

## **Building up alliances before venturing into Balkan Wars, 1912-1913; the impact of coalitions**

Dr Efpraxia S. Paschalidou

During the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the situation in Europe gave an impetus to a development concerning the Balkan states. They tried to consolidate their existence, creating perspectives for further territorial gains at the expense of their neighbors and most of all of the Ottoman Empire. The motivation for this, varied from ethnographical, geopolitical and economic realities to historical and cultural rights. The international position of Greece had undergone a profound, though gradual change. The most important aspect of this change was to link the future of Greece with this of the Balkan neighbors of the Ottoman Empire in a way that had been unforeseen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The outcome of the eastern crisis of 1897 had determined the status quo of the Balkans for the next ten years.

The enmity between Greece and the Ottoman Empire was perennial and stemmed from the heritage of the Ottoman occupation and the ongoing hostilities between the two nations. Therefore, the Powers involved in the Balkans (Great Britain, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Italy and France) supported the preservation of the legal status quo set by the Berlin Conference (1878), while promoting their interests in the region in every way, despite the open confrontation between them in other geographic areas. Their policy resulted in a new lease of life for the collapsing Ottoman Empire, but, at the same time, constituted a very serious obstacle for the liberation of enslaved Greeks.

The grievous outcome of the Greco-Ottoman War of 1897 and the tensions stirred up in all matters of national importance, proved to the Greek political and military leadership, that it was absolutely necessary to strengthen the country militarily. Indeed, by 1904 the Greek nation was confronted with the dilemma of whether to continue to maintain a passive attitude towards Bulgaria in Macedonia, and simply confine itself to protests directed at the Great Powers, or whether to undertake action. The second view prevailed and from that year on the Greek response became indisputable. Additionally, the outbreak of the Libyan war had made the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire a distinct possibility. In spite of the anti-

Ottoman feelings of the Balkan states and their common aspiration to broaden their lands to the detriment of Ottoman Empire, they came up against historical memories, ecclesiastical controversies, ethnic conflicts and territorial claims.

As early as August 1906, it was obvious that Greece could not fight both the Empire and the Bulgarians and that she should ally with the Bulgarians in order to fight the first. In 1908 the Young Turks, a revolutionary group that led a rebellion against the authoritarian regime of the Ottoman sultan were claiming a regime that would give liberty and equality to all the nationalities within the empire. This gave rise to aspirations for a “re-union” of the Greek with the Ottoman area.

At the end of October 1908, the Sublime Porte had proposed an alliance to Greece, Serbia and Romania. The last remained reticent, but Greece responded favorably: by assisting the Ottoman Empire against Bulgaria, the Greek government at that time had hoped to be compensated with the annexation of Crete. Serbia too had reacted favorably, but when the Porte had demanded a division of territories following a victorious war against Bulgaria, Serbia had rejected the proposal.

In May 1909, the Porte acknowledged a new independent status of Bulgaria in return for a financial arrangement. Besides, Ottoman fear of Bulgaria in the wake of the independence crisis had given birth to several abortive schemes for defensive alliances. Meanwhile, a fundamental renewal of the Greek national web and a structural change of the political scene were caused in August 1909 by the Military League, a group of junior officers claiming a revolutionary solution to the chronic problems of the state, the society and the army. This opened the way to the premiership of the political leader Venizelos.

Venizelos steered Greece towards a foreign policy which aimed at ending isolation and unconditional attachment to Turkey out of fear of Bulgaria though his views also had undergone several revisions. As islander himself, and aspiring to the union of his native island Crete with Greece, it was only too natural that he should regard Greece primarily as a maritime power and to believe that only a strong naval force would secure for Greece a dominant role in the Eastern Mediterranean. As early as August 1906 he stated that Greeks could not fight both the Turks and the Bulgarians and that

they should ally themselves with the Bulgarians in order to fight the Turks. Two years later, however, under the influence of the short-lived euphoria following the Young Turk revolution, he had not hesitated to declare that the future of Hellenism lay in a renovated, hellenised and constitutionally governed Ottoman Empire. Like many Greek politicians, he had welcomed the decision to demand compensation for Bulgaria's declaration of independence, not in liberating Macedonia but in the union of Crete with the Hellenic state. For he realized, that any claims to Macedonia would have to be backed by military might, an eventuality which presupposed a radical reorganization of the Greek armed forces. By January 1910, the progressive deterioration of Crete's international position, had convinced Venizelos - Prime Minister already, that non even Crete could be annexed without war. In the war that would follow, Greece would remain on the defensive along her mainland frontier and obtain mastery of the sea by occupying the islands. He had concluded that an understanding with Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro and possibly even the Albanians was necessary and would result, by means of reasonable mutual concessions, in the conclusion of an alliance among all these peoples for the expulsion of Turkey from Europe and its limitation to Constantinople and its surrounding region. The first months of 1910 were a period during which the subject of Greek-Bulgarian relations underwent a thorough re-examination.

On the other hand, Russia who had emerged out of the Bosnian crisis deeply humiliated and isolated from Britain and France, now attempted to regain her lost ground and achieve the security of the Dardanelles (Straits). This attempt made Russia the dominant factor in the new situation. Meanwhile to gain additional support, approached Italy and signed a secret agreement for a revision of the Straits settlement in return for helping Italy in Tripolitania. After its failure towards a revision of the status of the Straits, she re-activated its Balkan policy, no longer in terms of alliance with Ottoman Empire but through an alliance between the Balkan states to turn against it. As protectress of all Slav interests in the Balkans, Russia aroused in the Balkan peoples the consciousness that, for the common good, they must unite together as closely as possible and therefore she was willing to assist and welcome with the greatest satisfaction every attempt at rapprochement between them. At the time, Russia did not consider Greece to be a Balkan state. The unpredictable developments of the Cretan question, the confused state of her internal affairs after the 1909 coup

and the deplorable condition of her army, had convinced Russia that Greece could not be considered as a dependable factor in a Balkan alliance and that it was dangerous to begin talks with her at too early a date. Not until the beginning of 1910, when it became obvious that Ottoman Empire was building a fleet, which threatened her predominance in the Black Sea, did Russia realize the advantages of encouraging Greek military and naval preparations.

The Balkan states had recognized both the danger inherent in Young Turk chauvinism and the need to stand up against it. Their close cooperation was crucial for their own survival and for the liberation of their subjugated compatriots. A rapprochement between Greece and Bulgaria was achieved rapidly, with both the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Bulgarian Exarch playing a leading part in the process. The treaty for a Greco-Bulgarian alliance was drafted on August 1910 but was not signed because Greece wanted to include in it the issue of the abrogation of the Exarchate Schism. The idea of an alliance underwent further elaboration in early 1911. The time was ripe for direct negotiations between Greece and Bulgaria which, though aiming primarily at the protection of the Christians of the Empire, might even explore the possibility of the collapse of Ottoman rule in Europe. On March, Serbia and Bulgaria had a rapprochement in cultural and commercial fields and at the end of the month, Bulgaria favored the creation of an anti-Austrian bloc under the aegis of Russia, a block in which Serbia would be the key partner. At the same time Montenegro expressed its unreserved desire to join any alliance against Ottoman Empire. It was impossible to think of a Balkan alliance without the participation of Greece. The new round of soundings began and although these efforts did not end in an official agreement, they nonetheless reflected the prevailing mood in both countries, which was conducive to cooperation. They also provided the opportunity for mutual promises that each country would come to the aid of the other in the event of an Ottoman attack. It was not the first time that such an alliance of the Christian Balkan states against Turkey had been sought. Previous efforts, however, had borne no fruit. It deserves to be mentioned that the first endeavor to form an alliance was attempted by the Serbian King in 1860; it was thwarted by his assassination the same year. Greece made similar proposals to Bulgaria in 1891 and 1897, but they foundered owing mainly to Sofia's policies.

On October 1911, Greece informed that she would assist Bulgaria in the event of an Ottoman attack, if Bulgaria undertook to do the same if the Ottoman Empire attacked Greece. Bulgaria avoided any commitment since discussions with Serbia had just begun, concerning a defensive alliance, which had come to no conclusion. Russia sought the opinion that a promise of support might encourage Greece to pursue an aggressive and self-interested policy with regard to Crete. The Bulgarian government was reluctant to reject the offer, for a Bulgarian denial might drive Greece into an anti-Slav combination dominated by Austria-Hungary and including Romania and the Albanians. The alliance with Serbia was a priority while the entente with Greece should be exclusively confined to a guarantee of the status quo; if Greece wanted a defensive agreement, she would eventually join the Serbo-Bulgarian alliance, in which case she should accede to all its clauses.

The outcome of this activity in the Balkans became apparent at the beginning of 1912. On February, a secret Serbo-Bulgarian treaty of friendship and alliance was signed in Sofia; it stipulated mutual military assistance in order to secure the political independence and territorial integrity. Beyond these goals, an appendix to the treaty provided for possible military intervention against the Ottoman Empire if domestic disorders there, threatened the interests of either ally, or if the preservation of the status quo in the Balkans became problematic. The treaty also provided for the distribution of liberated territories if the outcome of a war with the Ottoman Empire were to be successful. A military agreement was signed in April, which provided for the mobilization of 200,000 Bulgarians and 150,000 Serbs in the event of a war with Ottoman Empire, Romania or Austria-Hungary. A complementary military agreement was signed a few weeks later on June between the General Staffs of both countries.

In contrast, Greco-Bulgarian negotiations faced serious difficulties due to Sofia's territorial claims on the Greek lands of Macedonia and Thrace, which were to be liberated from Ottoman subjugation. Despite these thorny issues Greece finally decided to sign a defense pact with Bulgaria, a pact which contained no mention of the fate of any liberated territories. On May 1912, therefore, a treaty providing for a defensive alliance signed between Greece and Bulgaria; it had a three-year term and called for mutual assistance and support in the event that Ottoman Empire attacked either state. A military agreement was also signed three months later on September,

just before the declaration of war. According to this agreement, in the event of an Ottoman-Bulgarian war, Greece undertook the obligation to attack the Ottoman Empire with an army of 120,000 men and its entire fleet. Bulgaria undertook a comparable obligation in the event of a Greco-Ottoman war, namely to attack Ottoman Empire with an army of 300,000.

Given that Bulgaria claimed terrestrial areas but did not border on Greece and the Ottoman Empire occupied both island and terrestrial areas bordering on Greece, it became apparent that if the strengthening of the Army was a matter of discussion, the arming of the navy was beyond any doubt. Greece, with considerable naval forces would be a reliable agent in the southeastern Mediterranean Sea attracting the interest of the Great Powers which would probably support the national affairs of the country when they understood that would benefit from the same. The members of the Balkan Alliance, Bulgaria and Serbia were in need of the Hellenic naval power over the Aegean space in order to obstruct the operations and transportations of the Ottoman navy. In reality, the Serbian and Bulgarian army had the potential to successfully confront the Ottoman Army, even without the participation of Hellenic Army. However, they realized that the influence and probably the outcome of military operations would have been negative for them in the case of the unhindered use of the Aegean Sea by the Ottoman navy. The Greek contribution in this anti-ottoman alliance was more than necessary in terms of securing allied dominance.

During summer 1912, the Balkan understanding was completed through oral agreements between Greece-Serbia, Greece-Montenegro, and the signature of a secret military convention between Montenegro and Bulgaria, as well as an agreement between Montenegro and Serbia. These regulations comprised the diplomatic web of the Balkan alliance; however it was not cohesive enough, since it was exclusively based on the hostility against Turkey. Therefore, the Great Powers could not remain indifferent to the developments in the Balkans. The Balkan League served the Russian interests as a containment barrier against the Austro-Hungarian promotion to the Balkans and a means of pressure against the Ottoman Empire. Russia, however, did not wish a Balkan war that would probably lead to the elimination of the European Turkey, thus forcing it to stand against other Powers in the Straits.

France also opposed a Balkan war, like Austro-Hungary which was not ready to undertake a political initiative in the Balkans. Germany, the patron Power of the Ottoman Empire, pursued to support Austro-Hungary and strengthen its dominant position. On the other hand, however, it correctly believed that a victory of the Balkan nationalism would create adequate conditions for the footings of the German influence in the Balkans. Italy expected the opening of a second frontier for the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans so as to lead Turkey to a peace treaty between them and be finally awarded Tripolitania. The role of England in the acceptance of Greece in the Balkan Alliance and the Greek-Bulgarian rapprochement, was important and absolutely understandable, if one considers that the cooperation between Serbia and Bulgaria resulted from the Russian encouragement. England did not oppose to the demolition of the Ottoman Empire which was controlled by Germany, however did not wish such a collapse to allow the Slav element to reach the Mediterranean Sea and this could be obstructed by the participation of Greece in the alliance of the Balkan Slav-orthodox states.

The great Powers themselves had most misleading information on the extent of the preparations of the Balkan Governments. Beyond doubt, Russia was the best informed, directly involved in the negotiations for the Serbo-Bulgarian Treaty of March and also had detailed information on the Greek-Bulgarian Treaty of May. But even the Russians had no knowledge of the military convention which Bulgaria had concluded with Serbia on July and of the preliminary oral agreement concluded with Montenegro in June. Not until mid-summer did they realize that Serbia and Bulgaria were preparing for war and yet the full extend of the destabilizing effect of the Albanian rising at the time. Greece's intention had been to build up a complete system of Balkan alliances before venturing into war, being unaware of the provisions of the Serbo-Bulgarian Alliance Treaty and of the agreement reached between Montenegro and Bulgaria, that Montenegro would begin hostilities in early October.

Each Balkan state understood that it could not stand up by itself against a yet military strong Ottoman Empire in case of armed conflict, thus cooperation among the states was necessary. Simultaneously, Greece embarked on an intense diplomatic campaign, since it had become apparent that she alone could not successfully confront the Ottoman Empire militarily, nor did Athens expect that it could unilaterally force the

Empire to accede to Greek demands. Conditions were conducive to a diplomatic initiative, as a spirit of conciliation and mutual understanding had already begun to take hold among the rulers of the other Christian states of the Balkans. A rapprochement between Greece and Bulgaria was achieved rapidly and reflected the prevailing mood in both countries, which was conducive to cooperation. At the same time, based on the demand and supervision of Russia, there took place negotiations with a view to joint action between Serbia, Bulgaria and Montenegro. Greece did not sign any treaty or military agreement with Serbia or Montenegro. It was only after the war had begun, that the two countries decided to send representatives to the corresponding general headquarters in order to coordinate military operations. Montenegro had signed a treaty with Serbia that September, the purpose of which was to define the manner in which operations against Ottoman Empire were to be carried out.

Throughout September, the Great Powers had tried to devise a way of preserving peace but they were unlikely to agree on joint pressure on the Porte. The Balkan states began to mobilize, though notified by Austria-Hungary and Russia in the name of all the Great Powers that they would not tolerate a violation of the status quo. It had taken the Balkan Governments two weeks to agree upon a common *démarche* to the Porte, which had attempted to detach Greece from the other Balkan states. By the beginning of autumn 1912, therefore the four Christian Balkan states, although they had not signed a common defense pact, were in solidarity and of united purpose against the Ottoman Empire. On the 17<sup>th</sup> October, the Ottoman Empire declared war on Bulgaria and Serbia, but not on Greece. The next day King George, directed his address to the nation<sup>1</sup> and the Greek government joined its Balkan allies and to the war.

---

<sup>1</sup> To my people:

Sacred obligations towards our dearest country, towards our subjugated brothers and towards humanity compel the state, after the failure of peaceful efforts to secure the human rights of the Christians under the Turkish yoke, to end by the use of arms the plight they have suffered for so many centuries. Hellas and its allies, fully armed, inspired by the same sentiments and bound by common obligations, undertake the sacred struggle for justice and freedom of the oppressed peoples of the East. Our army and navy, fully conscious of their duties towards the nation and Christendom, mindful of national traditions and proud of their moral supremacy and worth, throw themselves into the struggle with faith, in order to render freedom to the oppressed with their holy blood. Hellas and its brother allied nations will seek at all costs to accomplish this holy mission, and having called on the help of almighty God in this most just struggle of civilization, we exclaim: LONG LIVE GREECE. LONG LIVE THE NATION.

## Bibliography

J. D. **Bourchier**, «The Balkan League », *The Times*, 5 June 1913

Dakin **Douglas**, «The Diplomacy of the Great Powers and the Balkan States, 1908-1914», *Balkan Studies III*, 1962.

D. J. **Drosos**, *La fondation de l'alliance balkanique* (Athens: 1929)

R.C. **Hall**, *The Balkan Wars, 1912-1913. Prelude to the First World War*, (London-New York: 2000)

*Concise History of the Balkan Wars 1912-1913*, Athens: Hellenic Army General Staff/Army History Directorate, 1998.

Ernst Christian **Helmreich**, *The Diplomacy of the Balkan Wars, 1912-1913* (Cambridge Mass: 1938)

Helen **Gardikas-Katsiadakis**, *Greece and the Balkan Imbroglia. Greek Foreign Policy, 1911-1913* (Athens: 1995)

A. **Gerolymatos**, *The Balkan Wars: Conquest, Revolution, and Retribution from the Ottoman Era to the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (NY: 2002)

I.E. **Gueshov**, *L'alliance balkanique* (Paris: 1915)

Efpraxia S. **Paschalidou**, *Joint warfare across time; case studies from the Hellenic military history* (Athens: Hellenic National Defence General Staff/Joint Warfare Doctrine Directorate, 2010)

E. C. **Thaden**, *Russia and the Balkan Alliance of 1912* (Pensylvania: 1965)

Nicolaos **Vlachos**, *History of the States of the Balkans Peninsula* (Athens: 1954)