

The View from Athens: A Conversation with Prime Minister Mitsotakis

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00:00: Well, good morning everyone. Welcome back to the Aspen Security Forum and good afternoon. Good late afternoon to all of our friends in Greece and in the Eastern Mediterranean. It's a great pleasure for me to welcome a friend and the Prime Minister of Greece, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. I think he's gonna... You'll see his image and his screen pop up in just a minute. Prime Minister Mitsotakis doesn't need a big introduction for an American crowd because we know him very well. But he's been the leader of the New Democracy party in Greece, Nea Dimokratia for four years. I know that he modernized that party, he rebuilt its base, he rebuilt its platform and he won a major electoral victory with an absolute majority in the Greek parliament. This stunned a lot of people but frankly didn't surprise me knowing the gifts of this politician. He's been very skillful in my judgment in recreating Greece's relationship with the European Union. I wanna ask him about that, about the recent marathon overnight summit meeting that he endured with Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Macron and the other EU leaders. And as we in America know, he's also rebuilt in many ways, the long relationship, the alliance between the United States and Greece. He has a very good and productive relationship with President Trump which is positive for both of our countries. So Prime Minister, it's great to see you in Athens, welcome.

01:31: Well, Nick, it's a real pleasure. Thank you for hosting me and I can't imagine being interviewed by anyone more knowledgeable about our part of the world, so I'm really looking forward to this discussion.

01:43: Well, thank you very much. And I should say the people who are watching in the United States and Greece, around the world, the Prime Minister and I have known each other for... It's amazing to say, over 20 years. I knew early on, Prime Minister, that... I know you were involved in business, you're involved in finance, you made your own way in the world. I had hoped that you would come back to politics, you did. And the result is a very close relationship between the US and the United States. We're gonna have a conversation about a lot of issues. I wanna ask you first about the biggest crisis in the world today, the corona virus pandemic. We are suffering here in the United States, nearly a 160,000 Americans have died. We have the highest number of infections in the world and trouble across many of our states. You've had a very different experience in Greece and I've admired from afar your ability so far, and let's knock on wood, to curb the pandemic. Tell us how you approached it and how you listened to the epidemiologists in Greece because you do have an outstanding record.

02:47: Well, Nick thank you, first of all, very much for your kind words. As far as COVID is concerned, it was not really rocket science. We listened to the experts, we decided to shut down the economy sooner rather than later. We let the experts to the talking, we focused very much on our message, and we tried to convince Greeks that this should be a collective effort and that we all had to gain if we were to succeed to contain the first phase of the epidemic. And indeed it was quite remarkable how the Greek public reacted. They were extremely, extremely disciplined. This essentially allowed us to fully contain the first wave of the epidemic and to gradually relax our

protective measures and bring the economy back to some sort of normal activity. Of course, I do need to point out that as we open up the economy, the cases have started to increase which is something that we expected. We also do much more testing and we're also much smarter regarding the testing.

03:58: But one word of caution, because I had a meeting with my team this morning. We should not fall victims of our own success. People do become complacent, and yes, it is tiring to do social distancing and in particular to wear masks. We're very big on masks and we've essentially made masks mandatory in all... Everywhere indoors but also occasionally outdoors, whenever we cannot ensure social distancing. I changed my profile photo and put a photo with a mask. We wanna send a signal that masks do matter because frankly, Nick, we cannot shut down the economy for a second time. And everybody acknowledges that we need to find a way to live with the virus until we get to the point where we have a vaccine. So we're much smarter when it comes to contact tracing. We try to isolate the outbreaks sooner rather than later and we can still afford to do that. And of course, we were also quite... I think, quite clever in the way we've opened up the country to foreign tourists. Everyone has to fill out what we call our passenger locator form and we have a very complicated algorithm that essentially determines who needs to be tested.

05:13: We've tested more than 240,000 people from the almost 2 million people who have arrived into Greece since we opened up. So we have a big database that also gives us a very good indication of whether we have problems in other countries. For example, we very quickly identified that the Balkans was a problematic region so we restricted access to visitors from Romania and Bulgaria. We asked them to actually submit a negative test to come into Greece. So this has to be a data driven approach. It has to be scientific but I think it also needs to demonstrate enough empathy. You know the Greek word *philotimo*? You know that very well. We can't exactly... We can't exactly translate it into English but it's a sense of pride in our own accomplishments. So now that we see the cases moving the wrong direction, we have to make the extra effort to make sure that we adhere to the guidelines that the epidemiologists have told us, actually, we need to follow, so.

06:17: It was a very interesting experiment, also a very interesting social experiment. I'm happy because people restored a part of their trust in the state. You know very well that the relationship between Greeks and the state was always a troubled one. There wasn't much confidence in the ability of the state to actually perform its most basic functions, which is to protect the life and the property of individuals. The state actually responded in a professional manner. I think we were quite competent in the way we managed this whole process. Huge leaps in terms of digitalization, lots of services being moved online, so we cut the interaction. We used this as an opportunity to cut bureaucracy, hired lots of people in our National Health Service, almost doubled the number of ICU beds. So under the emergency, we used this as an opportunity to make sure that we also make some long-term investments, which are gonna be extremely valuable in the long term, even in the post-COVID era.

07:15: Well, Prime Minister, I was gonna remark, and you've just said it, one of the things I always loved about Greeks from the time that I lived in your country was they are very independent-minded people. And it's one of the most attractive qualities of Greeks. And so how have you managed to convince Greeks that it's a... Is it a patriotic thing to wear a mask now, a pride in Greece to protect the...

07:37: Yes. We have our masks with the little flags on them, so it's always a good idea to put the flag on your mask. But frankly, I think we used... We were lucky enough that our Chief Epidemiologist is someone who... He was a fantastic scientist, but he also proved to be an extremely skilled communicator. So until May, he was on TV everyday. We actually recruited him yesterday to do another extraordinary briefing because we wanted people to be aware that we have an issue that we need to address. But essentially, people understood that we had an opportunity to also break the stereotypes, and a lot of stereotypes regarding Greeks were, I think, broken during the times of the... During first wave of the crisis. And people really felt proud about what we achieved, but then of course, they became slightly complacent. This is not just a Greek phenomenon.

08:40: I was speaking to lots of my colleagues in other countries that have done well. You think you've done well, you think you've eliminated the problem, but the virus is still there, and the virus is contagious. What we see now is a different pattern where it spreads more amongst younger people, so we have no pressure whatsoever on our national health system, but we wanna make sure we keep it that way.

09:06: So when it comes to convincing people, I probably gave seven or eight, I don't remember the exact number, direct addresses where I tried to explain to people in very plain language what was at stake. But we relied heavily on the experts doing the talking, so I didn't do daily briefings. I had daily meetings, but I didn't do daily briefings. But whenever I felt I needed to communicate directly with the people, I just made a nationally televised statement. And I think as a communication strategy, it worked pretty well.

09:41: Well, knowing you and knowing about your education and your career in business, I'm not surprised that you were data-driven and that you were science-oriented. And may I just say from the perspective of abroad, I really respect what you've been able to do and putting your epidemiologist out front certainly made a lot of sense. Tourism is such an important part of your economy. Our daughter Caroline just spent 10 days in Greece. She went with a friend to Mykonos and to Milos, and then after, Thessaloniki. And Caroline, of course, has lived in Greece before. She was very impressed by how organized it was, and how people did check as to where she had been and whether she had been ill, and she thought it was a very positive experience, but it must be a hard sell... Your tourism must be down.

10:29: Oh, tourism.

10:31: From where or what you're undergoing. How are you handling that?

10:33: Look, we knew that we would suffer, and it's a question of what we can salvage from what would have been a lost season. Leisure, travel, tourism were the hardest hit sectors. And I think this is also... It's a medium to... It's a long-term concern how these sectors will recover, but what we did, we said, "We wanna open but we'll now re-open up safely." So we have all our screening protocols for the people who are actually coming to Greece. We're extremely strict in terms of protecting the employees in the hospitality industry, so you won't find anyone not wearing masks in terms of the professionals, the waiters, the hotel staff. Extremely diligent in terms of protecting them. We make

sure we have dedicated COVID rooms in all hotels should a case emerge. Well, all our hospitals, even our small hospitals, even if you go to a small island in the local healthcare center you'll find... In case you had a positive case, you'll find two COVID beds.

11:40: And of course, we keep repeating the messages that you can have a fantastic experience in Greece, but you probably wanna avoid very crowded beach bars or after-hour discotheques because that's where the problem is. But you can have a lovely experience, you can come swim in the sea. It's actually fantastic this year because the crowds are not here.

12:00: Right.

12:00: Fantastic from a visitor's point of view, actually not fantastic for us. But from a visitor's point of view, it's great. We're sad that we're not able to welcome citizens, tourists from the US. Because as you know, this is a European decision that we don't actually allow visitors from the US into the European Union as a whole. And I do hope that this is going to change, although things in the US don't look to be moving in a right direction. But overall, what we try to do is to use this as a springboard for the next season, to project an image of seriousness, competence, and to make sure that essentially jobs are not lost. So a lot of the money that we spend is going into short-term employment, flexible employment schemes where essentially... For example, we go to a hotel, we'll tell them, "Look, you can use... You can put your staff on 50% employment, so they work only 15 days. We'll pay them for 90% of their salary, we'll cover a 100% of the Social Security contributions, but don't fire them."

13:08: So we give employees the possibility to use their labor force much more flexibly for much fewer hours because the demand is not there, because we wanna make sure that they're not fired during the summer season. So in the winter then they'll go into short-term unemployment benefits, so that they can be rehired the next summer. So we wanna make sure that we don't lose too many jobs. But Europe has a stronger tradition than the US in terms of protecting employment, and we've actually spent a lot of money in these types of schemes. Because now our concern is, come winter, that we don't see a massive spike in unemployment and that we can continue to support the more vulnerable ones in an effective manner. And the good thing is that we now are not constrained by European budget guidelines. So we will... As all countries run a big deficit in 2020. The good thing is that the markets accept that, so our borrowing clauses are very low given the historical, the recent history of Greece. And of course, we have what we... I'm sure we will discuss access to lots of European money, which will start flowing in come 2021.

14:25: Well, Prime Minister, I wanted to turn exactly to this subject, and that's that your relationship with the European Union, your ability to finance the period ahead. And to me, it's such a big turnaround to see a situation where Greece can, 9, 10 years ago, nearly ended its relationship with the European Union. There was a real prospect over the debt crisis. You seem to have turned it all around. And this extraordinary marathon summit until five or six in the morning where you participated with all the leaders, you emerged with a neutralization of debt, with a program to provide grants and loans to Greece and Italy and Spain, and the other hard hit countries. 72 billion Euro, I think, of support. Tell us about your conversations with Chancellor Merkel and President Macron. How did that... That's a big turnaround for the Germans especially, that major change in philosophy. How did that happen?

15:23: Europe is never progressing in a linear manner. You have periods of rapid progress and you have long periods of stasis or stability where nothing is really happening. And I remember actually, I was sitting in this conference room on this summit we had on March 26th, and it was a disaster.

15:43: It was a pretty ugly time.

15:45: Yeah, we couldn't agree on anything. There was a great disagreement in terms of actually coming up with some sort of neutralized debt instrument, and that was a time when I really thought, "Oh, we were in deep trouble." But guess what? Four months later, Europe has taken a significant leap forward because we've decided that we will now use our collective fire power to borrow at the level of the commission. So we will, all member states, guarantee a common debt instrument that is issued however at the supranational level. And not only that, that we will use this money primarily to give grants to the weaker member states. If you had this discussion in Germany, as you pointed out, even four or five months ago, it would have been inconceivable.

16:32: And hats off, as I told Chancellor Merkel, she took a... Because it was very difficult for her to actually make that switch, but I think she understood that this is exactly what was necessary. So I don't know if it's exactly a Hamiltonian moment, but I can tell you it comes pretty close given Europe's difficult relationship with any sort of mutual aid mutualized debt concept. And I made the argument, not just on behalf of Greece, but on behalf of Europe as a whole. If the Southern Europe were to collapse, a single market would collapse. And even in my discussions with the Frugals, because I have lots of discussions and I'm good friends with all the leaders, I told them, "Look, your experts oriented economies, you sell us renewables or electric cars, or if that part of the internal market disappears, you will also suffer." So I think we ended up with something which is very important, rendered 90 billion Euros in total in grants. Why are grants important? Because we, the Italians or Spaniards or Portugese have high levels of debt. We cannot add significant additional debt to our debt stock pile. So we need Europe to borrow at the European level so that we don't incur the additional debt.

17:53: And of course, now as far as Greece is concerned, we have 40 billion Euros out of the multi annual financial framework, which is the seven-year budget of the European Union. And we have 32 billion out of the new recovery fund, out of which 19 billion is grants. And I'm telling you, we have already put the teams in place, set up our internal governance structure. Because by October 15th, we need to submit our plan, and there will be... This is not free money. This is what I explained to people in Greece. It's not that someone has... Somebody printed 32 billion and given it to us to spend. We need to justify the spending. We need to support real reforms. We need to support the green and digital agenda which is very big for us anyhow, so we don't need to be convinced that we need to spend money in that direction. And we need a very comprehensive plan on how we will absorb this money. But not just for Greece, for Europe.

18:50: And I think this is also important for your audience in the US to understand. This was a very, very important moment and it was difficult. I don't think I've pulled two all-nighters. I don't think I ever did two all-nighters in college Nick... In a row. But these discussions are always very interesting because beyond the discussions and the plenary, they're always very interesting discussions in the late... In the early hours of the morning with all leaders. And we do understand

their sensitivities, we all have domestic constituencies. And if you really want to forge an agreement, you need to be able to put yourself in the shoes of the other leaders because they also have to sell the agreement to their constituencies because this is a decision that requires unanimity at the end of the day. Greece is a big... Is a big... I hate to use the word winner but we're getting a lot of money as a percentage of our GDP from this new instrument and we intend to put it to good use.

19:52: We'll have three years to make sure we complete and we... To submit the projects and then another three years to get the money so this is a six-year time horizon and I intend to use this money to really transform the country. So it's a cliché to say that the crisis is a terrible opportunity to waste and you can't think of COVID as an opportunity because it's a tragedy given the number of people who've lost their lives but it is also... It gives us the additional impetus to drive through change that is so necessary in Greece and because I was elected on a reform agenda and I never told the Greek people that I don't wanna do reforms now I also have the financial fire power to implement the reforms I always wanted to do, so in that sense this is an additional something very important that has come out of the COVID crisis at least for Greece.

20:45: Thank you, Prime Minister, two quick follow-up questions on this issue of your economy relationship with the EU. The first is this, Chancellor Merkel, I know you know her well, I know you have a very good working relationship with her, she spoke at the Harvard commencement a year ago and I spent a lot of time with her there at that commencement, I've always been impressed by her, by her humility, by her intelligence, by her practical nature. Was she the key person do you think in this EU agreement? And how do you think of her legacy?

21:18: I think, yes, she was the key person for three reasons, first of all she's the president of the rotating council presidency. Second, she is the most experienced leader in the room by far, longer serving head of state or government, and third, if you didn't get Germany on board you would never have gotten a deal. And so Germany needed to change its approach regarding the necessity of Europe to borrow at the European level and then give out part of the money, most of the money in the form of grants, so I have tremendous respect for Chancellor Angela Merkel she is someone who has lots of experience, she's ready to make... She takes her time, she's not someone who's gonna be pressed into making quick decisions but once she's convinced that she has to do the right thing she can make big, big... She can take very important steps forward. And on a personal level, she's also someone who behind the cameras is also someone who's extremely likeable as a person, so I have tremendous respect for her and given the fact that she is going to be the President for the next six months, I think there's still a lot of issues that we need to work closely. One of them for example, being the new migration and asylum pact which is another big challenge for Europe, which is another big file that I hope will be completed during the German presidency.

22:52: And Prime Minister, in many ways the hallmark of your time in office as Prime Minister has been this very positive resurgence in the Greek economy, a lot of people had given up on Greece several years ago in terms of its financial and economic future but you've really been able to stabilize, there's confidence in the markets in you, tell us about that that, that must have been your major goal as Prime Minister I would think.

23:16: No, this is how we started until... But we've been in constant crisis management mode, so when I came into power I said look, my goal is to make Greece a success growth story within the

European Union, attract foreign capital, reduce our borrowing costs, reduce barriers to foreign investment and really have a very jobs-oriented agenda and we were doing quite well until COVID hit us but even now our 10-year T-bill is slightly above 1% which would have been inconceivable even a year ago so there's clear trust in the financial markets in what we are doing and in our reform agenda. And I think Greece is a very compelling growth story to tell, it has as you know unique natural comparative advantages that come... That are the result of its geography but it's also a country that has very talented resourceful people, a very dynamic diaspora, 400,000 people who left during the crisis would be happy to come back and support the economy and I think if you unleash the potential and the creativity of the Greek people we could really do very, very impressive things and overall the good thing is that we have the political capital to actually do that because we have an absolute majority in parliament which is unusual by European standards.

24:50: So we won 40% of the vote that makes us one of the strongest, if not the strongest center-right party in Europe, we're doing even better now in the polls so there's a lot of confidence in our reform agenda, we are... We want to see results so we're not that ideological, we want to dominate we're sort of a radical reformist, centrist party so we want to govern from the center but in a very reformed-oriented manner and I think we've also proven that you can beat a populist and that there is a value... For all of us who have... Who take some pride in our CVs and our studies we get thrashed by the populists and destroyed in this anti-elite and anti-intellectual wave, it feels good that we can actually prove that we can get the job done so I think also in terms of the global narrative, how do you defeat populism? Can you defeat populism by not being a populist, by being someone who embraces change but also embraces data-driven policy? I think we've done that and people are actually... We're a year in office and we have higher levels of trust now than we had when we got elected but of course COVID has thrown all this up in the air but it has in a sense rekindled the emergency of doing reforms, because COVID is going to leave us at some point, but the structural problems of Greece still will need to be addressed.

26:30: And as I told you, now we also have the funds to drive through some of these important changes, so there is more public, in this case, European capital available. But if you also talk to investors, and even US investors, they'll... I'm sure they'll describe you a different story in terms of how well received they are in Greece, how many deals are taking place. If you look at some of the big US multinationals, Pfizer, Cisco, they're setting up research centers in Greece. Why are they doing that? Because they understand that there's incredible human capital, in Greece, especially in the technology space. If you look at our vibrant high-tech startup industry, for the first time we see big transactions, acquisitions by big US companies. So something is happening beneath the surface, and it is a byproduct of the crisis. Young people no longer felt that they had to bang on a politician's door to get a job in the public sector, which was to a certain extent the case when you were serving in Greece. They understand that they have to maybe take their lives in their own hands, so I think that... I'd say the stars are aligned that post-COVID Greece can do something important and be really a pleasant success story on the economic front.

27:46: Well, for all of us who are philhellenes and wish Greece well, and there are millions of us around the world, we're so impressed by this economic resurgence, we wish you luck in it. Now let's talk about a very difficult issue. You won't be surprised to hear me raise the issue of Turkey and President Erdoğan. For those people listening here in the United States and around the world, the Turks have once again been contesting Greek sovereignty in the Eastern Aegean, that's not new,

they've been doing that for decades. Turkey has been very difficult and I think wrong, frankly, in contesting Greek and Cypriot natural gas drilling in Greek and Cypriot waters in the eastern Mediterranean. And then, of course, we have Turkey with very unfriendly statements about Greece. And Prime Minister, how do you... Turkey's your neighbor, it's been your neighbor forever and will be forever. How do you... It's a big country, it's a powerful country with a willful prime minister, president, excuse me. What are your relations with him? How do you handle all of these problems with Turkey?

28:53: Look, I've met President Erdoğan twice since I became prime minister, and first meeting I told him that, honestly, let's try to do a restart in the Greek-Turkish relationship, because as you said, we'll be neighbors forever. I think our people are quite close, and even culturally close, and I think that really there is no animosity, in spite of all the stereotypes between the Greek and the Turkish people. Unfortunately, I didn't get the response I was expecting. What we've seen from Turkey over the past year essentially has been the signing of what we consider to be a null and void and completely illegal memorandum of understanding between Turkey and Libya, which clearly violates Greek sovereign rights because it recognizes no exclusive economic zone to Greek islands. Completely unacceptable, completely illegal, not just in our minds, I think everybody would probably share that view. We've seen illegal, completely illegal drilling, not just exploratory work, within the Cyprus-exclusive economic zone, so in clear violation of the sovereign rights of Cyprus. We've seen over-flights over Greek islands, we've seen the attempt to weaponize migrants and refugees. The beginning of March, you probably remember when tens of thousands tried to cross the Greek border and we defended the Greek border and we said, this is not going to happen.

30:20: I think Turkey is also behaving in an unreliable manner within NATO. There are collective security concerns being raised. Purchasing the S-400 system is an issue of concern to all of us, including the US, because it compromises the F-35, which is an integral part of NATO as the most advanced airplane that NATO has. Violation of the arms embargo in Libya. So Turkey is behaving, in my mind, in a destabilizing manner, and this is not just a problem for Greece. It's a problem for Europe, I think it's also a problem for the US in terms of the fact that the US has always been interested in the Eastern Mediterranean. So we've made it very clear, and I made it very clear to President Erdoğan that I'm always happy to discuss the one outstanding issue which we consider to have with Turkey, which is the delimitation of our maritime zones in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean.

31:19: From your times as ambassador, there were exploratory talks taking place, and we've discussed, and we've discussed and we've made progress until Turkey cut off the exploratory talks in 2016. We told them, we're happy to resume the talks, but we cannot do this at gunpoint and we will not be blackmailed to the negotiating table by threats that you will violate our sovereign rights. So this is off the table, and we also made it very clear, because we had a recent incident where Turkey issued a NAVTEX threatening seismic activities within the Greek exclusive economic zone, and we basically said that this something which we will not accept. The good thing is that there was a standstill and the ship never sailed, and I take this as an indication, because I wanna see the glass half full, as a positive indication that while we talk, if we really wanna talk, we can't undermine the substance of the talks, which is how do we solve the problem of our claims regarding the exclusive economic zone?

32:22: And I've also been very honest Nick, in telling the Turks and the global community, look, if we cannot agree, let's go to court. Let's go to The Hague. Agree that this is the one difference we have, set the parameters, agree on what we have agreed, agree on what we disagreed, and we will respect the decision of the court because we respect international law. And I think it's a very... It's a fair approach to the extent that we cannot, if we cannot resolve our differences directly. But there have been other provocative activities, converting Hagia Sophia, again, into a mosque was something which in my mind was completely unnecessary. It's been a museum for 86 years. Istanbul is, Constantinople is not short of mosques, there's beautiful mosques, and many of them. So why take a church which became a mosque and then a museum, but still an indication of an intra-faith understanding and dialogue and politicized in such a manner. A completely unnecessary activity, which I think also raises serious issues because this is a World Heritage Site, declared by UNESCO, and it was declared a World Heritage Site as a museum, not as a mosque.

33:42: And I've also made it very clear to our European partners, that should Turkey pursue on this activity, there need to be consequences, there need to be sanctions. So either the relationship is going to improve or if Turkey continues to violate sovereign rights of Greece and Cyprus, the European Union has to react. And for the first time, I see a much better understanding within the European Union, the Turkish role... In our part of the world is really not very constructive. Again, we don't wanna isolate Turkey, and I'd be the first to champion a productive relationship between Greece and the European Union. I want to engage the Turks when it comes to migration. They host three and half million refugees and migrants. And so far we have worked with them, but we cannot work under the constant threat that they will open the flood gates and send us refugees and migrants to put pressure on us. And we have proven that we don't respond well to pressure. We will react. We have the capacity to react, the ability, the willingness and national unity in Greece to support this policy. So it's a carrot and stick approach, but they need to be of equal... Both the carrot and the stick need to be of equal size when it comes to Turkey.

35:00: Well, we've felt the reverberations from these crisis here in the United States. Of course, we have a lot of Orthodox Christians in the United States, and it's been a major issue Hagia Sophia, built... One of the most important churches in Christendom, built by Justinian in the Sixth Century, of course, a master in the Ottoman years. But as you rightly point out, it's been for 80 years, more than 80 years largely a secular... A place that offers access to all faiths, and now to see it returned to Muslim prayers has been disconcerting for the Christian world. You saw a very strong statement by former Vice President Joe Biden.

35:37: Yes.

35:37: And European political leaders speaking out about this. And the issue of sanctions Prime Minister, one of our most experienced American Foreign Correspondents is Steven Erlanger of the New York Times. He wrote a piece in yesterday's New York Times saying that Turkey is now a major problem inside NATO, and yet the leaders of NATO are kind of turning away from making a decision should Turkey be sanctioned on the S-400 and on...

36:05: Well, it's an issue...

36:06: Do you think Turkey could be sanctioned?

36:07: It's an issue. When we met in London in December, I raised the issue. The truth is, President Macron at the time was very supportive but... And he's been a forceful voice, highlighting the fact that Turkey is behaving in a disruptive manner. But I think the alliance will find itself faced with the reality of it's... An important member of the alliance, second largest military within the alliance behaving in a way that undermines the interest of the alliance and the interests of members... Of other members of the alliance. So I think this is an issue, which... I also read the piece and I think it's an issue we can no longer afford to necessarily put under... Put under the rock. It will be raised and of course, the issue of purchasing weapon systems that endanger the defense arrangements of the alliance is an issue concern, not just for the US, it's an issue... It should be an issue of concern for the Alliance as a whole. But again, I do hope that we've sent a very clear signal to Turkey, my... We will see if we're able to restart exploratory talks. If we do, it will be a good indication regarding our bilateral relationship, it doesn't mean, however, that the problems are immediately gonna go... Are going to disappear because we've seen a pattern that has been going on for quite some time now.

37:42: Prime Minister a happier subject, let's turn to your relationship with the United States. I may be one of the best people to say that our relationship has been strained in the past, certainly was during the time when I was ambassador during the Kosovo War. We had a difficult relationship. You have... You and President Trump, and I think President Obama deserves credit here too, in his relationship with your predecessor. Under president Obama and President Trump and you, there has been a new era of relations, and I think all of us who wish this relationship well are happy about this. Tell us about your relationship with President Trump and what you've been able to do here.

38:20: I think we've... This relationship has gone from strength to strength and frankly, I'm quite quite happy as a Greek who... I studied in the US and who really values this relationship. I think it's a relationship of strategic depth. I think the US knows that Greece is a dependable and reliable ally on the geopolitical side but also on the economic side. There is greater defense cooperation between our two countries. There's greater corporation when it comes to energy. So crucial aspects of the geopolitical relationship are being developed. And for the first time, I also see much more interest, which I didn't see in the past by US companies and US capital to be deployed in Greece, which is in my mind, also an important aspect of the relationship.

39:13: There is a relationship between Greece, Cyprus, Israel and the US. A relationship between strong democracies in the Eastern military that share the same values. And I'm happy because this is a relationship that seems to have continuity in the US, but also in Greece. As you pointed out, it could be very good meeting with President Trump when I met him. My predecessor had very good meetings with President Obama. Regardless of who is elected President, I think this relationship is going to continue and will become, if anything, there is a... There's room for it to become even stronger. And what's important from the Greek perspective is that this relationship also enjoys bipartisan support in Greece. For me, it's sort of obvious to talk about the value of the strategic relationship. I'm a centre-right politician educated in the US, but for my predecessor Mr. Tsipras, it was not obvious because he made his career, as you remember, as a protester outside the US Embassy, so for him...

40:17: I think he was protesting when I was Ambassador, he was protesting against the United States.

40:22: Yeah. So for him to recognize the importance of the relationship, that means that across the board in Greece there is now bipartisan support for the value of this relationship. And of course, 2021 is an important year for us. Historically, we'll be celebrating the bicentennial of the Greek revolution, which was very much inspired by the US revolution and by the values of the US revolution. So we shouldn't forget that our ties go back into history and that of course, we also have a tremendously vibrant and dynamic Greek-American community which serves as a bridge between our two countries. And what we also did, which is important, is after 45 years, we for the first time, gave the right to those Greeks who have the right to vote to vote from their place of permanent residence because until now everyone had to come back to Greece to vote. So now most people...

41:15: And be strategically in place, right?

41:16: Yeah. Most people will be eligible to actually vote where they actually... In terms of our diaspora will be eligible to vote from where they actually live, especially those who left the country relatively recently.

41:31: So you trust mail voting in Greece, you have a good system, you can have secure ballots with mail voting.

41:35: No, no, we are not gonna to do mail voting, they will vote in the embassies and in the consular offices. So we will, in the next election we will set up voting infrastructure in the places where we have a big Greek or Greek-American community.

41:57: I almost dragged you into American politics, but you skillfully avoided it. Very good.

42:01: I've been very careful not to. Yeah.

42:04: I know you haven't and...

42:05: Not to make any comments.

42:06: And rightly so. Prime minister, one of the big issues here, we talked to Prime Minister Scott Morrison last evening as part of the Aspen security forum. We talked to the Foreign Minister of Singapore, minister Balakrishnan. We talked to the Chinese ambassador to the US, Cui Tiankai. 5G has become a signature issue in how we relate and compete with China, Australia, the United States, the UK. The important friends of Greece have all taken the position that Huawei should not be part of our networks. What is Greece's position?

42:41: We start this debate from the fortunate position that Huawei doesn't have a strong presence in Greece, at least in the core network and it will remain so. That's gonna be our policy going forward, and probably... So as far as the core network is concerned, it will be completely Huawei free. And even those operators that have a Huawei presence in terms of their... In terms of their

antennas are probably going to decrease that as well. So we recognize that this is a security, a real security concern for the US, but also for Europe, and we will align ourselves with the practices of most European countries, although we... Again, our operators are foreign operators, but we didn't inherit a big problem. So it's easier for us to actually deal with it going forward. And we'll be one of the first countries to actually license offer a 5G spectrum before the end of the year, so we've actually kept our time table. We're big believers in the value of this investment, and we wanna be one of the first beneficiaries. But we fully recognize the valid security concerns, and we will do our best to address them, but we're starting from a good position in terms of we don't have... As we speak, we don't have a big problem.

43:55: I know that for Greece, Chinese investment has been important. I know, of course, the Port of Piraeus, the largest port in the Eastern Mediterranean, run by a Chinese state firm, they have a contract. Are you convinced that Greece has been able to ensure that any kind of nefarious Chinese influence through industrial espionage that you've blocked that off, can you make that assurance?

44:20: Yes, I can and to the... And I think I have good knowledge in terms of what I'm talking about. Yes, the Chinese have invested in the port. Yes, we're happy with the investment, we're very open. They invested at a time when very few people invested in Greece. Piraeus has been turned from a minor player into one of the most important, if not the most important port in the Mediterranean. We're leveraging our geographic position, it's a national... Natural entry point for Eastern Europe, and it's a big investment that is taking the port forward. But if you look at our overall portfolio foreign investments Nick, we have no real dependence on Chinese investment. If you look at overall FDI presence in Greece. And frankly, we want to attract capital from all sources. And we don't wanna be too dependent on any country. So the port is important, and it's been a successful, it's been a win-win proposition, but of course, when we talk about technology, data protection, that's a different ballpark, and we have to be very, very careful and very protective and also very sensitive in terms of the security concerns of our strategic allies.

45:33: Very good Prime Minister. Andy Zamanidis has a question, and I wanna invite Andy to take the stage. We may have a several second delay, so we'll hope that he'll come on board. Andy, if you are with us.

45:50: Thank you, Ambassador. Mr. Prime Minister, good to see you again. Doing a little bit of American politics for you. A lot of us may remember, since it's a presidential election year, the famous 3:00 AM crisis commercial. Who do you want answering the phone at 3:00 AM? And you've had three crises, the Evros crisis, the Corona crisis and this latest NAVTEX. And I have to congratulate you because I think you shoot to the top of answering that 3:00 AM phone call. But you've talked about how clear you've been to Turkey. European allies have been clear to Turkey, in fact, there's a report that Chancellor Merkel in this latest crisis, told Turkey, "Greece is absolutely serious. They were clear during the Evros crisis." But I wanna contrast that with, right now, from the US, it seems that we kinda drip, drip, drip, and send mixed signals to Turkey. We always kinda start with, we refrain from... We ask each party or refrain from doing anything when only one party is doing something. Does that mixed signaling and a bad signaling, in my opinion, make these relations more difficult and keep us from getting to the table or to The Hague sooner rather than later?

47:23: Thank you, Andy.

47:25: Yeah, look, well, thank you, Andy, for the question. Frankly, if I look at the official statements by the State Department, maybe with a few, slight exceptions, but overall, they've been quite supportive of your positions. And you're right that when there's an encouragement for both parties to refrain, this is a fundamentally unjust statement as far as Greece is concerned. Because we are not engaging in any provocative activity that could provoke, if I look at it from Turkey's side, that could provoke their interests while they're not... Clearly not doing the same. When I was in Washington in January, and we met I did sense within the administration, but also in particular on the Hill, there was a bi-partisan understanding that the relationship with Turkey is not the same that it was three, four years ago. It's not as predictable. Turkey is behaving in a manner that is actually threatening US interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.

48:27: And pieces of legislation also sponsored by Senator Menendez are clearly an indication that there is a much better understanding in Washington of what is really happening in the Eastern Mediterranean. And I do want to also use this forum to help clarify what is really happening and what US interests should be regardless of the historic ties between Greece and the US. So I had a very honest discussion with president Trump. I think he understood exactly when I told him regarding what our limits are, and what we can and what we cannot accept. And I think also the administration and the state department bureaucracy, I'm sure has a pretty good understanding of why things today are different from what they were maybe five years ago.

49:14: And also I think within NATO, it is very clear that this sort of hands-off approach that, "Oh, we have two NATO partners, so we're not gonna go into the details," is no longer gonna be accepted by me. And I raised this also with Secretary General Stoltenberg that we are a NATO contributor. We are an ally and we expect, when we feel that a NATO ally is behaving in a way to endanger our interests, we cannot expect from NATO the similar approach that we don't want to interfere in your sort of internal differences. This is profoundly unfair for Greece.

49:52: Andy, thank you very much. Prime Minister, we have another question from Rahul Stumont. Rahul, you have the floor. Please ask your question.

[pause]

50:14: It's extraordinary in these times that we don't have technology.

50:17: Hi can you guys hear me fine?

50:20: Yes, Rahul, we hear you now.

50:21: Yeah. Hi. So the question for Prime Minister Mitsotakis, is you mentioned you're a very data-driven person. And one of the difficult things you've been dealing with, of course, is how to keep the economy open while making sure the people are safe from the coronavirus pandemic. I have a two-part question, if I may? The first one is, can you tell us what are some of the four or five metrics your team is looking at on a daily basis to try to determine how to keep the economy

functioning. And for each metric, have you guys identified sort of objective numeric inflection points to let you know how are you guys in the red or the yellow or the green? And the second question, if I may, is somewhat open-ended and generic. As a leader, Prime Minister, you're often looking at... You're often being presented datasets that are potentially incomplete or inaccurate or perhaps can't. How do you sort of deal with such situations? Again, it's generic, but I'm curious to see if you have any words of wisdom for us listening in.

51:26: Well, thank you Rahul for the question. I'll start with the second leg. If you expect to have totally reliable data in this crisis, you'll be waiting forever until you make a decision. So you have to go with what you have. You have to look at trends. We're very data-driven and we have enough data to draw conclusions. And of course, the good thing, data is useful to the extent that it allows you to change your policy when that is necessary. And this is a constant re-adjustment exercise. So for example, as I mentioned in the discussion very early on, our data indicated that we had a problem from travelers who came from Bulgaria and Romania. So we took measures. So we are looking in terms of datasets. What are we looking at? The number one indicator is hospitalization rates and occupancy of our ICU beds. We're extremely low there. Right now, just to give you an indication, across Greece, we have 13 or 14 people on ICU COVID related beds. And less than 60 were hospitalized across the board.

52:39: So this is the number-one metric, because case number by itself is not gonna tell us the full story because you're doing more testing and we need to be sure we compare apples to apples. And of course, the other very interesting data that we have is because we test arrivals from all countries, we have a good indication as to whether there is a spike in another country that we need to worry about in terms of not importing cases into Greece. So that's another metric I look at very carefully.

53:09: And of course, if you wanna get into the minute details of contact tracing, we keep track of whatever local outbreaks we have, and we have information and very good also visualize information regarding how the outbreaks and the contact tracing actually is going and where we have small local outbreaks. And when I'm talking about local outbreaks, I'm talking about outbreaks of 10, 20, 30, 40 cases, of this sort of size. But I can tell you, sharing data in cross-functional teams has not always been a very easy exercise. And it did take us some time to get to the point where we have one integrated database that all people have access to and then experts can slice and cut the data in whichever way they find it more useful. But I have on my dashboard all the datasets that I need to get my top-level information as to what is happening.

54:13: Rahul, thank you very much. Prime Minister, this kind of science-oriented data-driven leadership is most welcome, I think. A lot of us are just trying to learn the lessons of this phase of the pandemic not knowing what's ahead of us, but I certainly credit you for having taken this apolitical data-driven approach to what you're doing. You've been very generous with your time. If I could ask you one more question and we'll let you go. You're about to observe your bicentennial as a nation, the rebirth of Greece in the revolution of 1821. That was a significant event in the United States at the time. There was great political support in the United States for Greece. It had so many different manifestations, from Greek Revival architecture, which in New England where I live is a prominent part of our building, to political philosophy, it had an influence on people like Abraham Lincoln. I think we in America wanna stand with you in observing this, celebrating the bicentennial of Greece. And I know all of the Greek-American fraternal organizations, the American school of

classical studies, our archeologists who have been with you for, gosh, since the 1880s, I assume this is almost a global celebration, from Australia to the United States, of the Greek world.

55:29: Yeah, it's an important year for us. We've set up a special committee that has been preparing events. We want this to be... We don't just wanna do just one big parade. I don't want this to be a glamorous sort of celebration. I want it to be a bottom-up celebration that celebrates our past but also is an opportunity to reposition Greece vis-a-vis its promising future. So, in other words, what we're doing is we're working very hard on the new national branding strategy, which will be unveiled in 2021. And which I think is gonna show to the world a very different story about Greece that they don't usually associate with the country, which I think is important for us to actually tell.

56:11: But especially as far as the Greek-US ties are concerned, it will be an opportunity to celebrate the unique bonds which are not that well-known, and hopefully I'll be able to make an official visit to the US in 2021. I think it will be important symbolically to celebrate this relationship and to also unravel historical aspects which are not very well-known regarding the mutual influence, the support that we got during our war of independence, but also the influence of Greek thought. Classical Greek thought in 19th century US, which is so prevalent, as you pointed out, in many US universities.

57:03: And of course, no liberal arts curriculum is complete without a study of Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War, as you well know, and I'm just indicating one text of classical Greek thinking, which has made its way into almost all curricula in US liberal arts programs. I can mention quite a few others. But this is not just about our past, this is not about what this country did for 200 years, which I think is overall pretty impressive. We shouldn't forget that we're the first province of the Ottoman Empire that managed to fight and win a war of independence, and I think that if you look at all the provinces of the Ottoman Empire, because that's what we were in 1821, we've done probably better than most. So there's reason to be proud of what we've achieved, there's reason to learn from our history, which has been rather tumultuous in terms of oscillating cycles of triumphs and disasters. Hopefully, this is gonna be an opportunity to take a good, hard look at our national history, be honest, also, with the mistakes that we've made, learn from our history, and hopefully be the beginning of what I hope is gonna be a promising and optimistic period for the country.

58:18: Well, I think that's a great way to end this interview. We who admire Greece and care about the country are so pleased to see the progress made, see how well the Greek people are doing, and Prime Minister, congratulations on all of your progress and achievements, and we look forward, hopefully after a vaccine, to welcoming you as Prime Minister to the capital of Greek America, which is the Athens of America, which is Boston, Massachusetts, where I live, and good luck with everything in the intervening time period.

58:52: Well, thank you, Nick. Stay safe, and hopefully we'll be also able to welcome you to Greece as soon as you're allowed to travel.

58:58: We hope so. Thanks so much, Prime Minister, thanks for being with the Aspen Security Forum.

59:01: Thank you! Thank you very much. Goodbye.

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