

The Parthenon revisited?

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Every art student knows that the Parthenon, Greece's foremost architectural treasure, was shelled and seriously damaged by the nasty Turks during the course of an obscure war in the 17th century. But few people know that most of the damage was caused by exploding ammunition which the Greeks and their Venetian allies had been storing in the Parthenon. This little historical vignette says a great deal about the state of Greek-Turkish relations and the sensitivities of the two traditional enemies.

Today, Greece and Turkey, two nations that comprise NATO's southern defence tier, are engaged in a state of growing acrimony that could lead to clashes over control of the Aegean Sea. The latest manifestation of bad blood between these neighbors comes over the question of who controls the airspace over the many Greek Aegean islands, some of which lie in sight of the Turkish mainland.

Until 1974, Greece and Turkey shared control of Aegean airspace under NATO command. But after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, the Greeks, unable to force the Turks off that island, vented their anger by renouncing this arrangement and partially withdrawing from NATO. Greece then claimed all the airspace over the Aegean right up to the Turkish mainland, a situation analogous to France's claiming control of the Atlantic from Le Havre all the way to the Canadian coast off the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon.

These Greek actions were also prompted by the discovery of offshore oil deposits in the Aegean, a resource desperately needed by both Greece and Turkey, whose economies are staggering under the cost of imported petroleum. When the new socialist government of Andreas Papandreou took power in Athens, relations between the two countries rapidly deteriorated.

So long as Greece was ruled by its military junta, relations with the Turks were calm and productive; but the new left-wing civilian regime embarked at once on stirring up the widespread hatred among Greeks for the Turks. Rousing anti-Turkish feeling proved for the socialists a useful and welcome distraction from Greece's growing economic problems, many of which were caused by collectivist policies of the left-wing government.

The Papandreou government also threatened to throw the Americans out of their key air and naval bases in Greece and Crete, in part as a ploy to soak

Washington for more money but also, many NATO members fear, as an expression of Athens' growing leftward trend. Harassing the Americans and beating the war drums against the Turks has succeeded in diverting Greek public opinion away from the faltering economy.

During the past few months, the Greeks have taken to intercepting American and Turkish military aircraft over the Aegean, a rather curious activity for even a partial member of NATO. Both Washington and Ankara have played down these unfriendly acts and have gone out of their way to avoid any provocation of volatile Greek public opinion. But Greece's increasing vociferous claims to the entire Aegean Sea and her growing troop concentrations on the Turkish border in Thrace have alarmed her neighbors and raised the possibility of a military clash.

Today, the major portion of Greece's NATO-supplied arms, designed to deter an attack by Bulgaria and Russia, are positioned against the Turks. The Greeks are rapidly expanding their naval forces with the clear aim of dominating the Aegean and blockading the smaller Turkish navy in its home ports. There is even talk in Greece of "teaching the Turks a lesson."

The United States and the other members of NATO are extremely worried about the growing possibility of a Greek-Turkish clash, an event that would certainly cause the collapse of NATO's eastern wing and that could plunge the Balkans into a crisis from which only the Russians would benefit.

The Turks, under the rule of their very strict military regime, have, so far, shown exemplary patience, refusing to be provoked by their irritating neighbor.

But the Turks, a people who are noted more for their martial prowess than their gentleness, are beginning to react to Greek provocations. In the event of a military clash, Greece's 163,000-man army might well be taught an unwelcome lesson by Turkey's 470,000 superb soldiers.

The Greeks, imbued with a spurious mythology of their military prowess during last century's wars, might find themselves sharing the truly unhappy experience of the Chinese who fought the Turks in Korea. The ferocious Turks, festooned with necklaces of Chinese ears, routed Peking's best troops and caused the entire Chinese army to fear for their various appendages.

Hopefully, the members of NATO, including Canada, will convince the Greek socialists to defuse this dangerous situation. But if Athens does not heed such sensible advice, the possibility could arise that the Greeks may once again see their Parthenon surrounded by Turkish troops.

(Eric Margolis, a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, writes frequently on international affairs)



"—and how much did they charge you for that stupid T-shirt?"

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