

Administration of Barack Obama, 2013

Remarks Following a Meeting With Prime Minister Antonios Samaras of Greece and an Exchange With Reporters

August 8, 2013

President Obama. Well, I want to welcome Prime Minister Samaras and his delegation to the Oval Office and the United States. It goes without saying that the friendship, the bonds between the United States and Greece are as deep and as broad as any relations that we have.

Our Government owes a great debt to Greece: our form of government. The Greek American community here are incredible businesspeople and political leaders and community leaders and great friends of mine. And that bond that extends beyond Governments, but goes to our peoples, I think is what makes Greek-American relations so special.

Prime Minister Samaras comes here at a time when I think we're all aware Greece is going through incredible challenges. And so far, the Prime Minister has taken some very bold and difficult actions to initiate the structural reforms that can help reduce the debt burden that Greece experiences, but even more importantly, can unleash the incredible talents of the Greek people so that they are effectively competing in this new world economy.

We had an extensive discussion about the challenges that remain, and I'm confident that Prime Minister Samaras is committed to continuing on these structural reforms. What we also agreed to is that in dealing with the challenges that Greece faces, we cannot simply look to austerity as a strategy. It's important that we have a plan for fiscal consolidations to manage the debt, but it's also important that growth and jobs are our focus, because we know from history that those countries that are growing, those countries where employment is high and people are increasing their productivity and feel as if the economy is moving forward, those countries have an easier time reducing their debt burdens than countries that—where people are feeling hopeless.

And I think Prime Minister Samaras is committed to taking the tough actions that are required, but also, understandably, wants to make sure that the Greek people see a light at the end of the tunnel. And what I expressed to him is that the United States wants to continue to be helpful and supportive in what will be a challenging process. But we're confident that Greece can succeed. And the stakes are high for not only Greece, but also Europe and the world economy.

We also discussed the strong bilateral military and intelligence cooperation between our two countries. Greece is a NATO ally. They have worked with us in preventing terrorist threats from actually happening. We have partnered on a whole range of issues. They are host for some of our very important military personnel and assets, and we are very grateful to them for that.

And we also had an opportunity to discuss the general environment around the Mediterranean, in the Balkans. As the Prime Minister put it, sometimes it's a challenging neighborhood, and Greece can play an important stabilizing role and partnership role as we address the issues in the Middle East and North Africa, as we address issues in the Balkans. There's a great opportunity as we speak for the decades-long conflict and tensions that exist in Cyprus to be resolved, and I think we're both encouraged by the messages that have been

coming out of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities. And we're going to be, I think, working very closely together to see if we can make progress on those fronts.

So this has been an excellent conversation. We are very proud of the friendship and partnership that we have with the Greek people. We want to be as helpful as we can during this period of challenge, and we're confident that the Prime Minister recognizes what needs to be done and is going to be working very hard to accomplish it.

So welcome.

Prime Minister Samaras. Thank you very much, Mr. President.

We had a very good conversation with the President and analysis on different areas. I first of all want to say that our two peoples and our two countries have been more than allies. Not only did they fight next to each other throughout history, always for a noble cause, but they cherished and they supported the same values like freedom, democracy, and independence. So it's good to be here.

In terms of the economy, yes, we have gone through thick and thin. The sacrifices made by the Greek people are huge, but they are not going to be in vain, because what we now need is development of jobs and growth. Of course, we are going to do what has to be done as far as structural changes are concerned, but our emphasis has to be on growth and on the creation of new jobs, especially for the youth, because as I told the President, in Greece, the unemployment for the youth has reached incredible numbers: 60 percent. And total unemployment of 28 percent. And the Greek people have sacrificed more than a quarter of their GDP only in the last 4 years. So, by definition, emphasis is on growth creation.

But the other thing I want to say is that if Greece succeeds—and it will succeed—our success story is going also to be a European success story. And I believe this is very important. On the other hand, we are trying to do as much as we can to stabilize a very destabilized environment where we live. I believe that the region has many problems. We are going to try and solve as much as we can, establish this cooperation, which I think is important, on the areas that you have described, being always an advocate of international law wherever there are problems around.

I believe that the problems have to do with illegal immigration, internal turbulence in various countries, and even, unfortunately, the problem of terrorism. And I think that there's a lot of synergies that we can have together in order to try and solve as much as we can those problems, including, as you said, the problem of Cyprus, which after the new proposals of the Greek President, opens up a window of opportunity as long as we always, as I said, abide by the international laws and the decisions of the United Nations.

I would also like to say that I told the President that we have found huge energy resources in a critical region. Cyprus, Israel, and Greece can realign those resources in order to be able to satisfy the European demand, especially for natural gas.

And last but not least, I told the President that we will try to do as much as we can during the Greek Presidency in the first semester of next year in order to—with the help of the Italian Presidency that will follow—in order to be able to conclude the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, which I think is very important because, as you know, Mr. President, Europe and the U.S. together in this trade account, as you've said before, more than 50 percent of the world's GDP. And therefore, it's important, especially for Europe, to liberalize that potential and create new jobs because I think jobs for everyone is the number-one priority,

especially to our youth, because everything we are doing has to do with our younger generation.

Again, I want to thank you very, very much for this meeting, and I'm very glad I'm here.

President Obama. Thank you.

Russia

Q. Why not meet with Putin, sir?

Q. Is the reset over?

[*At this point, several other reporters shouted out questions.*]

President Obama. Guys, I'm going to be having a press conference tomorrow, so why don't you ask that question tomorrow? Thank you, guys.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:48 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, Prime Minister Samaras referred to President Karolos Papoulias of Greece. A reporter referred to President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: White House; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Greece, Prime Minister Samaras.

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