

## INTERVIEW WITH GERASIMOS ARSENIS \*

### GREECE: DEFENSE AND FOREIGN POLICY

(Cyprus, Balkans, Europe)

This interview was conducted by Stephanos Constantinides\*\*

**Stephanos Constantinides:** - Minister Arsenis, first I would like to talk about Cyprus. We have just completed 20 years since the invasion and the occupation continues. I would like to ask, what is your political position regarding Cyprus.

**Gerassimos Arsenis:** At the present time there is very close political cooperation between the Government of Cyprus and the Government of Greece concerning this issue. We can say that the two centers of Hellenism, the one in the metropolis and the other in Cyprus, shape the strategy for Hellenism, in general, and of the Cyprus problem, in particular.

A characteristic point of this cooperation is that we moved beyond the sphere of diplomacy to the issues of defense. It is widely known that last December (1993) the Prime Minister of Greece (Mr. A. Papandreou) and the President of the Republic of Cyprus (Mr. G. Clerides) in a joint declaration, announced the coordination of the defense plans of the two countries. As part of the implementation of this plan, I visited Cyprus last March and I want to inform you that, this was the first visit of a Greek Minister of Defense to Cyprus since 1963-64. I had various discussions and contacts with members of the Government of Cyprus and with members of various political parties and, from this position, I can assure you that there was an agreement regarding the issue of the joint defense space and proceeding to specific programs. The visit of the Minister of Defense of Cyprus to Athens was the next step towards the implementation and coordination of the defense plans. To avoid any misunderstanding I want to clarify that the joint defense space is for security and deterrent purposes. The two centers of Hellenism recognize the common threat: Turkish expansionism. It is obvious why the two countries are obliged to coordinate their defense plans to form the military power which will discourage the enemy from any military intervention against our countries. Needless to say that Greece is one of the guarantor powers in accordance with the treaty of Zurich.

\* Minister of Defense of Greece

\*\* Director of the Centre for Hellenic Studies and Research (Canada) he teaches Political Science at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

S.C.- Do you mean that the joint defense plans are a result of Greece's role of guarantor power in accordance with the treaty of Zurich?

G.A.- This is only an additional reason besides the legal view on the issue. The reality is that you have two independent members of the UN facing a common threat, who have combined their defense plans.

S.C.- Is this defense policy legally justified by international law and practice?

G.A.- Exactly, exactly.

S.C.- At this point I want to ask your opinion concerning the allegations of the Turkish and Turkish-Cypriot press that the joint Greek-Cyprus defense plan is not a serious effort and that the Greek side stepped back leaving the plan only on paper. There are also allegations that there are strong pressures from the CSCE and NATO to cancel it. What are your comments to these rumors?

G.A.- No, there was no such reaction. On the contrary, there was the impression that this move should have been made a long time ago. There is a bitter experience of diplomatic failures which prove that no one is able to bargain if he has no bargaining power. If your country is "laisser passer", you cannot find justice even if you are right. A good and organized defense discourages the enemy. It creates the proper conditions to force the opponent into discussion and negotiations leading to a peaceful solution by the mere fact that you are well equipped and armed. A fact that cannot be ignored.

Our intention to proceed with a defense plan, which will arm Cyprus and will increase the government's bargaining power to pursue a peaceful diplomatic solution, annoys those who oppose such an outcome. Yes, there are many rumors because everyone knows that the possible solutions offered this time for the Cyprus problem are not feasible or fair for the Greeks and therefore, in my opinion, not viable.

S.C.- At this exact time, I would like to have more details. It is known that all the recent efforts of the UN Secretary General, Boutros-Ghali, to build a mutual understanding between the two sides have failed. What comes next? What will be the future Greek political line?

G.A.- Greece will support the policy of Cyprus. I do not know the future diplomatic solutions, but at this point I would risk predicting that the UN dialogue concerning Cyprus will continue under the auspices of the UN and that this is what the Greek side wishes.

Now is the exact time to initiate a dialogue including the issues of the illegal occupation of an independent country by an army of another country and the violation of the UN resolutions. We must insist that a viable solution should not ignore essential problems. The dialogue should not remain academic and should include all the above issues. In addition, we must convince all those who promote this dialogue to adopt these issues.

S.C.- Do you mean that you support the view that the subject of the discus-

sions should be considered on a different basis than the one being followed for the last twenty years and that this basis led us nowhere forcing Greece to successive withdrawals?

**G.A.-** Personally, I believe that Cyprus did not have a strong bargaining power during the years since 1974 and that was the reason for the continuous drifting away from the issue. This drifting should stop and reverse its direction. The dialogue should include essential issues or else it is not only meaningless but dangerous too.

**S.C.-** As far as I understand the essential issue for you is the presence of the Turkish occupation army in Cyprus.

**G.A.-** Exactly, it is the occupation. It is also necessary to institutionalize the essential issues, which should not remain just mere declarations but should be implemented on a day- to-day basis. The civil rights of the citizens of Cyprus should be respected. I would also like to emphasize another issue. This is the issue of the demographic changes in Cyprus with the establishment of colonizing Turkish settlers. This issue goes against the international UN spirit and is considered a barbaric action.

In other words, besides the constitutional arrangements, we should secure the unity of Cyprus, the democratic structure of the state and its independence without the Turkish occupation army and the Turkish settlers.

**S.C.-** Because of the bad memories and experiences of the past, there are people wondering how long the joint policy and defense plan will last?

**G.A.-** You see, there is a common threat, the danger is unique. It would be a tragic mistake for one to think that the crisis in the Aegean Sea or in the area of Evros should not trigger a crisis in Cyprus. Whatever happens in Greece has an impact on Cyprus and vice-versa. It would be naive for one to believe that a crisis in Cyprus will not have an impact in the Aegean Sea or Evros. I want to point out that the problem is unique and cannot be solved by applying different political methods or separate defense plans.

**S.C.-** Is the joint defense plan in the process of implementation ?

**G.A.-** Yes, it proceeds.... You mentioned certain political pressures, newspaper articles concerning this matter and certain rumors. There have been questions and articles, but Greece and Cyprus have explained to the international community that the wish of both nations is the implementation of this program which is within the framework of international law, the resolutions of the UN and the Treaty of Zurich.

**S.C.-** Regarding the Greek policy in the Balkans, there is criticism concerning the attitude of Greece towards the Serbs. Can you explain the Greek policy in the Balkans ?

**G.A.-** I think that the Greek policy in the Balkans has not been understood by the international community. It is lacking the proper information concerning

this region. The Greek policy in the Balkans can be summarized as follows:

First, the borders which resulted from the international treaties should be respected. It would be a tragic mistake to doubt the existence of these borders. Secondly, the Balkans should proceed to form a joint economic community because only the large economic communities can survive in these difficult days.

In North America, the United States, Canada and Mexico were forced by the circumstances to form a large economic unit (NAFTA). Based on that, it would be a fatal error for the Balkan states to split into small independent nations without any intention to have mutual cooperation. The result would be an unstable region. The Greek policy considers the economic alliance between the Balkan states.

Today, we are the second investor in Bulgaria and we proceed to Romania. We intend to use the same policy with Albania and the Republic of Skopje as soon as the normal diplomatic relations with these nations are reinstated. Thirdly, the Balkan states should respect the history of the neighboring nations. The deformation of the history of a nation is unacceptable and leads to instability in the region. The Greek political strategy promotes the peaceful cooperation among the Balkan neighbors with the main characteristic being economic and social cooperation.

A further step will be the cooperation on security issues. The security of the Balkans will be an affair for the peoples of the Balkans.

S.C.- What is your answer to some international political circles when they blame Greece for her attitude towards Skopje. Do you respond that the policy of Skopje opposes the realization of what you just mentioned ?

G.A.- On the contrary, we are the only nation in the Balkans whose interest is the viability of the Republic of Skopje for obvious reasons. What we propose in order to have economic cooperation with this country is that, it should respect our own history and abstain from all these actions which insult our history, such as the use of our national symbols or names and a false irredentism. We should make our position clear to them. If they comply we shall be the first to help that country by any means.

S.C.- Do you mean that the issue of the symbols and names is the beginning that leads to further territorial disputes with Greece ?

G.A.- This is not a matter of interpretation. It is a fact. If you thoroughly study the constitution of the republic of Skopje, you can see that it deals with territorial claims and is referred to the issue of a greater Macedonia.

S.C.- Minister, how can you explain the bad relations with Albania if you take into consideration that these relations were milder in the past ?

G.A.- To tell you the truth, the only reason I can see is bad diplomacy from the Albanian side. Let's face today's reality. Albania survives these days on the

smuggled income of the illegal Albanians trespassing in Greece. At this time there are 300,000 illegally working Albanians in Greece who support their economy and consequently their country on money earned in Greece. We did not take any strict measures against them as other countries did. Italy, for instance, threatened to throw the Albanians who illegally cross their borders into the sea. We are sensitive to their problems, taking into consideration the social aspect. The fact is that the economy of Albania is based on the income of the Albanians who work illegally in Greece and Mr. Berissa should not forget that. Another fact is the power of the Greek currency in Albania, especially in the south part of the country. We are prepared to invest capital in Albania and I think that the Albanians should not be afraid to start economic relations with Greece, but to accept these relations with a positive attitude. This is the only way to help Albania become a member of Western society. The reaction of the Government of Albania is a projection of the way Albanians have been brought up as a nation. It is a remnant of the Stalinist way of living and thinking in the past. Albania should open its borders and cooperate with us. This is in their interest.

S.C.- What is your answer to those who criticize Greece for her one-sided policy in the Balkans, which is the sole support of Serbia and the New Yugoslavia?

G.A.- This is not a matter of support because there is no military involvement. I believe that our initial position towards Yugoslavia is the position which has been vindicated afterwards. We, as a nation, have declared publicly that the partitioning of the Republic of Yugoslavia would have been a tragic error. Instead of encouraging the separation of Slovenia and Croatia and the recognition of the newly formed states, we should have considered a reformation of Yugoslavia to a certain kind of loose federation. Our position was not adopted at all at that time. Various European nations hastily supported the separation, following Germany, which played a leading role to that. Now we see the results of this policy.

We also believe that the solution of the Bosnia problem is not of a military nature. The solution should be political-diplomatic based on international laws. We have historical relations with the Serbs, but this fact does not prevent us from being strict with them whenever we are not in agreement with their actions and we consider the side of the Muslims. I would like to assure you that it is not the Greek position which is one-sided, because our policy is a result of many centuries of knowledge and experience of the problems in the Balkans. It is the position followed by the Western mass media which is one-sided and dangerous because of the lack of knowledge of the area and its problems. Military intervention does not provide a solution.

S.C.- You just mentioned that Western mass media is one-sided. Is this attitude a result of an organized hidden interest or it is the weakness of the other

side to present its positions ?

**G.A.-** I am not aware of the motivations leading to these extreme positions. I would like to point out that the mass media should give the opportunity to some other views to be heard. This has not been done so far.

**S.C.-** Let us talk now about the Greek European policy. There are rumors that Greece does not behave according to the European criteria. What is your explanation ?

**A.** Greece is a member of the European Union and participates in the development of the European reality. Greece has her views and I have reasons to believe that those views are constructive. There is lack of objectivity from the Western mass media whenever Greece's views are different from those of the other European nations. The Anglo-Saxon press strongly criticizes Greece for the lack of European spirit.

The European spirit is not a passive adaptation to what the Europeans believe but rather is an active participant and in dialogue with other European partners to create new views for the improvement of the European policy.

On the contrary, when the eleven partners reached the election of the president of the executive committee of EU in Corfu, Great Britain destroyed the agreement. I did not see any reaction from the European partners for that anti-EU action of Great Britain. This is a lack of objectivity on the part of the mass media. There is the general acceptance that the role of Greece within the EU is positive and that the Greek presidency that ended last summer was one of the best in the history of the EU.

**S.C.-** What are the Greek plans for a better Europe ?

**G.A.-** Greece is now culturally, economically and socially an integral part of the EU. Europe is for us the Europe of cooperation of sovereign nations. We wish to see the spirit of democracy dominate Europe.

Greece in cooperation with other progressive European nations tries to change the rigid framework of the Maastricht treaty. This treaty does not give any priority to quality of life and employment issues.

**S.C.-** Do you worry that the influence of Europe will be a threat to the cultural identity of Greece. How can Greek culture survive European integration ?

**G.A.-** On the contrary, we believe that the Greek presence within the European Union is a challenge for Greek culture. Greek culture fades out when it is isolated. The Greek spirit flourishes when it is at the crossroads of great changes and this is what a united Europe offers to us.

**S.C.-** Before we finish, I would like to ask you about the attitude of Greece towards the Greeks of abroad, the Greeks of the diaspora.

**G.A.-** The importance of Greeks of the diaspora has been correctly conceived. I believe that there is a mutual concern and understanding. We do not lack ideas

or lack national strategy of how to tackle this issue. We seem to have some difficulties in the process of implementation. I strongly believe that we shall have results of our strategy to this national issue with the “Panhellenic Parliament of the Greeks abroad”. In this way we shall have more systematic contacts between the metropolis and all the Greeks of abroad. These contacts will not only be limited to the state-government level but will encompass opportunities of cooperation among Research Centers and Cultural Institutions of Greece with their equivalent Institutions abroad.

There are for instance so many such Institutions in Canada and elsewhere.

(Translated from greek by Kostas Pappas)

## **DOCUMENT**

### **UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION (353) OF 20 July 1974**

**Following is the text of resolution 353 adopted by the UN Security Council at its 1779th meeting on 20 July 1974:**

**The Security Council,**

**Having** considered the report of the Secretary-General at its 1779th meeting about the recent developments in Cyprus,

**Having heard** the statements made by the President of the Republic of Cyprus and the statements by the representatives of Cyprus, Turkey, Greece and other member-countries,

**Having considered** at its present meeting further developments in the island,

**Deeply deploring** the outbreak of conflict and continuing bloodshed,

**Gravely concerned** about the situation which led to a serious threat to international peace and security and which created a most explosive situation in the whole Eastern Mediterranean area,

**Equally concerned** about the necessity to restore the constitutional structure of the Republic of Cyprus established and guaranteed by international agreements,

**Recalling** Security Council resolution 186 (1964) of 4 March 1964, and subsequent resolutions of the security Council on this matter,

**Conscious** of its primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security in accordance with article 24 of the Charter of the United Nation,

**1. Calls upon** states to respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Cyprus;

**2. Calls upon** all parties to the present fighting as a first step to cease all firing and requests all states to exercise the utmost restraint and to refrain from any action which might further aggravate the situation;

**3. Demands** an immediate end to foreign military intervention in the Republic of Cyprus that is in contravention of operative paragraph 1;

**4. Requests** the withdrawal without delay from the Republic of Cyprus of foreign military personnel present otherwise than under the authority of international agreements including those whose withdrawal was requested by the President of the Republic of Cyprus, Archbishop Makarios, in his letter of 2 July 1974.

**5. Calls upon** Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to enter into negotiations without delay for the restoration of peace in the area and constitutional government in Cyprus and to keep the Secretary-General informed;

**6. Calls upon** all parties to cooperate fully with UNFICYP to enable it to carry out its mandate;

**7. Decides** to keep the situation under constant review and asks the Secretary-General to report as appropriate with a view to adopting further measures in order to ensure that peaceful conditions are restored as soon as possible.