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Greece Beyond Deterrence: Island Resilience, Ethnofylaki, and Territorial Preparedness

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between Greece's central military deterrence and local territorial preparedness, with particular attention to the islands. It puts forward a model in which local preparedness and territorial resilience become a connecting layer between military deterrence and a broader comprehensive defence system.The article discusses Ethnofylaki as a possible institutional mechanism through which selected local capacities can be organised, trained, and placed under clear state authority without creating parallel armed structures. The islands are presented as the most suitable starting point for this model due to their exposure and the practical advantages offered by their limited geography which allows practical testing of local preparedness, communication, infrastructure continuity, and civil-military coordination.

Keywords: Greece; Ethnofylaki; island resilience; territorial preparedness; comprehensive defence; civil preparedness; civil-military coordination.

Introduction

When talking about modern security, it is no longer enough to focus only on the army, weapons, or alliances. A state's ability to defend itself also depends on how quickly it responds to crises, the effectiveness of its local structures, and the degree to which society is integrated into the broader logic of security.

For that reason, the meaning of "defense" today is wider than classical military deterrence.

However, one important question remains open: can this strength be organised as a fully comprehensive defense system, bringing the army, the reserve, local structures, and civilian potential into functional connection?

This article is built around that question.

I. Comprehensive Security as a Question of Integration

Comprehensive security should not be understood as a fashionable concept meant to replace the army, as it is something simpler and more practical. A country is defended not only by its armed forces and reserves, but also by the quality of its governance, the effectiveness of its civil protection system, the resilience of its infrastructure, and the level of its local preparedness. In other words, the issue is not only how strong the state's hard power is, but also how quickly and

coherently the whole system functions in a time of crisis. In this sense, comprehensive security is not mainly about creating new institutions. It is about connecting the ones that already exist.

At the same time, this should not be presented as an imported theory in the Greek case. Greece's own official documents already suggest that a narrow understanding of security is no longer sufficient. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' *Strategic Plan 2024–2027* addresses, within the same strategic frame, communication with Turkey, maritime delimitation, the protection of sovereign rights, the casus belli, and diplomatic resistance to illegal agreements.[1] Similarly, the Ministry of National Defence's *Agenda 2030* presents not merely another reform, but a broader transformation of the armed forces.[2] In other words, Greece itself already frames security as a multi-layered issue.

But in a multi-layered security environment, describing threats is not enough. The different levels of responses must also be connected. A 2025 systematic review of Greece's crisis-management and civil-protection performance points to fragmented governance, gaps in inter-agency coordination, limited local preparedness, and reactive approaches.[3] At the same time, ELIAMEP's defence analysis stresses that effective deterrence requires stronger jointness and a more active civic role.[4]

II. The Strong Sides of Greece's Current Security System

At the same time, one thing should be stated clearly: the central core of Greece's defence system remains military deterrence. According to NATO's 2025 data, Greece is still one of the Alliance's higher-spending members, allocating around 2.85% of its GDP to defence.[5] At the official level, Greece's current defence-modernisation agenda is presented as one of the deepest transformations of the armed forces.[2] In other words, military transformation is a high priority for the Greek government.

The second pillar is its alliance-based and diplomatic architecture. The Foreign Ministry's strategic plan shows that Greece treats Turkey not only as a military, but also as a legal and diplomatic challenge.[1] This is also why Greece has deepened its defence ties with France, which were formally turned into a framework of mutual support through the 2021 strategic agreement,[6] and with the United States, whose MDCA was presented officially as a qualitative and quantitative upgrade in bilateral relations.[7] Therefore Greek security rests not only on its own capabilities, but also on strategic partnerships.

The third layer is internal and civil security. Greece has long had mechanisms showing that the state thinks not only about war, but also about crisis management. The 112 service is an integrated emergency communication system that helps connect different agencies quickly and locate people who need assistance.[8] At the same time a 2025 scientific review covering 108 studies notes that, especially during fires, floods, and other multi-hazard situations, the system still faces fragmented governance, coordination gaps, and limited local preparedness.[3]

At this point, it is clear that Greece is not weak in security matters. It has a strong military, active diplomacy, and real civil-security mechanisms. But this whole system is still built mainly from the top down, relying on centralized control. What is still missing is a stronger decentralized element and a more united form of defence capacity linking the state and society. This is where the next part begins: understanding why the existing and developing deterrence potential has still not turned into a full and comprehensive defence system.

III. The Limits of Strength: Where the System's Gap Lies

The answer should be sought not in the separate instruments themselves, but in the links between them. Military power, alliance support, and state crisis-management mechanisms are all important, but their presence alone does not automatically create a unified defence system. Such a system becomes real only when different levels work within one common logic from, central government to local response, and from the armed forces to civilian preparedness.[9]

In Greece's case, this middle layer can still be described as only partly built. The state may be strong at the higher levels of governance: in strategic planning, foreign policy, and military modernization, but more vulnerable where security becomes a matter of local administration, territorial flexibility, and first response. Modern crises do not always begin with a clear military clash. Often, they begin with uncertainty: information disorder, communication breakdown, limited local capacity, delays in decision-making, or uneven reactions from different services. At that moment, the issue is not only the strength of the state's centripetal power, but also how ready its local links are to act without waiting too long for help or direction from the centre.[10]

Comprehensive defence means that power is not only concentrated upward, but also distributed below in a regulated, controlled, and functional way. When that distribution is not fully built, the result is a paradox: the state is strong at the general level, but in specific areas it may respond slowly, remain too dependent on the centre, or understand the real scale of a local crisis too late. In such a situation, strength itself can become a vulnerability.

This is especially important in Greece's geographic setting. In a country of islands, sea routes, border areas, and a multi-centred settlement pattern, security cannot be sustained only through centralised control. However strong the overall defence potential of the state may be, it cannot be present and respond everywhere at the same time. That is why the key issue here is not only the existence of strength, but its local embodiment. If the state does not build the layer that can maintain basic stability in the first phase of a crisis, then the effectiveness of the whole system remains dependent on the speed of the centre and that is not always enough.

At the same time, simple explanations should be set aside. The problem is not that society lacks the will to defend itself or does not take security seriously. It would be more accurate to say that this willingness has not yet been fully turned into organised capacity. What matters here is less a psychological issue than an institutional one. When the state does not have sufficiently developed intermediate links, even the human and social resources that already exist remain fragmented, disconnected, or unused. For that reason, the discussion should move away from whether strength exists and toward the question of how that strength is organised.

Still, one more point should be stressed. Greece's present limitation should not be described simply as weak governance. A more accurate formulation would be that the existing system has not yet fully moved from centralised defence toward an effective decentralised structure.

Thus, Greece's main gap lies in a rigid vertical structure that does not yet sufficiently connect state defence with social and territorial preparedness. Unless this link is built, the existing and growing deterrence potential will remain incomplete. The next step, then, should not be another description of the same pillars of strength, but an examination of what kind of social, local, and civic potential already exists in Greece today and how it could gradually become a real part of the defence system.

IV. The Limited Potential of the Civilian Shooting and Hunting Environment

In Greece, civilian contact with firearms is not a marginal or accidental phenomenon, but exists as a legal, regulated, and socially recognised environment, mainly through hunting and, to a more limited extent, sport shooting. This environment has its own organisations, rules, codes of conduct, and forms of internal discipline. Therefore not speaking about the creation of a new culture, but about an already existing social and practical environment that has so far remained within its traditional limits.[11]

What makes this environment relevant is that it is active, but also limited: it is active because it can produce practical familiarity with weapons, habits of safe handling, regular participation, knowledge of terrain, and in some cases strong local ties; it is limited because these skills remain mostly within the framework of hunting, individual possession, or sporting use. In other words, there is a form of capacity, but it has not become an institution with a broader defence function.

From a broader point of view, there is an important difference between hunting or sport shooting as lawful civilian activities, and a defence-oriented culture that may grow out of selected skills. The first can exist as a legal and organised environment while still remaining outside the operational chain of national security. The second begins only when skill is linked to training, training to organisation, and organisation to clearly defined state purposes. In Greece, that transition has not yet fully taken place.

The hunting and shooting environment already contains elements that, under different conditions, could support territorial preparedness: terrain knowledge, familiarity with weapons, local networks, regulated membership, and regular involvement. But as long as this layer does not enter a wider organisational framework, it remains a separate social component rather than an organised security resource.

V. From Civilian Skill to Organised Security Capacity

From this point emerges a political and institutional question of how to this reinterpret and link environment to territorial preparedness without turning the discussion into one about liberalised armament or uncontrolled militarisation.

The answer rests on one main principle: the security value of this civilian environment can emerge only through organisation, not through liberalisation. In other words, the goal is not to circulate more weapons, but to bring already existing skills and forms of participation into a higher and more controlled order through certified training, legal oversight, clearly defined functions, and state supervision.

The central issue is not whether the citizen should be “armed” or “not armed”, rather how an already existing civilian layer can be connected to local security in a disciplined and accountable way. What matters here is not liberalisation, but selection, training, registration, responsibility, and connection to general defence planning. Only under these conditions can this environment move beyond its current limited role and become part of territorial preparedness.

For that reason, the discussion cannot remain at the level of culture or social potential. It must move to the institutional question of which existing state structure can these dispersed civilian skills be selected, trained, subordinated, and connected to local security tasks. This is where Ethnofylaki becomes central, as it offers a possible framework through which civilian willingness and practical skills can be turned into an organised security capacity without creating a parallel structure outside the state.

VI. Ethnofylaki as a Platform for Transition

Ethnofylaki can serve as the practical mechanism for gradually reshaping the existing system. As an official part of the state structure, it is firmly tied to specific territories and makes it possible to assign clear and meaningful roles at the local level. This can bring former conscripts, citizens with lawful shooting or hunting experience, and community-level organised groups into a single framework not as vague participants, but with a well-defined status and purpose.[12]

Anyone admitted into this framework goes through a structured process of careful selection, background checks, structured training, assignment to a specific unit, and regular refresher courses. Once that foundation is in place, roles become clearer: some may be involved in observation, some in movement and logistical support, some in communications, while others may focus on protection duties or community support.[13]

This approach does not destroy the existing civilian shooting culture; it gives it a new and more useful function. Hunting or shooting experience remains a lawful civilian activity, but in this model it can also become an initial qualification for those who voluntarily choose to enter a process of selection, training, and organised participation. The guiding principle therefore shifts away from the idea of the armed citizen acting freely and toward a system of selection, training, registration, and clear lines of responsibility. Even a person without hunting or shooting experience, if admitted into this process and attached to a defined role, becomes part of the territorial preparedness layer rather than an informal civilian actor.

Under these conditions, broader civic participation does not remain at the level of a slogan or a separate initiative. It gains concrete form by being integrated directly into Ethnofylaki, with official status, territorial placement, and a clear division of tasks. The new layer receives official status, certain privileges, territorial placement, and a clear division of tasks. As a result, it does not sit outside the system, works inside it and strengthens the very area that has long lacked organised local support. At the same time, it creates a more decentralised security role for participating citizens, bringing both clearly defined responsibilities and possible incentives.

Once the institutional logic is clear, only one practical question is where should such a model begin.

The most natural starting point is the islands. That is where the real value of local organisation is most visible and where the cost of not having it may become most crucial in a crisis in the future.

The islands are one of Greece’s most exposed security regions. In a crisis, problems with communications, supplies, movement, ports, water, electricity, and even the functioning of the local community can escalate very quickly. What the mainland might handle with time and depth often becomes an urgent test on the islands, which is precisely why the islands make the most suitable pilot environment. The territory is limited, the population is more clearly defined, the people who need to be involved are easier to identify, the model can be more flexible, and the results are far simpler to measure. In a small, clearly mapped space, it becomes quickly obvious what works and what does not, whether the participants mobilise on time, if communications hold, if roles are respected, and whether local structures can cooperate effectively with defence and civil-protection authorities.

Starting on the islands is also politically more manageable, as it will not come across as a sudden, sweeping change forced on the entire country. It can be presented as a practical step to strengthen community resilience rather than a vague military programme of uncertain scale. This matters a lot in a climate where any expansion of civic involvement can easily be misinterpreted. In the end, local communities should not be left completely dependent on outside help when a crisis is already unfolding.

The islands are also a natural fit for Ethnofylaki itself. There, the connection between residents, territory, and security needs is much tighter than on the mainland. This makes it far easier to test the core elements, such as selection, training, unit attachment, regular gatherings, coordination with local authorities, and a clear division of functions, which are much harder to organise in a larger and more complex setting.

If this first phase succeeds, the island experience can become the working model that is later extended to border regions on the mainland. They are the place where the lack of comprehensive local defence is felt most sharply, and for that very reason, the right place to test a practical and scalable solution. Such a model could eventually grow into a coherent, comprehensive, and democratically grounded security system across the whole of Greece.

This approach also carries a significant legal and political advantage. In the Aegean context, discussions about island security often revolve around the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 and the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947.[14] The proposed model requires no new naval bases, fortifications, or parallel armed units. Instead, it focuses on local preparedness, civil protection, communications, observation, infrastructure continuity, and clearly defined auxiliary roles within the existing state framework. It therefore strengthens island resilience without moving the discussion into the most treaty-sensitive forms of militarisation. It does so by improving preparedness, coordination, communications, early warning, and continuity of essential services within existing state structures, with the aim of making Greece's military deterrence more resilient at the local level.

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