

Turkey's Deterrent

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists

March/April 1999 Vol. 55 No. 2

Mustafa Kibaroglu, Ph.D.

Bilkent University

On December 29, 1998, Greek Cypriot leader Glafkos Klerides announced that a shipment of Russian-made S-300 air-defense missiles would be shipped to Crete instead of Cyprus. His announcement seems to have cooled the possibility of a hot confrontation on Cyprus, while gaining time for Greece and Turkey to resolve their differences over a host of issues. (See "Mediterranean Countdown" by Michael Barletta in the November/December 1998 *Bulletin*).

Because the deployment of sophisticated Russian missiles on Cyprus would have met with a strong Turkish response—likely a military strike—regardless of the potential repercussions, all parties concerned, including Turkey, Greece, the United States, and the European Union, welcomed the Greek Cypriot decision to abandon plans to deploy the missiles. Nevertheless, Turkey maintains that the missile deal should be abandoned altogether. Whether the missiles are on Cyprus or Crete makes little difference because Greece and the Greek Cypriot administration have had a joint defense agreement since 1993.

Turks also point out that Greek Premier Kostas Simitis said that Greece was determined "to continue and ceaselessly strengthen its military cooperation with

Cyprus under the joint defense framework." Simitis also emphasized that "Greece guarantees the Greek Cypriots' right to live in security and will continue to defend this right by all means available." Turks fear that "all means available" implies that anything in the Greek military arsenal-which will soon include mobile S-300 missile systems from Russian-will be made available to Greek Cypriots.

Although the "eventual demilitarization" of Cyprus is stressed in U.N. Security Council Resolution 1217 (December 22,1998) "as an objective in the context of an overall comprehensive settlement," it would be inconceivable for Turkey to withdraw its troops from the Turkish Cypriot sectors of the island. Turkey's objection to demilitarization stems from history. Bitter memories, deep mistrust, and a lack of confidence on both sides of the Aegean have shaped the pace of bilateral relations since the 1820s, when Greece won independence from the Ottoman Empire. Since then, the Hellenic state has continuously expanded at the expense of Turkish territories in the Balkans and in the Aegean. Moreover, Greece invaded the western districts of Turkey following World War I, but was defeated, an event that paved the way for the formation of the modern Republic of Turkey in 1923.

Since then, the political and security elites in Turkey have paid the utmost attention whenever Greek politicians and government officeholders have suggested that Greek territory should be enlarged in the East to include Cyprus, or even Istanbul, the latter being the capital of Orthodoxy, the principal religion of Greece. Encouraged by a military government in Athens, in the summer of 1974 the Greek Cypriot National Guard staged a coup aimed at uniting Cyprus with Greece. Turks saw the

coup as another manifestation of the Megali Idea, the Greek dream of reconstituting the Byzantine Empire, which was lost to the Ottomans in 1453.

The Turkish military intervened on Cyprus in July 1974. Although the Republic of Cyprus could not be restored on the preexisting constitutional grounds, with Turks and Greeks both represented, the presence of Turkish troops on the island put a halt to a civil war between two communities that had resulted in mass killings. The troops were also seen by the Turks as guaranteeing stability. Turkey's political and security elites are always concerned that Greek decision-makers could decide to stage a surprise attack on Turkey when the time is deemed ripe-for instance, if Turkey were deeply immersed in serious conflicts with its rivals in the Middle East.

Greece has a strategic advantage over Turkey because several Greek islands in the Aegean-only a few miles off the Turkish coast-have small-scale airbases. Turks believe that only the threat of a strong penalty prevents Greece from resorting to surprise attack. That penalty is a Turkish invasion of the whole of Cyprus. A Turkish threat to take over Cyprus is analogous to the "second-strike capability" possessed by the United States and the Cold War-the ability to ride out an enemy attack and then retaliate. Turks believe that their ability to invade the whole of Cyprus helps maintain the strategic balance of power with Greece and provides them with a strong sense of security. Thus, the Greek Cypriot plan to deploy sophisticated Russian air defense systems (widely acknowledged as notorious killers of any flying objects) posed an unprecedented threat to Turkey's "strategic deterrent."

Although the 35,000 mechanized and well-trained troops stationed in the Turkish-controlled sectors of Cyprus are capable of invading the rest of the island, where 10,000 Greek Cypriot troops are positioned, successive phases of such an operation would depend on air support from mainland Turkey. Greek S-300 missiles could make it extremely difficult for the Turks to accomplish an airborne operation, and they would also protect the airbase at Paphos, where Greek fighter aircraft would be stationed as part of the joint defense doctrine. The S-300 missiles would interrupt and delay Turkey's airborne operations over Cyprus and gain time for the Greeks to secure third-party intervention. Greece has so far been unable to challenge Turkey's air supremacy over Cyprus, but the S-300 would provide an effective shield to any potential Greek air offensive from the island against the eastern districts of Turkey, which are normally inaccessible to Greek aircraft.

Although war between modern democracies is unlikely, an unintentional armed clash might escalate to all-out warfare. The recent history of Greek-Turkish relations is full of incidents in the Aegean and in the related airspace, some of which have brought the two countries close to war. Therefore, Turks believe that any major war with Greece, whether intentional or unintentional, is best averted by retaining the ability to invade the whole of Cyprus. Turkish political and security elites contend that Greece's fear of losing Cyprus is a strong stabilizing factor in the inherently volatile context of Greek-Turkish relations. Accordingly, Turkey suggests that concerned states should come up with realistic proposals -- other than potentially destabilizing demilitarization or no-fly-zones -- that might contribute to a solution to the centuries-old Greek-Turkish dispute.

*Mustafa Kibarođlu, Bilkent University, Ankara,
Turkey.*