Is the Greek-Turkish Conflict a Security Dilemma? An Assessment of Empirical Evidence

Panayotis J. Tsakonas*

The previous volume of *Études helléniques/Hellenic Studies* (Autumn 2001) was devoted to the examination of the Greek-Turkish conflict through the use of the diagnostic tool of the security dilemma. In IR literature the security dilemma has proved to be fruitful in analysing relations and explaining conflict emerging between states operating in an anarchic international system.[1] Most recently Robert Jervis — by far the most prolific writer of the security dilemma — has used this particular analytical tool in order to explain the US-Soviet relationship during the Cold War.[2]

In order for the Greek-Turkish conflict to be examined, pairs of Greek and Turkish scholars[3] examined a variety of cases that fall into the three basic manifestations of the Greek-Turkish conflict in the post-Cold War era. As theory and practice suggest, the security dilemma manifests itself (a) in *arms-race* {as the core of the action-reaction phenomenon characterizing the armaments dynamics}; (b) in *crisis scenarios* {in a low degree of crisis stability evidenced in vicious circles of "reciprocal fears and surprise attack"}, and (c) in *competitive alliance formation* {i.e., a tendency toward a continous struggle for "preemptive alignment"}.

The first thematic area, devoted to the arms race, was analysed in the contributions of Christos Kollias and Gunlay Gunluk Senesen. Given that even during the post-bipolar period — at a time when other NATO members have been trimming their defense spending — Greek and Turkish military expenditures have continued to grow in real terms, Kollias addressed some methodological issues which hindered the empirical examination of the Greek-Turkish armaments race with the aim of identifying whether the issue of an action-reaction régime between Greek and Turkish military spending can be esta-

* University of Aegean (Greece)

blished and a systematic Greek-Turkish arms race can be empirically verified. Along the same line of reasoning Senesen attempted to identify whether Turkish defense expenditures during 1983-2000 (the choice of the period is based on availability of detailed data on Turkish defense expenditures) and relations with Greece in the same period have a common pattern. Given that recent empirical literature on a long-run arms race between Turkey and Greece was inconclusive Senesen attempted to find out to what extent the continuum of perceived threats, upon which Turkish defense decisions reacted, are attributable to threats emanating from neighbouring Greece.

A particular crisis scenario, namely the Imia (Kardak for Turkey) incident of 1996 has been the focus of the analyses provided by Kostas Ifantis and Gulden Ayman. Structural factors along with the revisionist, predatory — non-security — goals of Turkey were highlighted by Ifantis as the major causes of the Greek-Turkish conflict, while the Turkish conduct in the Imia incident has been explored to verify the above mentioned premise empirically. In her contribution, Ayman explored various crisis models to show how crises lead to conflict and even war. Certain theoretical models were contrasted with the example of the Kardak crisis. Factors such as history, policy, strategy, social pressures, and diplomacy were examined while the impact of the particular crisis on Turkish-Greek relations was also discussed.

The tendency of the states living under the security dilemma toward a continous struggle for the formation of "preemptive alignment" was another theme considered. Antonia Dimou and Marios Evriviadis explored Turkey's search for pre-emptive alignments and a hegemonic role in the Eastern Mediterranean and the wider Middle East, as it is reflecred on the Turkish-Israeli alliance. The alliance's background, its modern version, and the motives behind its formation were thus analyzed. The Greek and Cypriot concerns and responses to this partnership were also discussed. The decision by the Greek and Cypriot Governments to deploy the Russian-made S-300 missile system in Cyprus within the context of the two states Joint Defense Doctrine is explored by Gulden Ayman (in an upcoming article still in the manuscript stage) as a pre-emptive move taken by both the Greek and the

Cypriot Government (and being developed as a well-prepared 'brinkmanship crisis') with the ultimate aim to change the *status quo* in Cyprus.

Two additional points of a methodological nature need particular reference. First, the set of aforementioned contributions has only touched on *some* of the issues affecting the Greek-Turkish conflict. By implication, only the issues examined empirically by the particular case studies are the ones from which inferences are drawn as to whether a security dilemma is or it is not at work.

Second, it goes without saying that an objective assessment by a Greek scholar of the empirical examination of the various case-studies examined by both Greek and Turkish scholars is a rather difficult, if not elusive, enterprise. Indeed, misperception is not only apparent although it can be hardly doubted or criticized in decisionmakers assessments on both sides of the Aegean. As the case studies indicate, Greek and Turkish academics and analysts are also carriers of misperception and they often experience major difficulties in assessing accurately the other side's intentions. It is rather easy, given the ambiguous nature of the evidence available, for an academic, whose country faces an inadvertent security dilemma to misperceive it and deal with the other state as facing a deliberate security dilemma, thus providing his/her government with policy options that emphasize a hard 'deterrent' response.[4] In addition, it should not be forgotten that the 'mainstream' approach which Greek and Turkish 'epistemic communities'[5] follow in order to analyze the Greek-Turkish conflict is based on the same 'consensual knowledge', a shared set of beliefs about a particular cause-effect relationship. Moreover, this relationship is most often burdened by a set of particular cognitive dynamics, which force almost all members of the 'epistemic communities' on both sides to highlight the structural reasons that make states becoming power-maximizing rational egoists, who define security in zero-sum terms.

Needless to say, not far from the 'mainstream' there is a distinct group of scholars in both Greece and Turkey who strongly believe that the Greek-Turkish conflict is far from carrying even elements of the

security dilemma. As a matter of fact, the Greek-Turkish conflict is seen as 'an alternative' to the security dilemma. Greek and Turkish academics view Turkey and Greece, respectively, as *inherently expansionistic* aiming to achieve *non-security goals.* This view is consistent with classical views of human nature viewing humans as harbouring original sin and being driven by the will to dominate. Furthermore, such a view depicts *both sides as seeking to alter the status quo* and it portrays them as *aggressive* or *evil.* By implication, the scholars who belong in this group from both sides of the Aegean offer the very same recipe as to the policies each state should follow vis-à-vis the other, which is based on the dictum "the only language [they] understand is the one of firmness and strength" (!).

Assessing the Empirical Evidence

After thoroughly reading the case-studies at hand, the first general observation one can make is that all analyses clearly and eloquently show the differences in the perceptions of events, policies, consequences and, most importantly, motivations and intentions in the relations between the two countries. Many of these misperceptions often lead to an overestimation of the other's side hostility. As already noted, academics in both Greece and Turkey, sharing a common set of beliefs about a particular cause-effect relationship that is most often overburden by a set of particular cognitive dynamics, experience major difficulties in assessing accurately the other side's intentions. The most striking example is the analysis of the most serious among the several near-conflict situations between Greece and Turkey since 1974, namely the conflict over the islets of Imia provided by Ifantis and Ayman. Unsurprisingly, for both Ifantis and Ayman, the conflict over the Imia was a clear case of Turkish and Greek revisionism, respectively (!). Along the same line of reasoning, Dimou and Evriviades perceive the Turkish-Israeli alliance as "a pre-emptive alignment of anti-Hellenic orientation" while Ayman viewed the Greek and Cypriot decision to purchase and deploy the S-300 missile system in Cyprus as part of a well-elaborated strategy on the part of Greece and Cyprus aiming at "enclaving Turkey with a strategic belt from the Ionian sea to the Gulf

of Iskenderum and closing all the naval routes of transportation of Anatolia" thus isolating Turkey and separating it from Cyprus.

The empirical cases provided by the Greek and Turkish scholars also reflect the two states' dilemmas of *interpretation* (i.e., are the other's policies defensive or offensive?). Also, to a lesser extent, there are dilemmas of *response* (i.e., should these policies be matched and so risk an arms race, counter-alliances or/and crisis escalation or should a wait-and-see policy be adopted thereby risking exposure to coercion or even attack as a result of relative weakness?). Ayman's and Ifantis's analyses of the Imia/Kardak crisis, Dimou's and Evriviadis's case of the Turkish-Israeli are representative of both dilemmas of interpretation and dilemmas of response, they provide insights as to the two states characteristics as *status quo*, 'security-seekers' and/or 'power-maximizers', and they suggest that the Greek-Turkish conflict is a blend of inadvertent and deliberate security dilemmas.

For their part, Kollias's and Senesen's analyses concur in the view that data on the Greek and Turkish defense expenditure inconclusively corroborates the presence of a Greek-Turkish arms race. Senesen argues that Turkey's defense spending was not directly related to that of Greece or to the state of their bilateral relations. Kollias argues that although it is hard to establish an action/reaction relationship to Greek-Turkish military expenditures as governments do not respond instantaneously to the military acquisitions of their rivals, there is a strong, long-term correlation between the growth rate of military spending and policy reactions to armament acquisitions, to the extent that Turkey's weapons built-up follows an upward trend at a faster rate than Greece's re-armaments. By extension, this action-reaction pattern incites an awesome security dilemma in the Greek-Turkish relations and potentially sets the stage for a systematic arms race.

Ifantis' study seeks to reflect on the issue of the Imia crisis through the connection of the anarchic structure of the international system with the expansionist state conduct at the unit level of analysis. Charting the spiral of events that triggered the Imia incident and brought the two countries to the brink of a war, he attributed this cri-

sis to Turkish revisionism. By virtue of his neo-realist assumptions, one is tempted to argue that Ifantis essentially voiced the view that the security dilemma in the Greek-Turkish conflict reflects a blend of inadvertent and deliberate types, being the product of two, seemingly contradictory, factors in combination. These are the Greek inability to consolidate the *status quo* and seek for security without being trapped in a dilemma of response; and the Turkish ability to maximize its power and secure more relative gains. In effect, there exists a 'deep security dilemma', even though the implications could be contained or even ameliorated.

In counterpoint to this argument and entertaining the belief that Turkey is a *status quo* and security seeker state, Ayman perceives in the Imia crisis a Greek effort to present a *fait accompli* with respect to what she calls a Greek expansionist policy in the Aegean. As a result, Turkey was forced to increase its security by arms built up, a fact that, thanks to the Greek 'non-security goals', deepens the security dilemma further. In her article, which is unfortunately not yet published, Ayman sees the initiator of the crisis in both the Imia case and in the S-300 missile issue as Greece (along with the Cypriot Government in the second case) while Turkey acted in both cases as the defender of *the status quo* who drew a line and tested — successfully — the validity of its deterrent strategy.

Ayman's analysis of the S-300 issue also reflects some of Turkey's primary concerns and fears that are integral elements of a security dilemma relationship, namely the domination of nightmares of inferiority, not hopes for gain, as stemming from Turkey's conflict with Greece. It is interesting to note that Dimou and Evriviades' analysis regarding the Turkish-Israeli Alliance also highlights similar Greek nightmares of inferiority due to the consequences of the Turkish decision to form the particular alliance against Greece's and Cyprus's interests. It is interesting to note that in Ifantis's and Ayman's analyses on the Imia crisis, in Dimou/Evriviades's contribution and in Ayman's piece of the S-300 issue there have been episodes — following changes in the perceptions of threat — where Greece and Turkey were experiencing a state of fundamental insecurity, thus drawing

themselves into a 'deep security dilemma' where a series of factors (i.e., the fear that the other's relative power is dangerously increasing, events outside their control, their subjective security requirements) prevented them from being reassured. This was the case even if they were willing to give up the chance of expansion in return of security.

Of particular importance is the fact that the empirical findings of the available case studies do not provide clear indications — not to mention proof — that either Greece or Turkey was willing to pay a high price to gain superiority in order to coerce the other into changing the *status quo* in the Aegean or elsewhere. In other words, neither Greek nor Turkish analysts attributed aggressive behaviour to Turkey and Greece, respectively; i.e., a willingness to undertake high risks and dangerous efforts (even risk the state's survival) to change the *status quo*, although both have attributed to each other a desire to expand or have accused each other as being revisionist.

Unsurprisingly, Jervis' analysis of the Cold War conflict provides similar inferences. Indeed, Jervis' explanation of the US/Soviet rivalry through the use of the diagnostic tool of the security dilemma suggests that Soviet leaders were *not willing to risk what they had achieved in order to get more*, yet they did *want*, *expect*, and *seek more*. However, the American belief that the Soviet Union was inherently expansionistic — as Greece mainly views Turkey and *vice versa* — ruled out cooperation, precluded the adoption of a purely defensive posture by the US and led to the conclusion that demonstrations of resolve were crucial while the only way to underscore US resolve was by prevailing in crises.[6]

To sum up, the empirical examination of the basic manifestations of the Greek-Turkish conflict in the post-Cold War era suggests that the conflict contains more than just elements of the security dilemma. As most cases indicated, both the inadvertent and deliberate types of the security dilemma, as well as a 'deep security dilemma', were in certain episodes at work. More specifically, it could be argued that the Greek-Turkish conflict reflects a blend of inadvertent (the 'arms race' cases) *and* deliberate security dilemma (the 'crises' and 'preemptive alignment'

cases) ending up in certain episodes in a 'deep security dilemma' state of affairs. The unavoidable result has been that even if one of the two states might primarily seek security these efforts were indistinguishable in their effect from expansionism. Indeed, the unintended effect was to preclude mutually acceptable arrangements.

Despite the obvious need of theoretically informed projects to analyse Greek-Turkish relations, the diagnosis of the existence of elements or/and particular types of the security dilemma in the Greek-Turkish conflict is politically attractive and useful. It can contribute to the ongoing debate on both sides of the Aegean as to what constitutes the two states real concerns and interests and how best to pursue those interests. Dealing with the security dilemma in such a critical way reveals the possibility that uncertainty can be transcended and that the Greek-Turkish security dilemma can be ameliorated. Thus, each state may cease assuming — as Rousseau's 'stag-hunt' example suggests — the worst and thus pursuing its 'apparent' interests at the expense of its 'real' interests. The analysis of the Greek-Turkish conflict by using the diagnostic tool of the security dilemma offers valuable insights as to the policies that need to be developed in order for arms competition to be reversed, crisis stability be increased,[7] and arms reduction be encouraged between Greece and Turkey.

Yet a special volume devoted to the examination of the Greek-Turkish conflict through the diagnostic tool of the security dilemma represents but a first attempt to contribute to the mapping out of the conflict in a theoretically informed way. It also stimulates a shift of scholarly concern, on both sides of the divide, from the influence of individual politicians and the inescapable 'structural' dictates or 'blind' historical processes to the interaction of historically and socially constituted systemic and domestic forces. However, much more remains to be done: the construction of national identity and its impact on the evolution of the conflict; the relationship between the security dilemma and Greece and Turkey's political, social and economic transformation; and the strategies that should be developed to ameliorate the Greek-Turkish security dilemma[8] are only parts of a future research agenda related to the security dilemma.[9] Greece and

Turkey do have some choice on the matter of the security dilemma and theoretically informed projects can contribute to the development of a more 'mature anarchy' in Greek-Turkish relations. The challenge for scholars on both sides of the Aegean remains great and as yet ahead of us.

NOTES

1. Past attempts include Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (revised edition, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994); and Alan Collins, *The Security Dilemma and the End of the Cold War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

2. For a recent explanation of the Cold War conflict between the two super powers by using the diagnostic tool of the security dilemma, see Robert Jervis "Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?", *Journal of Cold War Studies* (Vol.3, No.1, Winter 2001), pp. 36-60.

3. In analyzing the Greek-Turkish conflict, country representation is considered as necessary: assessments are often formed or influenced by the Greek and Turkish perceptions of the cases under examination. Indeed, behaviour underlying the security dilemma is shaped not simply by the strategic situation or the circumstances that constitute the security dilemma; i.e., anarchy and offensive advantages, but also by the *participants' perceptions* of that situation and their expectations of each others' like behaviour in that situation. Indeed, cognitive dynamics impact on the security dilemma in crucial ways and are thus among the contributors' pursuits when examining a particular case study to capture the way cognitive dynamics can intensify the security dilemma. As theory and practice suggest, cognitive dynamics may include — among others — ethnocentrism, 'doctrinal realism', ideological fundamentalism, strategic reductionism and zero-sum thinking.

4. Although they cannot be criticized because they overestimated the other side hostility, yet they should assess the cost of overestimating the other's hostility (beware of the costs of misperception and the costs of the opposite error).

5. Networks of professionals with recognized expertise in a particular domain.

6. R. Jervis, *op.cit.,* pp. 58-60.

7. As Jervis pointed out "...not only the Cuban missile crisis, but also the conflict over West Berlin could have been avoided by greater understanding and statesmanship". See Ibid, p. 41. He cites for that conclusion a phrase by Anatoly Dobrinin (The Soviet Ambassador to the United States) that in 1961 "Moscow ...overlooked a very important point: President Kennedy's readiness to reach an understanding on the status quo in Europe". See Anatoly Dobrinin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

8. Although the aim of this special volume of *Etudes helléniques/Hellenic Studies* was not about how the effects of the security dilemma can be mitigated, the utility of the research findings for future research aiming at the amelioration of that Greek-Turkish security dilemma is self-evident.

9. An 'epistemic approach' to Greek-Turkish relations would also be of particular importance in analyzing the interaction between domestic and international sources of state behaviour as well as the role ideas play in shaping each state policy.