

From Confrontation to Detente

Van Coufoudakis*

During the second half of the twentieth century, Greek-Turkish relations went through stages of detente and cooperation as well as confrontation and near conflict. Following the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus, Turkey systematically challenged Greek sovereignty in the Aegean and the status quo that was established by the treaties of Lausanne (1923), Montreux (1936), and Paris (1947). Turkey relied primarily on political and military methods to promote its objectives while avoiding adjudication given the weakness of its legal claims.

A major arms race between the two countries was one of the effects of the escalating confrontation between Greece and Turkey. In addition, the Greco-Turkish confrontation created the perception in Athens that Turkey threatened Greek sovereignty and territorial integrity, the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Cyprus, while aiming to eliminate the Greek minority and the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul. Thus, from 1974-1999 the common perception that cut across the Greek political spectrum was that Turkey pursued a revisionist agenda with support from the United States and NATO; that the threat confronting Greece was from the East and not from the North as it was commonly assumed during the Cold War; and that Greece had to defend its rights through military modernization and political and diplomatic means at the international level. The latter included sanctions against Turkey for its violations of international law and blocking Turkey's access to EEC/EU funds and to a possible candidacy in the EU.

These tensions culminated in the 1996 crisis over the Imia islets. War was prevented by American intervention, much as the U.S. had done in 1987, in 1974, and in other earlier occasions. Turkey's assertive foreign policy increasingly relied on its military who had undergone significant reorganization and modernization, especially in

* Indiana University - Purdue University (USA)

the decades of the 80s and the 90s. Turkey, in turn, perceived threats not only from internal sources (Islam, Kurds) but also from external ones (early on the USSR, Syria, et al.). Turkey felt increasingly isolated in a hostile environment both before and after the end of the Cold War. Thus, Turkey, isolated from Europe, relied extensively on its strategic position, its military strength, and its ties to the U.S., NATO, and Israel to promote its regional interests.

The natural disasters in Turkey and Greece late in the summer of 1999 turned a new page in their bilateral relations. How real this new detente phase in Greco-Turkish relations is will be examined at the end of this essay.

The volume of **Études helléniques/Hellenic Studies** includes six articles written by Greek and Turkish scholars on three specific areas that affected Greek-Turkish relations since 1974, which are characteristic of the tensions and perceptions that dominated Greek-Turkish relations since 1974. These include essays on the Imia crisis, the Greco-Turkish arms race, the Turkish-Israeli alliance and a more general essay on the security dilemma confronting the two countries. Tsakonas' essay uses the diagnostic tool of the security dilemma to better understand Greek-Turkish relations. This, he feels, has been a neglected aspect of the study of Greco-Turkish relations even though it is one of the most significant and pervasive features of international relations. A security dilemma exists when military preparation and foreign policy actions create uncertainty to others as to motives and intentions. As one nation feels insecure if it fails to protect its security, it is likely to affect the security perceptions of others.

The Greco-Turkish arms race has been a key feature in the relations of the two countries, especially since the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus. Even though military modernization and defense spending was affected by various reasons other than the specific issues in Greco-Turkish relations (NATO mission, Kurdish insurrection, internal security needs, etc.) the fact remains that the two countries spent the highest percentage of their GDP for defense than any of the other NATO members, even though their economies were among the weak-

est in NATO. Gulay Gunluk-Genesen confirms these trends. The author also concludes that Turkish defense spending was not directly related to that of Greece or to the state of their bilateral relations. Kollias' data confirm that Greco-Turkish military expenditures continue to be the highest among NATO members. Even though these expenditures continue to grow at a slower pace than in the past, other NATO members, since the end of the Cold War, have reduced considerably their military spending. Kollias also concludes that it is hard to establish an action/reaction relationship to Greco-Turkish military expenditures as governments don't respond instantaneously to military acquisitions of their rivals.

The pieces on the 1996 Imia crisis, the most serious among the several near conflict situations between Greece and Turkey since 1974, reach opposing conclusions. Ifantis concludes that the conflict over Imia was a clear case of Turkish revisionism which was reinforced by the Kurdish problem and by the Turkish belief that military force is a useful foreign policy legitimizer. Gulden Ayman, in turn, attributes revisionist motives on the part of Greece and finds that the end of the crisis resulted in a Turkish psychological victory because Turkey drew a line and tested the validity of its deterrent strategy.

The article on the Turkish-Israeli alliance shows one more strategic dimension of the Greco-Turkish rivalry. The Turkish-Israeli "alliance" was perceived in Greece and Cyprus as a means of ensuring Turkey's hegemonic control in the Eastern Mediterranean. These essays clearly show the differences in the perceptions of events, policies, motivations, and consequences in the relations between the two countries. Since 1974, in the case of Greece, military spending cannot be separated from the Turkish threat. In the case of Turkey, increases in military spending can be attributed to a variety of causes other than the Greco-Turkish problem. For example, Turkish threat perceptions did not include Greece at the top of their defense priorities. This was understandable due to geostrategic reasons, and differences in the size and capability of their military forces. In addition, successive Turkish civilian and military elites gave far higher priority to internal security reasons and to regional hegemonic ambitions.

The post-Cold War environment brought profound changes in the international environment in South Eastern Europe, in Eurasia, and in the Middle East. Greece has made a successful transition to a leadership role in the region thanks to its economic recovery, its membership in the EU and in the EMU, and the Europeanization of her foreign policy. At first, Greece's adaptation to the new environment was not easy, especially due to the consequences of the break up of Yugoslavia and the revival of Balkan irredentism. However, after 1995, Greece became part of the solution in the Balkans and managed to move away from the status of a small dependent state to that of a contributing member of an interdependent society.

The end of the Cold War brought fears in Turkey that it would lose the strategic importance it once enjoyed during the Cold War. This is why the late president Ozal attempted to define a new role for his country. Turkey was promoted as America's faithful ally in an unstable region, as a model of economic and political development, and as an island of stability in a region of instability. Turkey presented itself as a model of an Islamic democratic republic to the other Islamic states in Central Asia, to the Middle East, to the United States, and to the EU. Turkey, however, failed to achieve the hegemonic role it aspired to in Central Asia. These former Soviet republics were neither interested in a change of hegemony, nor could expect much in terms of economic and technical development assistance from Turkey.

The Imia crisis has been discussed in the introduction of this essay and in two other essays in this volume. This crisis symbolized the risks of the escalating Greco-Turkish confrontation. In addition, it displayed the EU's inability to respond to such a regional crisis in the absence of a common foreign and defense policy. The twenty years of Greco-Turkish confrontation following the Turkish invasion of Cyprus came to a climax with the arrest of Kurdish PKK leader Ocalan who, in his last days of freedom, had been sheltered by some Greek officials. The changes in the government of Greece that followed that failed operation, along with the humanitarian response to the August 1999 earthquakes in Greece and Turkey, created new opportunities for Foreign Minister George Papandreou to re-orient

Greek policies toward Turkey. Greco-Turkish problems were moved to a European framework following Greece's decision at Helsinki (1999) to remove its objections to Turkey's candidacy for membership in the E.U. Since this courageous decision Greco-Turkish relations have entered a new era of detente. Officials from the two countries have attempted to address issues of low politics as trade, tourism, environment, illegal immigration, crime, et al. However, this "new climate" has not resolved any of the substantive problem areas in Greco-Turkish relations.

Greece's policy of conditional rewards has not met with any reciprocity on the part of Turkey nor has it brought about a change in Turkey's demands in Thrace, the Aegean, or in Cyprus. While this does not imply that we will see a return to policies that led to confrontation and to the isolation of Greece from its European allies, Greece is not likely to accept sacrifices of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, or to betray the rules governing the E.U. in order to appease Turkey and promote further Turkey's European vocation. Nor is Greece likely to sacrifice Cyprus in order to remove another irritant from Greco-Turkish relations, and the relations of Turkey to the E.U.

The challenge now rests with the leadership of Turkey. Will it take advantage of the opportunities offered by George Papandreou's policies and by the EU Helsinki (1999) decisions? My conclusion is not very optimistic as there is no indication that the Turkish military are ready to accept the required changes that will substantially reduce their role in the economy, the politics, and the foreign policy of their country.

This set of articles has touched only on some of the issues affecting Greco-Turkish relations. Despite the present state of detente in the international environment and in the bilateral relations of Greece and Turkey, the challenge remains of how to transform the Aegean from a sea of confrontation to a bridge of cooperation. That chapter has yet to be written.