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Cyprus crisis

Small crises are very much in fashion these days. Lately, the whole world has had to take time off to worry about such minuscule places as El Salvador, Nicaragua or Lebanon. In terms of longevity, however, the title for tiny tempest spot is still held by the island of Cyprus.

Strategically located at the end of the eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus is less than 100 miles off the coast of Turkey and within a few hundred miles of Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt. As a result, Cyprus has been occupied by almost every power in the history of that troubled region.

These historical convolutions have left Cyprus with a mixed population of 500,000 Greeks and 150,000 Turks. Mutual animosity between Greeks and Turks is something of a national religion for these two groups, surpassing even their passion for soccer. Put a Greek majority and a Turkish minority together in one sun-drenched island; make it an independent state run by a Greek government and, viola!, you have trouble aplenty.

Until 1974 the two communities squabbled and clashed. Both sides committed outrages and atrocities against the other. The Greeks, superior in number and aided by mainland Greece, were getting the better of this communal mayhem.

A series of particularly brutal Greek outrages proved the last straw for the beleaguered Turks. The Turkish Cypriot leader, Rauf Denktash, called on mother Turkey for salvation. Responding with alacrity, the Turks launched operation "Atilla," a singularly bad choice of names in terms of international public relations. Thirty thousand tough Turkish troops invaded northern Cyprus and have remained there to this day.

The Turkish invasion finally brought peace to the warring island by effectively partitioning it into two zones. But, in the process, the Turks seized almost 38% of the island's territory, including its money-earning tourist resorts and the port of Famagusta. Thousands of Greeks who had lived in the new Turkish zones fled as refugees to the Greek area.

Greece would probably have gone to war over the Turkish invasion had not Cyprus been too distant for effective military action. The Greeks and Hellenic Cypriots were left to fume and lick their wounds. No amount of UN and Western mediation succeeded in resolving this intractable issue.

Though the Greeks would never admit the fact, the *de facto* partition of Cyprus was probably the only way to resolve the island's murderous ethnic disputes. The island Greeks had brought down the Turkish invasion on their heads by butchering so many Turks; but then the Turks grabbed more than their fair share of the island, damaging its economy in the process.

Formalizing this partition, Turkish Cypriots proclaimed an independent Turkish Republic of Cyprus last November. Only Turkey recognized the new regime; the UN called for a return to the status quo ante-bellum and the rest of the world condemned or ignored the lonely republic. Greek Cypriots and the socialist government in Athens became even more incensed.

U.S. pressuring Turks

The situation is now growing more tense. Greece's leader, Andreas Papandreu, is soon to dispatch an entire Greek army division to Cyprus; some lead elements may already have arrived. Athens claims the division is intended to protect Greek Cypriots. Yet the absence of any current fighting on Cyprus suggests that these Greek troops may be intended to throw the Turkish army off the island rather than just keep the peace.

How will Turkey react? The Turks are under strong American pressure to withdraw from the island — or at least to keep the peace. The influential Greek-American lobby in the U.S. Congress has threatened to cut off vital aid to Turkey if fighting erupts.

If the Greeks attack, however, Turkey will most likely respond in kind, giving the Greek expeditionary force a sound beating. Such an event could easily trigger off a general war between Greece and Turkey on their Thracian border and in the Aegean, a major catastrophe for the NATO alliance and a godsend for the Soviets.

Though the communal squabbles of the Cypriots are of little importance to anyone outside of the island, Cyprus itself is of great value to the West. The British air base at Akrotiri is NATO's principal Middle Eastern base and the key electronic monitoring post for the region. Cyprus is like an unsinkable aircraft carrier that dominates the eastern Mediterranean.

The Americans and Western Europeans have been trying mightily to prevent a clash between their Greek and Turkish allies. But the present Greek socialist government, having veered sharply to the left, appears intent on stirring up trouble with Turkey to divert attention from its growing economic problems. Some observers even believe that Papandreu may be looking for an excuse to withdraw from NATO.

In the past, the U.S. usually managed to keep the Greeks and Turks from fighting. A recent series of nasty disputes between Athens and Washington may threaten to cause the U.S. to lose patience with the bellicose Greeks and cease playing the role of peacemaker. This month, for example, the U.S. refused Greek requests for surplus F-5 fighters, transferring them, instead — as a pointed insult — to Turkey.

The reasonable solution to the Cyprus mess would be a fairer partition of the island into two republics and the withdrawal of all foreign troops. But the Greeks and Turks, unable to suppress their historical emotional hostility, just cannot seem to stop aggravating this petty problem. If they are not careful, this little Mediterranean Belfast could turn into a red-hot war.

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