

# German Chancellor Scholz visits Athens and seals tank deal with Greece

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A week ago, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democrats, SPD) made his inaugural visit to Athens where he met with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis of the right-wing conservative Nea Dimokratia (ND). The talks, held against the backdrop of the proxy war between NATO and Russia in Ukraine, focused on closer cooperation between the two countries in defence and energy policies. “In both areas, Greece could play a leading role in the future,” commented news broadcast *Tagesschau*.

The previous week, the first six of a total of 40 German Marder tanks had arrived in Greece as part of the so-called “backfill arrangements” to arm Ukraine. This involves Berlin supplying state-of-the-art armaments to European states, which in return send Soviet-style weapons to Ukraine. Athens has handed over 40 old BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles to Kiev, which came from stocks built up in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR).

The “traffic light” coalition of the SPD, Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Greens is using the Ukraine war for a comprehensive armaments’ offensive. Under the slogan “the turn of the times,” it has massively increased military spending and supplied weapons and other materiel to Ukraine. Since the spring, it has also been organizing “backfill arrangements” with other countries, which in addition to arming Ukraine allow it to push German arms deals throughout Europe.

Mitsotakis announced that the new Marder tanks will be stationed along the Evros River on the border with neighbouring Turkey, of all places. “Our forces assume that they will be most useful there,” he said, explaining this provocative decision. Geopolitical tensions between NATO allies Turkey and Greece have further escalated with the Ukraine war. Mutual threats and nationalist war rhetoric serve both sides to distract attention from the serious social crisis at home.

Scholz did not give the Greek government any directives as to where the tanks could be stationed. Even before his visit, he had backed Greece in an interview with the Greek daily *Ta Nea* and criticized Turkey’s “military threats.” At the press conference in Athens, he kept a lower profile and called for “dialogue based on international law.” For his part, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan regards his regime’s interests as being threatened by the arms build-up in Greece and calls for demilitarization of the Aegean islands.

On October 28, the new German Marder tanks were presented at the annual military parade marking the so-called Ochi Day. The Greek national holiday commemorates October 28, 1940, when the

pro-Hitler Metaxas dictatorship rejected an ultimatum from fascist Italy under Mussolini and called for national resistance.

The Greek ruling class often uses this holiday as an occasion for nationalist propaganda. Chief of the General Staff Konstantinos Floros addressed an open threat to Turkey in his speech in the run-up to the parade. As in 1940, he said, the “powerful” armed forces stood ready to silence anyone who “threatens, insults, derides or belittles” Greece.

These words from the highest-ranking military brass must also be understood as a warning to opponents of the war at home, who denounce chauvinist patriotism and gigantic military spending at the expense of the education and health systems. It was not long ago that the working class was crushed under the yoke of the Greek military dictatorship (1967-1974).

In terms of energy policy, Greece could become a “more important hub for Europe” after Russian gas supplies have stopped, Professor Kostas Lavdas, a political scientist at Panteion University in Athens, told the *Tagesschau*. He also referred to the planned Eastmed pipeline, which was currently off the table, but had “moved back within reach due to the war in Ukraine.” The pipeline, which has not yet been realized, is intended to deliver natural gas and hydrogen from the Middle East to Greece and from there on to Italy.

The northern Greek port of Alexandroupoli, which was recently expanded and serves as a transshipment point for NATO arms deliveries to Ukraine, is also becoming more important in the energy sector, according to *Tagesschau*: “Via the southern gas corridor—an interconnection of several pipelines—gas reaches Greece from Azerbaijan via Georgia and Turkey. From Alexandroupoli, in turn, the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline runs via Albania to Italy.”

In addition, a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal is being built at the port, which could supply the Balkan countries. German and other European companies are also investing in wind and solar energy.

Greece is one of the closest allies of the US and Germany in the war against Russia. Even before the outbreak of the war, it was spending 3.59 percent of GDP on its military apparatus—more than any other NATO country—according to NATO figures in 2021. Military spending rose to about \$8 billion in 2021 from \$5.3 billion the previous year, according to figures from the peace research institute Sipri.

Greek rearmament has the full support of the pseudo-left

opposition Syriza party, which wants to distinguish itself as a better defence partner. A few days ago, party leader Alexis Tsipras met with managers of the Greek aerospace industry and expressed his pleasure at the success of “the two arms programs we completed as a government under very difficult circumstances: the upgrade of 84 F-16 Viper fighters and four P-3 maritime reconnaissance aircraft.”

He then complained that of the last arms programs under the ND government, “not a single euro went to the national armaments industry. This is a national crime.” Greece, he said, “must always maintain its armed forces as a deterrent and in constant readiness.” If Syriza came to power, it would renegotiate the contracts and strengthen the Greek defence industry, Tsipras said.

In recent months in particular, Washington has accelerated the expansion of military bases and the modernization of the Greek army. In September, US government plans to station forces in the port of Alexandroupoli became public.

At a meeting on October 11, deputies from both defence ministries spoke about “expanding the US military presence in Souda Bay and elsewhere in Greece” and “providing resilient access to NATO’s Eastern Flank, especially to assist Ukraine,” according to a US Defense Department press release.

The German defence industry does not want to come away empty-handed in this development. According to data from Sipri, tiny Greece already ranked fifth among the biggest buyers of German arms exports between 2011 and March 2022 (after South Korea, the US, Egypt and Israel). Berlin is trying to rapidly expand German imperialism’s position of power—also in competition with the US and France.

### **Rheinmetall and Greece**

The current intensified armaments collaboration with Greece shows once again the criminal traditions in which today’s German great power policy stands. The backfill arrangements are being carried out by the same companies that were industrial leaders in Nazi times.

Marder tanks are produced by Düsseldorf-based arms giant Rheinmetall, which reported record sales in the first half of 2022. As early as the mid-1930s, Rheinmetall-Borsig was heavily involved in secret arms deals between Greece and Nazi Germany.

The Greek war minister at the time, General Kondylis, contacted Rheinmetall-Borsig in 1934 and “presented the company with a long shopping list,” according to historian Morgens Pelt, in an essay available online (in German). Negotiations took place in secret because Greece did not want to alienate Entente allies France and Britain; and Germany was not allowed to export war materiel after World War I due to the Treaty of Versailles.

Because of these restrictions, Rheinmetall-Borsig created a shadow company, Waffenfabrik Solothurn in Switzerland, which undertook arms deals with several countries, including Greece, Italy and Bulgaria. Rheinmetall-Borsig was closely linked to the Nazi government. The president of its arms and sales headquarters, Major Waldemar Pabst, had ordered the assassination of revolutionaries Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in 1919 and enjoyed the trust of Nazi leaders. According to Pelt, Nazi Germany also saw the arms shipments to Greece as a welcome opportunity “to undermine the French security system in Central and South-

eastern Europe.”

On August 4, 1936, following the suppression of a major tobacco workers’ strike in northern Greece, fascist general and monarchist Ioannis Metaxas established a dictatorship. As a result, he intensified arms agreements with Rheinmetall-Borsig and increased dependence on German war materiel and armaments technologies. From the perspective of Hitler’s Foreign Ministry, arms deliveries were “an essential element for the protection of German interests in Greece,” according to Pelt.

After the Italian attack on Greece, which was initially repelled, the Nazis occupied the country in the spring of 1941 and waged a campaign of extermination against the civilian population, the Jewish community and the partisan movement. The plunder of economic resources (including chrome and nickel) benefited the German industrial machine.

Rheinmetall also profited from this policy of robbery; Greek forced labourers were made to toil in German armaments factories. The former director of Rheinmetall-Borsig in Athens, Walter Deter, became part of the economic staff of the Wehrmacht, Hitler’s armed forces, in Greece.

More recently, Rheinmetall raked in big profits in Greece via shady corruption deals. Between 2001 and 2011, the group had paid at least €42 million in bribes to Greek intermediaries to set up arms contracts (mainly air defence systems and Leopard tanks). When the scandal came to light in 2014, the company had to pay around €37 million in fines.

Now, under the leadership of the Scholz government, German arms companies are officially making huge deals with Greece and other countries and are firmly integrated into Germany’s politics of self-interest in southeastern Europe.

In the process, the latest “backfill arrangements” with Athens have not only intensified the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, but also the danger of another devastating war between Greece and Turkey. This escalation of war can only be stopped if workers in Turkey, Greece and worldwide unite in an international and socialist anti-war movement.



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