

*Paper prepared for the
Fourth Euroacademia Forum of Critical Studies
Asking Big Questions Again*

13 – 14 November 2015

Lucca, Italy

This paper is a draft

Please do not cite

The Grexit Through a Defensive Neorealist Lens

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Abstract

The Euro currency has been around for less than two decades, yet in 2015, we are already seeing a large Euro-crisis of the potential Greek exit from the Eurozone, which has now been termed the 'Grexit'. The notion of Greece withdrawing from the Euro currency is coupled with Greece's issues with their own public debt. This past June, a bailout referendum left to the popular vote failed. There have been two elections this year already, the first in January and the second in September. It is fair to say that domestic Greek politics are experiencing a type of limbo with internal and external factors pulling at it. Prime Minister Tsipras and his Syriza party have been instrumental in opposition to further proposed bailouts. This calls for a look into Tsipras' intentions, especially through a realist lens. Although realism has been traditionally discussed in terms of hard power and exertion of power upon other states, I argue aspects of realism can be construed towards a soft power argument. That is, Tsipras is evoking defensive neorealism, popularised by Kenneth Waltz, in dealing with the Eurozone crisis. The key tenets of neorealism utilised by Tsipras include the European Union as a system being anarchic. In addition, one can never know other state's intentions (i.e. Germany has been seen as fuddling with Greek elections); one has to be set on survival, and one must always be thinking towards survival. In general, I will look at these facets of neorealism and apply them towards Tsipras and other Prime Ministers of the recent past to show the changing dynamic of the Greek leader at the time and how it influences the potential Grexit.

Key words: Grexit, realism

Introduction/Background/Definitions – What is the Problem?

All signs seem to indicate that the Greek debt crisis began in late 2009.¹ Growing disillusionment among the Greek people led to a 'snap' election in October 2009.² The Pasok Party, seen as a centre-left party in Greece, took control of government from the centre-right New Democracy Party.³ Just over two years later, Prime Minister George Papandreou was facing the same issues of public distrust and economic issues within Greece and called for a vote of confidence, which he narrowly won.⁴ Shortly thereafter, he resigned as Prime Minister, and a new far-reaching coalition of Pasok and New Democracy was founded. This put Lucas Papademos (a political independent) as Prime Minister.⁵ So over the course of two years, Greece with its money issues went from a centre-right government, to a centre-left government, and then to a great coalition of the two parties led by an independent Prime Minister. As part of this coalition agreement, elections were held again within six months. The Pasok/New Democracy coalition was not able to sustain a majority in the government. As a result, Greek President Karolos Papoulias was forced to appoint a 'caretaker' Prime Minister; and chose a judge, Panagiotis Pikramenos, to lead until the next election one month later.⁶ Following this quick turn-around for a second election in as many months, again no party was able to obtain a majority. This led to further coalition talks, with a majority finally being sustained by New Democracy, Pasok, and a third party, the democratic-socialist Democratic Left, elevating the fourth Prime Minister to power in this short amount of time: Antonis Samaras.⁷ One year later, Samaras lost the Democratic Left as a coalition partner, leaving him with a majority of just two.⁸ Somehow, Samaras was able to maintain some sense of stability and remained in power until the next legislative elections in 2015.

The January 2015 election was an awakening for Greek politics in comparison to the past decade. Alexis Tsipras, leader of the left-wing Syriza party, won the most seats, but like the elections before this, was unable to achieve an overall majority. Syriza was able to attain a majority by entering into a coalition with the Independent Greeks party.⁹ This is interesting because Syriza is firmly anchored on the left, whereas the Independent Greeks are right-wing populists. Syriza under Tsipras has not adopted a public view on staying in or getting out of the European Union. Tsipras has been very careful about his wording when it comes to the future of Greece and the European Union.¹⁰ Another interesting point to note about Syriza—they are a relatively new party in the Greek political system. For a large part of the third republic, Greece was largely a two major party system, Pasok and New Democracy as the centre-left and centre-right, respectively, populist parties (Vasilopoulou, Halikipoulou, & Exadaktylos 2013). Even up until 2011, as the Vasilopoulou, Halikipoulou, and Exadaktylos article mentions; Syriza was largely seen as a smaller opposition party, and were able to capitalise on the fact that Pasok and New Democracy were joined in coalition and the Greek economy was still struggling.

It is also important to note the official stances of the other parties; to examine the actions of their party leaders in power and how their actions may have been shaped by their parties view on the Grexit. As mentioned earlier, Syriza has no decisive policy on the Grexit. Pasok has a definite 'remain' position, with Evangelos Venizelos, who succeeded Papandreou as party leader, saying, "I do not see a possible exit from the Euro. I believe that is in nobody's interest."¹¹ Samaras as leader was along the same lines, saying that the possibility of the Grexit would not only devastate the efforts Greece had already made towards repair, but contended that it would be, "a geopolitical nightmare that would go beyond the borders of Greece."¹² Panos Kammenos, leader of the Independent Greeks, used a much harsher tone and threatened that if the European Union forced Greece to exit, that Greece would open its borders and "flood [Europe] with migrants, and it will be even worse for Berlin if in that wave of millions of economic migrants there will be some jihadists of the Islamic State too."¹³

What is the Grexit? This portmanteau of Greek and exit is a relatively new term, only appearing in literature since mid-2012.¹⁴ There has been debate over whether such an exit would be forced or voluntary. On one hand, if Greece fails to meet the requirements agreed upon towards the European Union and International Monetary Fund, one could argue that the European Union has the right to force Greece out for such failures. On the voluntary side, Greece may feel that the requirements set out for them are impossible to meet and choose to let them dictate their own terms.

One must also look at a brief background of realism for the purpose of this discussion. Hans Morgenthau (in Hughes & Meng 2011) outlines the six principles of realism. First, politics follows objective and rational laws. These laws may be imperfect, but they are rooted in human nature, which is inherently imperfect. Second, the study of politics is the study of power. A leader's decision is governed by how much power he/she gains or loses and how this power can motivate a leader to act a certain way. Third, power is transformative; power among countries is ever changing and all countries are vying for a (oft quoted in IR literature) balance of power. Fourth, "moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation, but they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place" (Morgenthau in Hughes & Meng 2011, p. 122). Fifth, the morals of a nation cannot be coincided with the morals of the universe; nations are self-interested, especially when it comes to power. Sixth, is the adoption of a human nature viewpoint that is pluralistic; realists acknowledge autonomy of the political 'sphere', while other schools of thought move towards other spheres. The political sphere is political.¹⁵

Likewise, John Mearsheimer (1994-5, p. 10) details the five tenets briefly touched on in the abstract. Those are, loosely, all states exist in an anarchic system, all states have possession of military capability, states can never fully know the intentions of other states, states are set on survival, and states must proactively think about how to survive. We can then couple this with Kenneth Waltz (2001), who argues that there are three levels of analysis (or images, as he refers to them) for dealing with international relations: the individual, the state, and the international system. Each of these images dictates who/what determines behaviour/order. Classical realism, the school of thought following the likes of Morgenthau, falls under the state level of analysis. Neorealism, following Mearsheimer (who has adopted a sort of 'offensive' neorealism) and Waltz (who likewise has evoked 'defensive' neorealism) falls under the systemic level of analysis. I have decided to examine the actions of the latest Tsipras government in a defensive neorealist lens against other countries, and specifically the European Union.

Literature Review – whose work did I refer to?

Due to the nature of this topic, being a fairly recent one (with some things mentioned occurring in the past four months), I have relied a lot more heavily on periodicals than is typical for writing of this type. I strove to choose the most relevant articles from those that are seen as reputable periodicals in the global sphere. I also assessed many government body reports, both on the Greek and European Union ends. In the case of Greek-language sources, I used Google Translate cross-checked with Babylon and Systran to confirm translation accuracy. In terms of academic literature, I relied heavily on core neorealist texts for a thorough background on what defensive neorealism exactly means. I read multiple pieces by key defensive neorealist scholar Kenneth Waltz, as well as other neorealists such as John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, Robert Art, Robert Jervis, and Charles Glaser. I also particularly examined a piece by Simon Collard-Wexler that deals with neorealist thought and whether or not it can explain "integration [of the European Union] under anarchy."

Results – what did I find out?

In this section, I will analyse various aspects of Greek politics within four of the five facets of neorealism that Mearsheimer details, and then put a defensive spin, as per Waltz, on them. I will then explain why I have omitted a certain facet and the implications that such an omission carries.

Anarchic System

A core tenet of neorealist philosophy is that people live in an anarchic society or a world with no central government above all other countries' government (see Art & Jervis in Powell 1994, p. 330). For the purpose of Greece in the European Union, one may argue that the European Union is a government above Greece, but it is more logical to see the European Union as a sole state (that is land with borders and possession of sovereignty).¹⁶ A key debate about the impact the European Union and neorealism have on one another is given greatly by Simon Collard-Wexler (2006). I will take some of the arguments he lays out and apply them to the relations between Greece and the European Union.

In 1979, Waltz predicted, "A United Europe that developed political competence and military power over the years could one day emerge as the third superpower" (Waltz 1979, p. 180 in Collard-Wexler 2006, p. 423). In many ways this is true of the European Union post-Maastricht and Amsterdam (happening over a decade since Waltz's prediction). The European Union is now a power and force to be reckoned with. As Collard-Wexler (2006, p. 423) noted, the European Union satisfies four of the five requirements for being a great power, "population and territory; resource endowment; economic capability; and military strength, but lacks the fifth; political competence." So, while the European Union is an economic power, to Collard-Wexler, its lack of political prowess reduces the argument for the European Union being a *hegemon*.

But, does the European Union possess political competence in 2015? The European Union does not have a *de facto* leader that dictates universal policy among all states like a president or prime minister. But, the European Union has several bodies of direct responsibility, mainly: European Parliament, European Council, Council of the European Union, European Commission, and the Court of Justice of the European Union.¹⁷ In brief, the European Parliament is

a directly-elected legislative body; the European Council is all of the country leaders sitting together in meeting. Likewise, the Council of the European Union is the relevant government ministers from all countries aligning policy. The European Commission is the closest thing the European Union has to a separate executive, with the President of the European Commission the closest notion of a total leader, and the Court of Justice of the European Union is the judicial arm, ensuring that laws are enacted equally across all states and settling disputes between European Union countries.¹⁸ To the point of the President of the European Commission, or the closest position to 'Prime Minister of Europe', traditionally it has been a figurehead, but since the presidencies of Jose Manuel Barroso and now with Jean-Claude Juncker, there has been a shift towards a hierarchical and bureaucratic power structure (Goetz 2014). The President of the European Commission has long attended G7/8 and G20 summits on behalf of the European Union as its own entity and not entirely on behalf of all members and in May 2011, the European Union was granted further rights as its own entity within the United Nations.¹⁹

"Neorealists explain that cooperation can occur when a hegemon fosters rules and dampens the fears of cheating and relative gains when the number of parties increases, or when states are collectively faced by an external threat" (Snidal, 1991, p. 722 in Collard-Wexler 2006, p. 400). We can then elect to view the European Union as the regional hegemon in an examination of Greek cooperation with European Union/International Monetary Fund. If we take the latter point of Snidal's point of external threats facing multiple states at the same time, we can then see why both Greece and the European Union are acting the way they are. Fellow Eurozone states do not want further Greek economic troubles to impact their domestic livelihood as they are on the same currency. That is why you have states like Germany pushing for hard reforms on the European Union end upon Greece. Likewise, Greece, especially under Tsipras, has looked towards Russia (further expanded in the next section) for economic talks. Although Russia is not a part of the European Union, there is a balancing effect going on. To the Greek government, brokering a deal with Russia can balance out any fear and power imbalance coming from the European Union end. Although balancing of power is the last resort in a defensive point-of-view, it becomes a necessity for smaller states like Greece to maintain a level of security.

Although a defensive neorealist wants bipolarity (two great powers balancing each other leads to a more secure world all around), and an offensive neorealist wants unipolarity (one great power dictating power dynamics, no one else can stand up to them), the European Union may be on the rise to becoming a power in a multipolar world, at least economically. Although, with no standing army of its own it would be impossible to achieve balance of power or relative gains effectively against those who do have armies (although Juncker has indicated a desire for a standalone European Union Army to *balance* against a looming Russia).²⁰

Other States' Intentions

Another tenet of neorealism is that one can never know the intentions of other states, so therefore must always be planning in response to hypotheticals coming from other states. Due to some events in the past few elections, Greece has to act extremely cautiously with one of the European Union's biggest powers—Germany. After the first 2012 election resulted in no majority attainable, it was reported that German Chancellor Angela Merkel was suggesting that an in/out European Union referendum should happen alongside the next round of legislative elections.²¹

Likewise, United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron suggested that the legislative elections were in essence a quasi-referendum, in that whichever party you vote for is dictating the national mood of the referendum vote: "We now have to send a very clear message to people in Greece: there is a choice – you can either vote to stay in the euro, with all the commitments you've made, or if you vote another way, you're effectively voting to leave."²² Along the same lines, neorealism is focused on relative gains. It is not about absolute gains where you have a complete advantage, but rather having just enough power over another state to be balanced. With the second 2012 election looming, parties began to make ultimatums to Samaras in order to attract an offer of coalition. For Tsipras to join the coalition, he required the withdrawal from European Union/International Monetary Fund requirements, expectations, and deadlines.²³ This can be seen as a largely defensive move. Also, traditionally weaker states tend to cooperate with stronger states as a matter of balancing and protection. For example, a small country may seek to politically appease a larger country in return for either physical or economic protection.

So with Greece in its current position, Tsipras on the defensive has to then balance out with third parties who could protect them. Interestingly (or perhaps, very logically), Tsipras has chosen Russia as the unlikely ally. There is some speculation as to a common thread linking Russia and Greece. Russia being sanctioned by the European Union can be viewed *vis-à-vis* Greece's attitudes towards continual economic austerity plans from the European Union.²⁴ This type of political manoeuvring would be characteristic of defensive neorealist Charles Glaser's (1994/5 in Collard-Wexler 2006, p. 415) point that "what states seek above all is security. Power, in his [Glaser's] view, should only be seen as a means to achieve security, not an end in itself." But, as a defensive neorealist, one has to then think about what Russia is gaining from such an action and to be equally cautious about exploitation on the Russian end as well.

There are also effects from the other states in terms of policy. The bailout packages relied on the funding and support from other European Union members and the International Monetary Fund. The first bailout programme relied heavily (almost three-quarters of the total disbursed at that point) on just three European Union members: Germany (15.1 billion), France (11.4 billion), and Italy (10.0 billion).²⁵ There is very obvious high-risk involved with bailout packages—one can never be 100% sure that the money will be recouped. So, one has to be under the impression that with further austerity deals and potential bailout programmes that the countries who are putting the most in may be

influencing policy in a way to better benefit them in the long run. While all of the European Union members are allied with one another, going back to a core tenet of neorealism—mutual gains—the actions of another state can never fully be known.

States Aim for Survival and Proactivity Towards Such

Although ‘survival’ in most neorealist thought connotes losing all or part of your state to a circumstance like war, survival is currently about the Greek debt crisis and the looming threat of the Grexit. Greece stands to lose a lot of (soft) power if they continue to have both continued economic downturn/debt issues and if they leave the European Union.²⁶ The Greeks have had a strong proactive role in trying to rebound their economic downturn, and thus, quasi-survival. There have been two main efforts to enact this survival—a referendum and a series of austerity measures.

Although there have been a handful of austerity measures, there has only been one referendum. But, this referendum is arguably the most important factor, as the public finally got to have a say in the matters of the Greece economy. On June 26, 2015, Alexis Tsipras announced to the public that there would be a referendum vote on July 5, 2015 on whether or not to accept the bailout deal offered by the IMF and other European creditors.²⁷ He said on the matter, “so that Greek voters can choose freely, without blackmail and pressure.”²⁸ Former Prime Minister, then-minority leader Antonis Samaras described the referendum attempt as “effectively setting the country on a collision course with Europe.”²⁹ Here, we have two conflicting views on the purpose of the referendum—Tsipras looking at it from the point-of-view of giving the voters a say, and Samaras looking at it proactively towards its potential effects on Greece’s position within Europe. It could be argued that both are vying for Greek survival, just on two different ends of the survival spectrum. Tsipras is going for a defensive stance, a stable electorate, which is necessary for him to rule (given how often the Greeks have had elections), whereas Samaras is looking in a more offensive position with the terms of Greece’s power dynamic with the European Union. We can juxtapose this with the basic definitions of offensive and defensive neorealism. Ultimately, the ‘no’ vote supported by Tsipras/Syriza handily won with 61.31% of the vote.³⁰ This led to the resignation of Samaras as minority leader, but interestingly did not help Tsipras with his premiership.³¹ Two months later, the Greeks were back at the polls for the legislature, but the Syriza-Independent Greeks held on to their coalition majority.

There have been two major bailout packages, formally called “Economic Adjustment Programmes”, for Greece from the European Commission and on behalf of creditors. Papandreou signed the first one of these in May 2010. In April, the request was put out, and a financing package of 110 billion Euros was agreed upon, and loans from Eurozone countries were then approved up to 80 billion Euros.³² The International Monetary Fund then agreed to cover the remaining 30 billion on a ‘stand-by’ arrangement.³³ This programme also lays out the expectations for Greece to meet and maintain certain financial and fiscal figures as a result of having this bailout money injected into the Greek economy. Papademos and the European Commission agreed to the second programme in March 2012, and while the report acknowledges ‘mixed’ progress in terms of the measures laid out to them in the first programme; which of 110 billion outlaid, 73 billion had been disbursed (52.9 from European Union states and 19.9 from the International Monetary Fund), this second programme promised an additional 130 billion Euros on top of the remaining amount to be disbursed from the first programme.³⁴ This would bring the total amount of commitment to 144.7 billion from the European Union states, and 28 billion extra from the International Monetary Fund.³⁵

Likewise, we can then look at the series of austerity measures that have been on-going since 2010. The first substantial measure came in June 2010 (Law 3845), and dealt mainly with public sector changes as well as a hike in Value Added Tax.³⁶ Next was in June 2011 (Law 3895), which dealt again with tax reform.³⁷ But, this specific package led to widespread public protest across Athens, both disciplined (i.e. union members halting work) and unruly (i.e. throwing items at police).³⁸ Law 4024 came just four months later, amidst even more fervent protests, including the death of a protesting trade unionist.³⁹ This measure slashed pensions and active civil servant wages.⁴⁰ It is important to note that all of these prior measures were under the premiership of Papandreou and the centre-left Pasok party. The next package (Law 4046) came under the independent Papademos, and was actually the first measure to set out plans between external creditors and the Greek government as well as setting out memoranda on exactly how the Greeks will tackle their crisis.⁴¹ This is in stark contrast to the tinkering of pensions and wages that Papademos enacted. Law 4046 was the only one to be enacted during Papademos’ tenure. With Samaras, we see a robust change to how in-depth these laws are. In contrast to the prior laws being around ten pages or so, Law 4093 is 123 pages, Law 4152 is 51 pages, Law 4172 is 61 pages, and Law 4263 is 36 pages.⁴² These extremely wide-scope acts sought reforms such as bank bailouts, further tax reform, layoffs/working hours extensions (teachers, for example, planned strikes and the government essentially coerced them back to work⁴³), and further formal dialogue between Greece and its creditors.⁴⁴ This brings us to the latest set of austerity measures, those under Tsipras, the first two coming this past July (Laws 4334 and 4335), and the latest one this past August (Law 4336). The main focus of these three was the adjustment of taxes, once again.⁴⁵ To sum up each prime minister’s stance or outlook on austerity measures, Papandreou was concerned with taxes and wages, and also had to deal with widespread public protest. Papademos was much more into reaching out and looking at the system as a whole. Samaras had a calculated and detailed approach with far-reaching changes both inside and out. Finally, Tsipras was a mix of all of the above; he had depth of Samaras, but not quite breadth, with focused policies like Papandreou and Papademos.

Going back to the point of survival and proactive actions, I contend that the actions of Papandreou, Papademos, and Tsipras can be construed as ‘defensive’ and Samaras’ as ‘offensive’. The rhetoric and legislation of the governments under Papandreou, Papademos, and Tsipras are primarily concerned looking-in towards Greece and

maintenance of Greece as the centre of the status quo. Whereas, the Samaras government's rhetoric and legislation were much more far reaching and looking to warn the other influential actors what they gain to lose in the case of the Grexit. Both offensive and defensive neorealists argue that cooperation is "difficult to establish and hard to sustain" in the systemic level and it could also offer a lot for discussion at the domestic level for survival (Collard-Wexler 2006, p. 402). As touched on in the background, the past half-decade has offered many interesting political caveats that are not typical for most party systems—cross-spectrum coalitions. The economic troubles and threat of exit have brought together the most unlikely of political alliances. We also see the notion of 'difficult to establish', as two elections had to occur in 2012, as Samaras could not get cooperation at his first opportunity. We also see the hard to sustain factor in that Pasok and the Democratic Left parties since Papandreou left power have been reduced to just 17 combined seats.⁴⁶ Not as drastic, but another testament, is that New Democracy is down to 75 seats from an almost majority under Samaras.⁴⁷ So, cooperation has become a necessary evil for a government to even be established, but cooperation seems to lead to an alienation of voters, i.e. why is my centre-left party in government with the centre-right party? Tsipras seems to fall into this quasi-trap as well. Syriza is a firm left anchor, and the Independent Greeks are a firm right-populist anchor. It leaves a lot of room in the middle for the next election, thus Tsipras will have to look elsewhere to beat the 'hard to sustain' factor of cooperation.

Omission – Military

I have omitted one of the tenets of neorealism, the necessity for military capacity in this discussion. While the Greeks have a very robust military, edging above the United Kingdom in terms of percentage of GDP spent on defence, I do not see any sort of situation that would necessitate a military response in terms of European Union – Greece relations.⁴⁸ While it is important to note that the military may have an effect on domestic politics in Greece (i.e. another round of mass violent protests erupting), then it would have to be examined at the domestic level, not the systemic level. I cannot fathom a situation where the European Union would encourage member states to send troops in order to try and claim back their debts owed by Greece. Does an omission of this point weaken my overarching point? While a perfectly valid question, I believe it does not. Just like the European Union satisfies only four of five neorealist great power attributes, we still consider the European Union a great power economically. Likewise, although neorealism is primarily concerned about power, and *hard* power comes from military, the possible Grexit will not be a violent exit by outside actors by any means.

Conclusion – what does it mean?

Although defensive neorealism is typically used to analyse one state's actions towards another state in the international sphere, certain aspects of it can lend itself useful in looking at domestic and individual levels. Although it may not completely satisfy the standard neorealist thought, the predominant notion of power politics plays a tremendous impact in all levels of politics. Certain aspects of 'defensiveness' and 'offensiveness' can contribute greatly to understanding an individual's political line of thinking. When you combine internal and external factors that may be affecting power, it is quite interesting to see actions through a neorealist 'lens'. The point of this paper was not to label Tsipras and others as defensive neorealists or not, it can likely be argued in either direction. Also, many aspects of liberal and constructive international relations theory could be used to explain the actions of the past half decade of Greek politics. Rather, it was to illustrate that neorealism has a lot to offer other levels of analysis, not just at the systemic level. Waltz offered up these 'images' of individual, domestic, and systemic, but I feel they offer a lot more to the field of international relations if you adopt them as more fluid than Waltz lays them out to be. While it may just turn out to be analysing rather than theorizing, I feel certain things are more intriguing, such as the Grexit in a defensive point-of-view, when taking aspects of analysis and applying them in a super specific case and having to formulate hypotheses from that.

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- ¹⁴ For example, see Pagoulatos (2012) and Visvizi (2012)
- ¹⁵ See Morgenthau in Hughes and Meng (2011)
- ¹⁶ One may argue that the European Union's landed borders and sovereignty only exists because of its component states. While true, the European Union still has its own inter-country laws, its own law-making body, and it recognised as its own entity in the United Nations. If we take the definition of sovereignty from Joel Krieger's (2004) edited volume, it is easier to form a mold of the European Union as its own sovereign state when it comes to examining its relations amongst constituent members.
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