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Hotheads in the Aegean

The Greeks and Turks, those proverbial cats and dogs, are at it again. This time, the old foes' spat is over territorial rights in the "wine dark waters" of the eastern Aegean.

War nearly broke out last week and could erupt anytime.

What caused the latest round of sabre and scimitar rattling was plans by the Turkish state oil company to begin drilling in offshore waters that Greece claims as its exclusive preserve. Much of the problem centres around the many large and small Greek islands that lie off the Turkish coast. In some cases, the islands are within sight of Turkey; others are no more than a few miles away.

Greece claims a 12-mile economic zone around the islands; the Turks claim that their economic zone extends equally far from their coast. The claims of both sides thus overlap. Now that large oil deposits have been found on the coastal shelf, such conflicting claims have fired passions in Greece and Turkey, both of which spend much of their scarce foreign exchange on imported oil.

As usual, it is the left-wing Greek government of Andreas Papandreou that has been most loudly beating the war drums. Hellenic hotheads say they are going to "teach the Turks a lesson." Athens has threatened war if the Turks start drilling in waters Greece claims. This squabble ought to be settled by negotiation and arbitration. But not with the Greeks and Turks, whose favorite pastime seems to be irritating the other.

Add to this dispute the long-simmering stew over military activities on the strategic islands of Tenedos, Lemnos and Samothrace and all the elements for a nasty war in the Aegean are present. Both sides remain on high military alert. One accidental fender-bender could turn into a shooting war.

If war came, the results could well be a big black eye for the Greeks. The Greek navy is better than the Turkish fleet and would probably quickly

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dominate the Aegean. But it would soon come under sustained air attack from the Turkish air force and suffer serious losses.

Greece's air force lacks sufficient range to cover all of the islands. Some, like Lesbos, Chios or Samos, could well fall to amphibious assault by Turkey's powerful 4th Army based along the Aegean coast. Other smaller islands could also be quickly taken. The Greeks probably could hold the key islands of Lemnos and Samothrace, unless the Turks decided to make a major and costly effort to invade them.

Some wildmen in Athens no doubt dream about a powerful Greek thrust into Turkish Thrace and then a drive on to Istanbul. The vision of a "liberated" Constantinople shimmers before their ouzo-fuddled eyes.

Some must also think of dispatching a fleet and army to Cyprus, there to drive out the Turkish garrison of two divisions. Greeks are gallant fighters, but such chimera are ludicrously beyond Greece's modest military capabilities.

In a war, besides having to defend the vulnerable Aegean islands, the Greeks might even be faced by a Turkish thrust out of Thrace and into northern Greece. The Turkish army is tough, mean and spoiling for a fight; it also outnumbers the Greeks 3:1. One suspects that the modern-day janissaries might well get to Athens before the sons of Leonidas reach Istanbul.

Remember also that Balkan nations have a shark-like tendency to attack neighbors who get into trouble. There are lots of old but lively grudges in the deepest Balkans. If the Greeks got into a war with the Turks, who knows but the Albanians might attack them in the rear. Or maybe the Bulgarians.

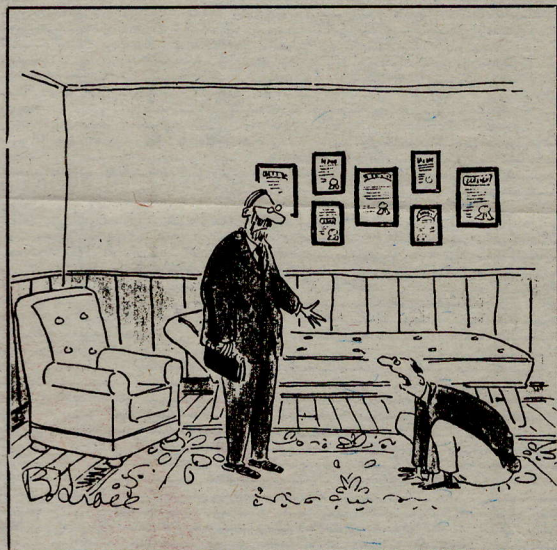
War for either side would be sheer madness. Casualties would be heavy and the economic cost to the two nations, both of which are on the financial skids, would be disastrous. Replacing lost aircraft and warships would keep Athens and Ankara bankrupt for a decade.

Equally bad, if the Greeks get a sound thrashing from the Turks, they are likely to then turn to the Soviets, who have been patiently waiting for just such a fracas in the Aegean.

Friends of Greece and Turkey, including Canada, should rebuke them sharply and talk some sense into their heads. We cannot afford to see the eastern arm of NATO wrecked because Andreas Papandreou needs an issue to boost the popularity of his discredited PASOK party. Beating the war drums about the Turkish threat shows that Greece's politicians need to do some growing up.

The Turks, for their part, must exercise patience and tact. Asking the hotheaded Greeks and Turks to be moderate, however, is like asking the Swiss to be lively, or Parisians polite.

Punch



"Sorry, I'm not allowed on the furniture."