The Collapse of the Interwar Collective Security System: Aspects of the Greek Experience

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the University of Piraeus and its Rector, Professor Kyriazis Dimosthenis, for the honour bestowed upon me by inviting me to deliver today's commemorative address.

Today, we celebrate the 86th anniversary of the historic “Ohi”, the resounding, nationwide “No” of October 28, 1940.

Today, we pay tribute to those who fell in the glorious battles against Italian fascism in the Pindus Mountains, at Kalpaki, Korçë and Himarë.

Today, our thoughts turn to the Greek people, who participated en masse and with unwavering resolve in the resistance against the occupying forces. As Emmanouil Roukounas, former President of the Academy of Athens and Professor Emeritus of International Law, has observed, popular support for the armed struggle was so extensive that it justified describing it as a “general popular mobilisation” or, in the terminology of the international law of armed conflict, a *levée en masse*: the voluntary, mass participation of the population in resisting an advancing invading force.

Today, we also honour the academic legacy of Konstantinos Tsatsos, Professor of Philosophy of Law and later President of the Hellenic Republic, who, on October 28, 1941, refused to deliver his scheduled lecture at the University of Athens. Instead, he addressed his students in a commemorative speech, an act that led to his dismissal the following day. Allow me to repeat his words, as he himself recorded them:

“The First World War blighted our childhood years. We spent our youth amid the misconduct and transgressions of the post-war period, and now, in our mature years, when we should be at the height of our activity, we find ourselves enslaved, unable to contribute what it is ours to contribute. You, however, upon leaving the university, will find a free country and a wider field of action than ever before. What those who now lie buried beneath the snows of Albania, and those who return to our streets without legs, without arms, or without sight, have won, you will have the honour and the good fortune to inherit and put to use. That is why the role of your generation will be so important. You must not remain at the level of enthusiasm; you must rise to the level of political consciousness.”

Ladies and gentlemen,

We live in troubled times, when peace and order in relations among nations can seem almost illusory. Bloody conflicts, both interstate and civil, continue to rage across the globe, repeatedly raising questions about the adequacy, effectiveness and, ultimately, resilience of the contemporary collective security system.

Against the backdrop of a constantly evolving international order, I thought it appropriate to share with you some reflections on the collapse of the early collective security system established during the interwar period, and on the Greek experience, as an exercise in critical historical reflection on the circumstances surrounding Fascist Italy's aggression against Greece.

In the aftermath of the First World War, still referred to in Britain as the Great War, the prevailing view was that attempts to preserve peace through a balance-of-power system had failed. A transition to a system of collective security was considered a historical necessity: a system in which nations would recognise their overriding common interest in maintaining peace and undertake to respond promptly, effectively and collectively to any threat to it.

As articulated in US President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, what was required was “a general association of nations” established through specific covenants to provide mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.

Indeed, President Wilson's almost missionary zeal, the pragmatic approach of the British Imperial Delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, and the impetus provided by public opinion contributed to the establishment of the League of Nations. It was the first permanent, intergovernmental organisation of universal membership and general competence, whose principal objectives included the development of international relations, the peaceful settlement of disputes and the safeguarding of the territorial settlement embodied in the Treaty of Versailles.

Greece enthusiastically supported the creation of the League of Nations. As Eleftherios Venizelos observed in a speech on October 13, 1919: “As the representative of a smaller state, it is only natural that I should sincerely desire the birth of the League of Nations, since such an association, beyond securing peace, will make the independence of smaller nations even more secure.”

Under the Covenant of the League of Nations, its constituent instrument incorporated into the Treaty of Versailles, member states undertook to respect and preserve the territorial integrity and political independence of all members against external aggression. They also accepted that an attack against one member was a matter of concern to the organisation as a whole and required a collective response. Disputes between member states were to be submitted to arbitration, judicial settlement or the League's competent executive organ, the Council.

The Covenant of the League of Nations did not expressly prohibit the use of force in relations between states. Instead, it established a three-month cooling-off period following an arbitral or judicial decision or the issuance of a Council report on a dispute, during which the parties were prohibited from resorting to war.

Where a dispute between member states was likely to lead to a rupture and had not been resolved through judicial means, the Council was required to take up the matter. If a settlement proved impossible, it would issue a report setting out its proposed solutions. Only where the Council adopted its report unanimously, and provided that its recommendations were implemented, were member states obliged not to resort to war. In all other circumstances, League members reserved the right to take such action as they considered necessary.

A state resorting to war in breach of the Covenant faced economic sanctions, which were mandatory under its provisions, as well as possible military measures, insofar as member states acted upon the relevant recommendations of the Council.

The League of Nations began its operations at the time of the Greek Asia Minor Campaign and the subsequent Asia Minor Catastrophe. During this period, the League maintained a passive stance, although Greece had, in practice, acted as an “agent” of the Allied Powers in implementing the post-war peace settlement.

Nevertheless, the League's valuable financial and operational assistance in addressing the refugee crisis must be acknowledged, particularly through loans for refugee resettlement and the implementation of the population exchange under the supervision of the League's High Commissioner, Fridtjof Nansen.

The Asia Minor Catastrophe and the subsequent conclusion of the Treaty of Lausanne marked a turning point, prompting a comprehensive reassessment of Greek foreign policy. From that point onwards, adherence to the treaty-based international order and the principle of legality became enduring foundations of Greek diplomacy. The overriding objective was now to safeguard national independence and territorial integrity, including through participation in networks of international cooperation.

Greece, however, soon encountered the inherent contradictions of the League's collective security system. These contradictions exposed weaker states to the expansionist ambitions of more powerful countries and ultimately drove them to seek additional guarantees for their national security through traditional balance-of-power arrangements.

In August 1923, Italian General Enrico Tellini, head of the commission responsible for delimiting the Greek-Albanian frontier, was found murdered at Zepi, near Kakavia.

Mussolini's Italian government alleged that Greece had failed to exercise due diligence in protecting the commission's members and bringing the perpetrators to justice. In a diplomatic note, Italy demanded that the Greek government arrange for an apology to the Italian Ambassador by Greece's highest military authority; hold a memorial service for the victims at the Catholic church in Athens in the presence of the entire Cabinet; render honours to the Italian flag on the day of the service, including a twenty-one-gun salute and the hoisting of the Italian flag by Greek vessels in Piraeus; sentence the perpetrators to death; and pay compensation amounting to fifty million lire.

It is worth noting that, under the international law of state responsibility, Italy's demands constitute a particularly striking example of a disproportionate claim for satisfaction. It is generally accepted that their primary purpose was to humiliate Greece rather than to provide reparation for the injury sustained.

The Greek government rejected the Italian demands but offered to provide financial compensation to the victims' families and to allow the Italian military attaché to assist the investigation by sharing any information at his disposal. At the same time, Athens declared that, should Italy consider the Greek response unsatisfactory, Greece would refer the dispute to the competent organs of the League of Nations.

Despite Athens' conciliatory approach, Mussolini ordered the bombardment and occupation of Corfu on August 31, 1923.

Notwithstanding this manifest violation of the procedures for the peaceful settlement of disputes, the League's response was hesitant. Rather than allowing the League's competent organs to address the attack on Corfu, the matter was referred, in a delaying manoeuvre, to the Conference of Ambassadors, which had established the commission responsible for delimiting the Greek-Albanian frontier. This referral, followed by the eventual return of the matter to the League of Nations, undermined the credibility of the League's procedures. Moreover, the organisation operated under the constant threat that Mussolini would withdraw Italy from the League if it condemned his country's actions.

Ultimately, Greece was compelled to pay the onerous compensation demanded by Italy, while the Italian actions were effectively tolerated.

The lack of resolve among the Great Powers and their attachment to short-term, conflicting interests resulted in the first major violation of the League's founding principles.

The League's handling of the Greek-Bulgarian crisis of 1925 was radically different.

The killing of a Greek officer during a border skirmish prompted the dictator Theodoros Pangalos to invade Bulgarian territory and occupy Petrich and neighbouring villages.

The Bulgarian government immediately appealed to the Council of the League of Nations, which called for an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of Greek troops.

The League established an international commission of inquiry, which concluded that Greece had used excessive force and ordered it to pay reparations amounting to thirty million leva, equivalent to £45,000.

The League's intervention in the Greek-Bulgarian crisis was hailed as a “success” for the collective security system. It was not, however, sufficient to convince weaker states that the League of Nations was either capable of, or willing to, intervene decisively when one of the parties to a dispute was a Great Power.

The relatively favourable assessment of the League's collective security system during the 1920s was largely attributable to its role in the peaceful settlement of disputes between small and medium-sized powers. Examples included the Petrich incident, the dispute between Poland and Lithuania over the status of Vilnius, and the dispute between Sweden and Finland concerning the Åland Islands.

An exception was the settlement of the British-Turkish dispute over Mosul, which was credited to the procedures of the League of Nations, although the Council's final decision was characterised, even at the time, as one-sided.

In any event, the League's inconsistent handling of the Corfu and Petrich incidents undermined Athens' confidence in the organisation. Recognition of the system's weaknesses compelled Greece to adjust its strategy and seek to strengthen its geopolitical position in the following years through bilateral diplomacy.

At the international level, efforts to consolidate peace during the League's relatively tranquil years of the 1920s continued with the Locarno Treaties of 1925, which sought to normalise relations with defeated Germany and facilitate its admission to the organisation.

These efforts culminated in the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, which marked the first condemnation, embodied in an international treaty, of recourse to war as an instrument for settling international disputes.

Although the Kellogg-Briand Pact was concluded outside the institutional framework of the League, partly because the United States was not a member, it was closely associated with the so-called “Spirit of Locarno”: the climate of optimism, international cooperation and reconciliation that prevailed in Europe during the second half of the 1920s.

Yet while an optimistic belief in states' willingness to exercise self-restraint in pursuit of the common interest prevailed internationally, national strategic calculations presented a different picture.

In a letter dated March 31, 1928, addressed to Foreign Minister Michalakopoulos, Nikolaos Politis, then Greek Ambassador to Paris and a former Foreign Minister under Venizelos, observed:

“The course pursued by the League of Nations towards the consolidation of peace has made [...] significant progress. It is unnecessary for me to emphasise how closely this new international policy accords with Greece's properly understood interests.”

He added, however:

“Among the Great European Powers, Italy alone resists the emerging policy, continuing to regard the League's entire activity with a degree of mistrust.”

According to the Italian perspective, this mistrust stemmed from the fact that powers such as France advocated collective security because they already possessed the territories and colonial holdings throughout the world that they considered necessary for their existence.

By contrast, countries such as Italy, according to the contemporary Italian press, which did not possess territories commensurate with their growing vitality, “must become conquerors if they wish to avoid destruction through suffocation.”

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 found Eleftherios Venizelos once again at the helm of Greece.

Venizelos adapted his policies to the requirements of the League, which he publicly praised, seeking both financial assistance and the advancement of bilateral alliances through the organisation. While consistently pursuing a pro-British foreign policy, Venizelos also concluded bilateral agreements of alliance and friendship with Italy in September 1928, Yugoslavia in March 1929, and Turkey between June and October 1930.

Despite these agreements, he remained suspicious of Italy and sought to contain Yugoslavia.

The beginning of the new decade marked the League's entry into a period of gradual disintegration, driven by the rise of authoritarian and fascist regimes within and beyond Europe. The first major blow to the League's collective security system came with Japan's invasion of Manchuria in September 1931 and the establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo on March 1, 1932.

The League appointed the Lytton Commission to investigate the incident. The Commission concluded that Japan could not invoke self-defence as a legal justification for its actions.

The League lacked both the military capability and the political will to confront Japan, despite the fact that, following the Lytton Report, the League Assembly determined in February 1933 that Japan had unlawfully attacked China.

One month later, in March 1933, Japan withdrew from the League.

At this point, it is worth noting that the treatment of the puppet state of Manchukuo under international law is also relevant to matters of particular concern to Greece and Cyprus.

The Manchurian crisis gave rise to the so-called Stimson Doctrine, under which the United States declared that it would not recognise territorial changes resulting from the unlawful use of force or aggression.

The Stimson Doctrine laid the foundations for the principle of the obligation of collective non-recognition, subsequently reflected in United Nations Security Council Resolutions 541 and 550 concerning the non-recognition of the purported state established in the occupied part of Cyprus.

In January 1933, Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. In October of the same year, following the collapse of negotiations at the Disarmament Conference, he announced Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations, foreshadowing the expansionist policies of the Nazi regime.

The most devastating blow, however, came with Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935, followed by its occupation and annexation to the Italian Empire in May 1936.

Once again, the League proved incapable of guaranteeing collective security.

Britain and France pursued a policy of appeasement towards Italy, hoping to prevent a closer alignment between Mussolini and Hitler. The League ultimately imposed limited economic sanctions on Italy, but these had no substantial effect on its military campaign against Ethiopia.

The League's refusal to recognise the Italian conquest as lawful, together with the continued participation of an Ethiopian delegation in its proceedings despite the annexation, provided Mussolini with the pretext he needed to announce Italy's withdrawal from the organisation in December 1937.

With Germany, Italy and Japan outside the League, the way had been cleared for the consolidation of the Axis Powers.

The League of Nations remained a passive observer of the *Anschluss*, the conclusion of the Munich Agreement, the occupation and dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and, ultimately, the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany.

The League's swan song came on December 14, 1939, when it decided to expel the Soviet Union following the Soviet invasion of Finland.

Three days later, the Soviet news agency TASS issued a statement declaring that, “in the opinion of Soviet circles, the decision of the members of the League of Nations provokes nothing more than an ironic smile.”

In Greece, the post-Venizelos period was characterised by a firm alignment with Britain, with successive military interventions effectively confirming the foreign policy choices made by Venizelos during his 1928–1932 administration.

As has been observed, the dictator Ioannis Metaxas pursued Venizelos' foreign policy with the zeal of a new convert.

For its part, London, seeking to keep Greece pro-British, united and militarily prepared, reconciled itself with the anti-Venizelist forces and the monarchy.

From as early as 1935, Greece was able to undertake systematic military preparations with British financial support in anticipation of the approaching conflict, the prospect of which became increasingly apparent with the signing of the Munich Agreement in 1938.

Military preparations focused on two fronts: the construction of fortifications along the Greek-Bulgarian border, known as the Metaxas Line, and the establishment of a defensive line along the Greek-Albanian border in the Kalpaki area and along the Kalamas River.

In April 1939, Italy invaded Albania and established a protectorate.

On August 15, 1940, the Greek cruiser *Elli* was torpedoed in the harbour of Tinos.

The Italian invasion followed on October 28, 1940, after Ioannis Metaxas rejected the ultimatum delivered by Italian Ambassador Emanuele Grazzi with the words: “Alors, c'est la guerre” — “Then it is war.”

Ladies and gentlemen,

The anniversary of October 28, 1940, is not merely an occasion for historical remembrance and national pride. Above all, it represents an enduring invitation to reflection and historical self-awareness.

The collapse of the interwar collective security system reminds us that peace cannot be secured by declarations of good intentions alone, nor can the international order survive through the selective application of rules and policies of appeasement.

The League of Nations' failure to contain revisionist powers and impose meaningful sanctions offers a fundamental lesson: collective security requires more than institutions and treaty obligations. It also demands political will and solidarity translated into concrete action.

In today's world, where geopolitical realignments, hybrid threats and revisionist ambitions test the resilience of the international order, the response cannot be one-dimensional.

What is required is active diplomacy: engagement in international organisations, the building of alliances, the strengthening of regional cooperation and the pursuit of dialogue without illusions.

For diplomacy to be effective, however, it must rest upon credible deterrence and systematic preparedness.

Finally, today's anniversary also reminds us of the power of unity.

The historic “No” represented a resolute defence of freedom, dignity and the right of a people to determine its own future.

Long live Greece!

Long live October 28!