term, the US administration would be expected to continue to support dialogue between Greece and Turkey, while also continuing to engage Turkey, allowing room for it to play a bigger international role.

For his part, transactional Trump will not be interested in Turkey's divergence from the West, since he doesn't see the US as the guarantor of the Western world, and he will reward Erdogan for choices that he admires, regardless of principles and

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values. In short, with Trump, there will be no background or framework governing Greek-Turkish relations, or the Cyprus issue for that matter. However, it is reasonable to expect these relations will be impacted by developments in Ukraine, the Middle East, the Balkans and North Africa. And given that Biden agreed to exit the race, the election of a younger Democratic candidate is expected to lead to more hands-on American engagement abroad at a critical time for the postwar international order. This would be particularly useful in our unstable part of the world, as the war in Gaza is threatening to expand to Lebanon and undermine regional stability. Russia has its eyes set on undermining stability in southeastern Europe, and Turkey has not given up its revisionist aspirations, including in Cyprus. And it should be noted that even as both the current and former presidents have links to the Greek American community, the same holds for the most likely Democratic candidate, Harris.

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