

# GreeSE Papers

## Hellenic Observatory Discussion Papers on Greece and Southeast Europe



**Paper No. 195**

**Konstantinos Karamanlis and Leadership in Foreign Policy**

**Spyros Economides**



THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

April 2024



**HELLENIC  
OBSERVATORY**  
European Institute  
Research at LSE ■

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# Konstantinos Karamanlis and Leadership in Foreign Policy

Spyros Economides<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

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In this article I will address a lesser discussed issue in the political career of Konstantinos Karamanlis, his leadership in terms of Greek foreign policy. It is lesser discussed because, in the context of leadership, the extensive literature and commentary on Karamanlis primarily focuses on his role, contribution and legacy in domestic politics during his 14 years as Prime Minister. What is attempted here is a discussion of Karamanlis in the frame of 'leadership' in the study of foreign policy, in two specific ways First, there is a consensus that Karamanlis was a 'leader' (hgetis) in the domestic context: was he that too in terms of external affairs? Second, there is an assumption in the study of foreign policy/foreign policy analysis that leaders and leadership can matter in the formulation and execution of foreign policy (for example Jervis, 2013). Can we address Karamanlis's role in Greek foreign policy through this analytical lens? My initial conclusion is yes on both counts: Karamanlis can be discussed in the context of the leader/leadership approach in foreign policy analysis and that he did provide leadership in external affairs - in fact he can be considered to be a statesman in that respect.

This paper first appeared in Greek in, 'Ο Καραμανλής και η ηγετική του ικανότητα στο πεδίο της εξωτερικής πολιτικής, in ed. Arvanitoroulos K., [ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΣ ΚΑΡΑΜΑΝΛΗΣ Η πολιτική ως δημιουργία](#), 2023.

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## 1. Introduction: Karamanlis as Leader

There is no doubt that Karamanlis was an imposing political figure who played a defining role in the governance of Greece especially in the aftermath of the fall of the junta. He redefined 'the Right' in Greek politics through the creation of Nea Dimokratia and its establishment as a party of government. He is often described as a solitary figure, who in the *metapolitefsi*, governed through personal will and vision. In truth, he was more than a *primus inter pares*, yet governed with and through a team which represented a broader conception of the 'right' than had been evident before in Greek politics (Featherstone and Papadimitriou, 2015).

This leadership was of course, cemented through crisis. The crisis of Greek democracy from the mid-1960s onwards and throughout the years of the rule of the junta, shaped the emergence of Karamanlis as a new force in the domestic scene. His return to Greece in the summer of 1974, as the saviour of Greek democracy was both a recognition of his stature and standing on the Greek political stage but also brought with it great demands and responsibilities. The most immediate was the restoration of democracy in a fragile political climate where the threat of a further intervention by the army into Greek politics was highly feared. The initial government of National Unity built by Karamanlis was an attempt to consolidate transition to democracy by reaching out to a broader political class. Once this early shift to democracy seemed to be safe Karamanlis swiftly held elections not only to establish a strong government but equally importantly to establish a strong basis for democratic rule.

The legitimacy of this democratic rule was essential to Karamanlis. Yes, he represented a specific part of the political spectrum and as such was much maligned by the Left in Greece for his politics and policies in both his terms as Prime Minister. But his leadership was evident by his desire to address core issues which had plagued the Greek body politic in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His push for the legalisation of the KKE and the holding of a referendum to decide the fate of the Greek monarchy in 1974 are a clear manifestation of this leadership (Hatzivassilioiu, 2020). He had a vision of what was needed to legitimise and consolidate democracy in Greece which ranged beyond the scope of narrow interests and the needs of his party. The abolition of the monarchy brought to life a new, republican constitutional order, putting to rest one of the most contentious and divisive issues in the Greek politics. The

legitimation of the KKE appeared to be an attempt to heal the national wound of the Greek Civil War but strayed beyond that. It enabled the renewal of left-wing politics within the Greek political space which was essential for the legitimation of Greek democracy: without true political contestation there would be no solid basis for the longevity of Greek democracy.

This was the essence of Karamanlis as leader. It is true that he led Nea Dimokratia in specific ways surrounded by specific people. His Prime Ministership of Greece, especially post-1974, was characterised by economic and social policies located somewhere between a liberal economic outlook and the need for state corporatism and intervention in specific areas (Hatzivassiliou, 2020, p. 640). But his real leadership is to be found in the understanding and vision that Greek democracy had to be reinvented to be re-established and consolidated in the wake of the political crises of the mid-1960s and the dictatorship of the colonels.

## 2. Karamanlis and Foreign Policy

The evidence suggests that for Karamanlis foreign policy was not necessarily a discrete policy area. Indeed, on his return to front-line Greek politics he was confronted with the immediate crisis of the invasion of Cyprus. This was the one foreign policy issue which he had some familiarity from his first Premiership. But it was not a 'foreign', foreign policy issue. On one level, the crisis in Cyprus was directly linked to domestic Greek politics in the context of the junta and its ultimate demise. On another level, the future of Cyprus was an 'ethniko thema', straying beyond some rationalised national interest. Indeed, in this context the stress should be on *national* interest. Here, the link between the Greek political reality and foreign policy is clear and self-evident.

But for Karamanlis there was a bigger link between the domestic and international environments. The restoration of democracy in Greece required international support both in rational, practical terms and in terms of the reaffirmation of Greek identity. The first could be accomplished in numerous ways but most significantly through the pursuit and achievement of membership of the EEC. This would also go a long way in realising the reaffirmation of Greek identity mentioned above. Greek membership of the EEC was proof of its 'Westernness', of belonging to the West in its liberal democratic iteration.

This brief introduction is merely an attempt to identify the fact that there is a thin line between the domestic and international environments in political terms and that Karamanlis, as a leader was fully cognisant of the need to bridge this notional divide in the pursuit of higher political goals. For me this indicates that indeed, Karamanlis exhibited leadership in the foreign policy domain in the same vein as he is acknowledged to have been a leader in domestic terms. Indeed, he was a leader in *national terms*, straddling the notional domestic/international divide (Featherstone, 2008).

While there have been innumerable explorations, both supportive and critical of the kind of leadership Karamanlis exhibited in domestic terms, little systematic study has been made of his leadership in the foreign domain. How can we define and assess his leadership function in this sphere? Three basic criteria spring to mind in evaluating leadership in foreign policy:

1. Can foreign policy be dictated by a leader/statesman or is it primarily dependent on the vagaries of the particular international system of the time?
2. Does foreign policy leadership emerge and matter primarily in time of crisis or is it present and have consequence in a static international environment.
3. How does a leader manage the relationship between domestic and foreign policies of a state at any given time?

These three criteria are fundamental as they address a key concern in foreign policy analysis: the relationship between structure and agency (see for example, Alden and Aran, 2016, p. 4 and Carlsnaes, 1992). This is an age-old factor in the study and practice of international relations, and in our case more specifically to foreign policy decision-making and execution. In essence, the conundrum is one which pits the constraints imposed by an anarchic international state system on states within the system, against the autonomy of action afforded to states by the sovereign power and authority, and the ability of individuals to affect change. Briefly put, the predominance of structure implies that state autonomy in foreign policy is limited by the nature of the system itself: if we privilege agency, then we assume that the reality of any given international order can be challenged through human action and thus there is an autonomy of action in foreign policy at the state level. Somewhat related to this concern is another long-standing debate in foreign-policy analysis on which 'environment' or 'milieu' plays the more influential role in the formulation and implementation of a state's

foreign policy. Here, the argument is based on the ability to distinguish between a domestic and an international policy environment, and that decisions are guided by influences emanating from each of these milieus and that one will predominate over the other.

A subsidiary but related concern, which is more relevant to the second factor listed above but has implications for both the structure/agency and domestic/international distinctions is whether the 'leader' has a real interest in foreign policy, or whether they are 'forced' to make decisions as the result of the emergence of a sudden emergency or crisis. This implies that a leader may have a clear vision of where their state 'fits in' in the international order at any given time and thus expend political capital and energy pursuing a foreign policy to secure this position. Or the leader is driven by domestic concerns and neglecting the definition and pursuit of longer-term foreign policy goals other than the banal 'safeguarding of the national interest'. In my mind, the two are inseparable: there is a constant interaction between the two environments. But what we have to ascertain is which of the two is the dominant driver at any given point in time. And, in any event. I would concur with the argument that: '[L]eaders are called on to interpret and frame what is happening in the international arena for their constituencies and governments' (Herman and Hagen, 1998). That is to say that leadership is both about being able to evaluate the international environment and translate it into a political reality relevant to domestic interests and audiences.

To me, these factors are extremely useful and relevant in explaining and understanding the role of Karamanlis in formulating and operationalising Greek foreign policy and weighing up to what degree his leadership was a decisive factor. Of course, a problem we are confronted with is how do we 'measure' this leadership. I will offer three examples in the *metapolitefsi* in discussing whether Karamanlis offered foreign policy leadership, what this leadership was and how successful can it be considered in the context of the factors introduced above.

The first, is the Cyprus crisis of 1974 which sparked off the return of Karamanlis to the Greek political scene and the restoration of democracy and was the first and most dangerous set of foreign policy decisions faced by Karamanlis. Second, and most often cited, is Greek accession to the EEC. There is a general agreement that Karamanlis played the key role in Greece's acceptance into this European 'club'. Third, was the evolution of Cold War alignments and Greece's role within them and the impact this had on Greece's 'Westernness'.



Of course, these three examples are inter-related, and it is virtually impossible to disentangle them. What they also point to immediately is the assertion made earlier that, in general (and for Karamanlis in particular), the distinction between foreign and domestic policy is not always useful. In any event, a quick assessment of Karamanlis's involvement in these three aspects of Greek foreign policy will allow us to conclude not only that he was a leader in foreign policy terms as well, but also what type of leader he was.

### 3.Karamanlis and the Cyprus Crisis of 1974

The Cyprus Crisis of 1974 necessitated 'crisis decision-making'. It was a dangerous series of events external to Greece, affecting Greek national interests which forced the Greek leadership to make complicated decisions in a very short period of time. It was also a crisis which truly lends itself to the use of the term 'intermestic', in that it brought together the foreign and domestic policies of Greece. It was a true test of leadership and gave us a clear indication of how Karamanlis was to provide this leadership in Greece's international relations.

The crisis is well-trodden ground. The Greek junta's intervention in the domestic politics of Cyprus resulted in the Turkish invasion of the island. This, in turn resulted in the collapse of the dictatorship in Athens and brought Karamanlis (and democracy) back to Greece. The blending together of domestic and foreign policies was clear and at times indistinguishable. For its adversaries, Greece was to blame for provoking the crisis in Cyprus. There was no distinction between democratic and non-democratic regimes. For Karamanlis though, it was vital to disentangle the actions of the junta, from the national interests of Greece (whilst of course defending the latter to the hilt). There was no doubt that this was a case of foreign policy decision-making resulting from a specific crisis. Therefore, under the second criterion listed above, this was certainly a case of leadership as the outcome of crisis decision-making. But what makes this particular case much more interesting in our analysis and evaluation of Karamanlis as a foreign policy leader was the inclusion into the equation of the other two criteria listed above. To the domestic audience, Karamanlis managed to place the burden of the crisis not only on Turkey but also onto the miscalculations of an illegitimate, unrepresentative regime in Greece. This was important not only for domestic political

purposes but also in convincing an international audience that Greek interests had to be defended now that a legitimate government was in power.

It was obvious that war was not the best solution but one had to prepare for it. It was also obvious that to avoid war and to bring about some negotiated settlement, at least in the short-term, foreign powers and institutions would have to be included in the discussion. Therefore, US influence came into play, as did Greece's membership of NATO. The UN was inevitably called on to intervene and mediate as per the norms of accepted international behaviour. But there was a puzzle to be solved here for Karamanlis and his government (and where his leadership became obvious). US involvement was imperative as a form of leverage over Turkey, but many Greeks mistrusted the US role both in the Turkish invasion of Cyprus and the ostensible cause of the invasion, the junta. The realist in Karamanlis appreciated that power mattered, and that the US had to be brought in board despite domestic political misgivings. The realist in Karamanlis also appreciated that a domestic political agenda too had to be satisfied. Consequently, as a measure of showing discontent with the role and actions of the US/NATO, Karamanlis withdrew Greece from NATO's integrated military command. The pragmatist in Karamanlis also appreciated that longer-term Greek interests would be best served by Western support and so Greece remained firmly within the NATO political framework.

The Cyprus dispute was not solved but the immediate crisis was alleviated. Karamanlis balanced the interests of Greece in the domestic sphere with its foreign interests. He interpreted an international environment in such a way so as to be able to manoeuvre through it politically and reach a satisfactory short-term foreign policy outcome. He understood that Greece's position in the regional and broader international system had been undermined by the junta's actions and calculated how best to safeguard Greece's interest from a weakened position. In terms of the criteria of measuring leadership outlined above all three definitely apply.

- A. There was definitely a clear and specific relationship between domestic politics and international affairs which had to be carefully managed in volatile circumstances. Here it seems that a balance was struck, and it was a balance acceptable to a domestic audience on an issue of vital national interest.

- B. It is self-evident that this was a crisis situation requiring crisis-decision making. But arguably, Karamanlis's understanding of the longer-term international situation with respect not only to Cyprus but also to the international political system as a whole afforded him the opportunity to take action which straddled placed the immediate crisis into a broader, longer-term context.
- C. There is no doubt that in this case that Greek foreign policy was reactive: Karamanlis and his government had to respond to a rapidly changing and dangerous international situation. But, as mentioned above, the attempt to defuse the situation was very much in the context of having a certain degree of autonomy of action. While having to reluctantly accept the reality of a Turkish military presence in Cyprus as the result of the use of force, there was some mettle shown in the political manoeuvrings with respect to the US and NATO

#### 4. Karamanlis and the pursuit of EEC membership

This is the example above all others in which the leadership of Karamanlis is seen as central. There is a consensus that the vision and role of Karamanlis in the pursuit of EEC membership was crucial. The Association Agreement with the EEC was entered into during Karamanlis' first tenure as Prime Minister. Full accession in 1981 is attributed to his dogged pursuit of EEC membership as a way of defending Greek interests internationally and promoting prosperity and welfare domestically.

Karamanlis' perception of why EEC membership was necessary was multifaceted (Svolopoulos, 2002). The most obvious explanation was economic: membership of the Common Market would increase growth and development of the Greek economy and ultimate prosperity. The explanation most often referred to beyond Greece in the context of discussions about EEC enlargement, usually in conjunction with Spanish and Portuguese accession, was that this was a safeguarding measure to protect and consolidate post-dictatorial democratic regimes (Karamouzi, 2015). What is often neglected is the most pragmatic rationale: Greek accession to the EEC was driven by security concerns: Karamanlis saw it not only as a way of defending democracy but also as a way of promoting and securing Greek interests against external threats. In this context, what is mostly overlooked in the explanations of the accession rationale was the 'Europeanising' impact that EEC membership

would have on Greece (Economides, 2005 and 2008). This was partly a question of identity: Karamanlis firmly believed that Greece's 'Westernness' would be enhanced by Community membership. And, indeed, this 'Westernness' would not only assist in the consolidation of democracy but also provide a further bulwark against external threats as Greece would be seen as a solid member of the 'Western world', both in terms of the relationship with Turkey but also in the broader Southeast European context. So, there was a pragmatic dimension to his slogan of 'Anikoume Stin Dysh' which went beyond the historical-cultural dimension of Greece's 'Europeanness' and what this meant for the average Greek citizen. A sense of belonging was important in social psychological and electoral terms, but it was equally if not more important in political and strategic terms.

This last point is also reinforced by a different aspect of this 'Europeanising' policy. I have made this argument elsewhere and think it a key point in understanding Karamanlis' perception of Greece's security concerns. The argument is that the 'turn to Europe' was important for all the reasons mentioned above but there was also one other dimension which was 'purely' strategic. Greece needed an added security 'provider' or 'guarantor' beyond the US, which had played the role of Greece's main ally since the days of the Greek Civil War. The rise of the Colonels and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus raised many concerns about the reliance on the US for security purposes. Karamanlis saw in EEC membership the possibility of lessening the reliance on the US and creating another pole of support and added extra security provider for Greece in the long-term. In terms of leadership, Karamanlis understood full-well that NATO membership and partnership with the US, in the long-term, was a necessity. But he also saw the prospect of EEC membership as a way of indicating displeasure with the US and turning to another, friendly, pole for further and enhanced security.

This, more than any other is a clear exhibition of Karamanlis and leadership in foreign policy. His drive in securing EEC membership is incontrovertible. His personality and personal relationships with European leaders like Giscard d'Estaing and Schmidt are said to have been decisive. But what is most interesting, and certainly relevant, from a leadership point of view is the vision of the complex (positive) consequences that could be had from early accession to the EEC. This was not merely a short-term political fix: this was a long-term investment into a complex web of interdependence and integration which had multiple foreign policy

outcomes (as well as domestic effects in Greece). In this example too, the three criteria outlined above apply.

- A. We have seen a clear link between domestic and international goals in the pursuit of EEC membership, whether in rational or ideational terms. EEC membership would bring economic benefits to Greece internally as well as provide an extra bulwark in the consolidation of democracy. In terms of international relation, accession added an extra and new layer of security against external threats. And on a more ideational level, Greece's European and thus 'Western' credentials were much enhanced.
- B. This policy was not the consequence of crisis (even though the 1974 crisis may have focussed the mind on its importance). It was a longer-term evaluation of a specific set of relationships both within Europe and transatlantic ally which was the catalyst. It was based on a perception and interpretation of how and when could benefit in a variety of different ways from membership of an exclusive European club of nations. It played to a variety of audiences and was very much based on the leadership and commitment to the policy of Karamanlis himself.
- C. It certainly also exhibited a degree of autonomy of action and ability to persuade international partners the positive sum gains to be had from enlargement to Greece. There is plenty of evidence confirming the key role played by Karamanlis in defining the objective, formulating a policy to achieve it and implementing that policy. The international environment of the time was indeed favourable – a secure and democratic Greece would be an addition to both the EEC and the Western alliance in Cold War terms. But Greek accession was not a given. A convincing argument had to be made for it and it had to be pursued with vigour and guile: here Karamanlis was the key figure, and his leadership was the key factor.

## 5. Greece and the Broader International System

Greece's role in the Cold War international system during the *metapolitefsi* was in some respects a pretty straightforward one. Since becoming a member of NATO in 1952, Greece remained a staunch supporter of the Western Alliance. It belonged firmly to 'the West' in strategic terms even though it might not have always been a part of the liberal democratic

West (eg., the junta period 1967-74). Post-1974, this hiatus was overcome, and Greece was both in political and security terms, Western. It seemed that the static bipolar international system of the Cold War – in the European theatre at least – was both a straight-jacket and a life-jacket: the system removed both the need and ability for extreme manoeuvring whilst simultaneously providing a clear guide for what was necessary and acceptable in foreign policy terms. The key variable was defending from the spread of international communism and the threat from the Warsaw Pact. Every other aspect of external relations was seen as subservient to this prerequisite.

What may have distinguished Greece from many of its allies in Europe, and enabled it under Karamanlis to have some leeway in the field of foreign policy, were its 'front-line state' status and its precarious relationship with Turkey (especially post-1974). These two factors more than any other were the basis upon which the Karamanlis governments of the *metapolitefsi* charted a lightly different line in terms of their 'Western' foreign policy.

The question of Cyprus and the relationship with Turkey (an ally in official terms) required the design and attempted implementation of a foreign policy outside the context of Cold War alignments. Indeed, Turkey was a NATO ally, and the stability of the alliance necessitated US diplomatic engagement to maintain a balance in the Aegean. But the Cyprus question afforded Karamanlis the opportunity to pursue a foreign policy of drumming up international support beyond the West to serve Greek interests in Cyprus (and to a lesser extent in the Aegean). Diplomatic engagement with the Arab and the non-aligned world, for example, were potentially important for commercial reasons, but much more important for the purposes of garnering broad support, especially in the context of the UN General Assembly, for the Cyprus issue. In this context, Karamanlis also set in train an improvement of relations with Moscow and the satellite states in Central Europe. Of course, the gate had been opened earlier by Germany's *Ostpolitik* and the détente of the early 1970s between Washington and Moscow. Nevertheless, this was an important step taken in terms of signalling a degree of autonomy of action serving Greek interests within the stifling Cold War international environment.

Similarly, Greece's front-line state status, especially in the Balkan region afforded it the possibility of engaging with its neighbours, especially but not only Tito's Yugoslavia, for the purposes of securing both regional stability and also specific Greek interests especially as they related to 'the Macedonian Question' and other possible irredentist tension on Greece's

northern borders. Of course, the leeway to manoeuvre here was indeed limited by Cold War frontiers. Nonetheless, Greece's Balkan regional diplomacy took off during the Karamanlis era post-1974.

These are two very brief glimpses of what was possible in terms of some autonomy of foreign policy action by a small state actor in the context of a very static European balance of power during the 1970s. Here we also see the balance between pragmatism and realism characteristic of other aspects of Karamanlis' leadership in terms of foreign policy. In pragmatic terms, Greece would toe the 'Western line' in the core conflict between the two Cold War blocs: this served core Greek foreign policy and security interests. In realist terms, Karamanlis pushed the boundaries in terms of taking on the challenge of serving Greek interest through a slightly more autonomous set of policies while constantly acknowledging the centrality of 'Western positions' which had to be maintained. Again, in this set of policies fits in quite well with the three criteria outlined above.

- A. Here the link between domestic and international goals is less clear. But when we take into account the importance of the 'Macedonian Question' and the Hellenism at stake in the Cyprus crisis, in identitarian terms, the domestic/international link is evident. What was at stake was not only practical solutions to security and 'border' issues, but the meeting of true 'national' interests in which the Greek nation was invested.
- B. As with the EEC accession example, this more general set of foreign policies was not the result of crisis even though the consequence of crisis, specifically the division of Cyprus, was an important factor. In fact, the two politicise highlighted above were very much set in the context of a bipolar international system, which in the European frame was very much a static international environment. Here there was a clear sign of leadership in terms of the formulation and implementation of these decisions.
- C. This was very much a proactive attempt to create conditions which would enhance Greek interests on specific issues. While the particular international system did impose certain conditions and constraints on action, Karamanlis and his policy-making team were able to operate within them with some degree of autonomy and creativity. These initiatives showed a degree of leadership and clarity of perception in what was possible in a very specific international environment. The success which they may or may not have achieved is a different story. Relations with Balkan states were gradually

shifted but were radically altered by the end of the Cold War. Similarly, the issue of a resolution of the Cyprus dispute under the auspices of the UN has seen many unfulfilled cycles.

## 6. Conclusion

Small-state foreign policy is constrained by the realities of any anarchic international order. In this context small-states can submit to the influence of the more powerful, drift on the tide of changing international balances responding to events and crises, or pro-actively seek partnerships and alliances in the pursuit of national goals. Of course, all three can happen simultaneously or in close time proximity.

What distinguishes active foreign policy leadership from passive management of external affairs is the ability to interpret the international environment, define its possible impact on the domestic arena and then have the vision to define and implement realistic foreign policy goals in the name of the national interest.

If this is the case, then one could argue (in superficial terms) that agency matters: leadership is an important enabling variable in allowing small-states to define a specific foreign policy path within a constraining international structure. Individuals/leaders can make a difference to the 'objective reality' of the international system by how they interpret it, make it relevant to the national interest and operate within it. It can be proactive and not merely reactive. It may need vision, but it certainly takes skill and experience.

Karamanlis, certainly in his first tenure as Prime Minister, was not renowned for his interest in foreign policy. In his *metapolitefsi* Premiership it became a key item on his political agenda. Partly, this was the result of a crisis: the Cyprus issue was not new to him in general, but the 1974 crisis brought with a much more dangerous and complex set of problems. More importantly, Karamanlis saw in foreign policy an important avenue through which to address and support domestic change both politically and economically. The pursuit of EEC membership was directly relevant to domestic interests in terms of democratic consolidation and economic growth and development. But it was also a way by which to 'Europeanise' Greek interests and balance out the influence of the US. In this sense, Karamanlis's leadership in foreign policy was closely linked to his vision of domestic politics and mutually reinforcing



goals. And, while Karamanlis was pragmatic enough to appreciate the constraints imposed by a specific international order such as Cold War bipolarity, or Greece's ranking within a hierarchy of states, he had the ambition and will to create circumstances within that system to defend the national interest. With this in mind, it would be fair to conclude that Karamanlis, especially in the *metapolitefsi* did provide foreign policy leadership. This was not a discrete area of activity to him nor one simply of international self-promotion. He saw in the specifics of the international environment of the time both dangers and threats, but also opportunities which if properly cultivated and exploited would benefit the Greek polity in its totality.

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