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In My View

Sadi Cayci

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IN MY VIEW . . .

“Aegean Angst: The Greek-Turkish Dispute”

Sir:

I have read very carefully your article on the Greek-Turkish dispute (by Lt. Col. Michael N. Schmitt, USAF, *Naval War College Review*, Summer 1996), and I would like to thank you for your kind approach to this issue. I must state that it is one of the most objective, realistic and detailed articles I have ever read that was written by a foreigner. I must congratulate Lt. Col. Schmitt. As a graduate (1988) of the Judge Advocate General’s School, U.S. Army, I am well aware of the publishing policy that an article published in military journals reflects the views of the author only.

Nonetheless, I believe there are a number of points that should be taken into consideration when reading this article. For instance, on page 42 reference is made to Turkey as the “only” Nato country which did not sign the 1982 UNCLOS agreement; this puts Turkey in a negative light and is not just. Turkey’s stand stems from her unique geographic location and from the historical background of her relationship with Greece, neither of which applies to other Nato allies. Similarly, the reference made to a “declaration” by the Turkish Grand National Assembly as a “decree” granting authority to the Turkish Government to treat any Greek attempt to broaden its territorial waters in the Aegean Sea as a *casus belli* is legally incorrect. It was only a “political statement” aimed at sending a clear message to the Greek authorities. Under the Turkish Constitution (Article 92, “Rules of Procedure of the Turkish Grand National Assembly”) and the Act on Mobilization and State of War, to grant such authority to the Government the Parliament must pass a formal *decree*, which was not the case here.

The article suggests (page 43) that the sovereignty and security of the eastern Aegean islands are a top priority for Greece while for Turkey it is only one element affecting Turkey's security. On the contrary, and as affirmed on page 46, the situation and demilitarized status of these islands are Number One concerns for the defence of the Turkish mainland. This can also be discerned by a careful study of recent political history and from the contents of the respective transfer agreements. The past negative, aggressive Greek behaviour in this connection is clear evidence of the correctness of the approach taken by the legal instruments.

It is not correct to present agreements concluded by Turkey and certain Balkan countries on cooperation in the field of military training as agreements on "defense cooperation" or as efforts to create a "defence belt" against Greece. Neither is it fair to continue to refer to Istanbul as "Constantinople," or, with implied sorrow and misdirected admiration, to say that the city had fallen into the hands of the Turks and that only after four hundred years had it been possible to establish an independent Greece in the ashes of the Byzantine Empire. It is a pity that the author forgot that the Byzantine Empire was the continuation of the Eastern Roman Empire, which had nothing to do with the Greeks, and that he gave the impression that Istanbul and her environs originally belonged to the Greeks. The same can be said for referring to Izmir as "Smyrna" (page 45), and calling the Turkish Straits "the Bosphorus" and "the Dardanelles" is yet another sign of the author's somewhat pro-Greek approach to the subject. The author should have emphasized more the fact that the recent political history of the region is in fact a story of Greek expansion at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, with the support and toleration of the Western powers of the time. That pattern, against the Republic of Turkey, still exists, and it is the root cause of the present Turkish-Greek disputes. This fact also reflects the political, rather than legal, nature of the disputes and demonstrates the correctness of Turkish insistence on settling the disputes through diplomatic, not judicial, means.

Because Anatolia, after World War I, had only been invaded and occupied at the time by the Greeks, not annexed, it is not correct from either a legal or historical perspective to state that Anatolia, the Turkish motherland, was "granted" to the Turks by the Lausanne Peace Treaty in 1923 (page 45). The Treaty only legally confirmed the success of the Turkish Liberation War and Turkish independence. The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, not having been ratified or put into effect by normal diplomatic procedures, became null and void not only *de facto* but *de jure*. Similarly, the eastern Aegean islands had not been "seized" by the Greeks (page 46), but only transferred to them, by a concerted effort and with the support of the Western powers. This is a major reason for Turkey's unwillingness to refer any case to an international body whose decision may have an adverse effect on her supreme national interests.

In more recent years, Turkey, like any other member, joined Nato within the framework of collective self-defence—primarily to ensure her territorial integrity. It is almost certain that any threat to Turkish territorial integrity would come from neighbouring countries, especially to the north, south, or east. Thus it is impossible to understand the logic of calling Nato activity in these areas an “out of area operation.” If the author refers only to ad hoc peace-support operations (peacekeeping or enforcement), the point should be made clear.

Concerning Cyprus, the island was not sold to the British (page 47). Only the administration of the island was transferred to the British, for certain financial consideration, and in exchange for support against an imminent Russian threat against Ottoman territory. Title and sovereignty still rested with the Ottoman state. The British, however, though the agreement expired under which they were to “administer” Cyprus, never returned the island to Ottoman rule and later declared its annexation. As for the crisis itself, the article also refers (page 47) to a 1964 letter to Turkey by President Johnson; the author would have done well to discuss its legal validity. Under the UN Charter, “collective self-defence” is an inherent right; therefore, under international law and in compliance with special agreements giving Turkey the right to intervene against any aggression aimed at the Republic of Cyprus, any use of force by Turkey at the time would be legally correct. From the Turkish perspective, this development and the 1974 Greek-organized coup reflected a pro-Greek approach by the international community. A Turk might wonder: What would the reaction of the U.S. or its other allies have been had the case been reversed? That is, what if Turkey had unilaterally acted against the Greek Cypriots in the Republic of Cyprus?

Two final points concern the political implications of geography. First, Turkey does not share the view (see page 60) that the Flight Information Region (FIR) line determined by ICAO in 1952 matched the separation line between Turkish and Greek territorial waters. Finally, the statement on page 44, meant to lessen the importance of the very recent Kardak (Ikizce) Islet crisis, that the feature in question was a “tiny, uninhabited islet,” may be misleading. It must be realized that due to the vital symbolic importance of the subject, the twin islets involved represent sovereignty issues; even a tiny, uninhabited islet may be the focal point of a major international confrontation.

Notwithstanding these objections and points of information, I wish to convey my best regards and congratulations to Lt. Col. Schmitt for the effort he has made in writing so objective and realistic an article on one of the most complicated issues in the world.

Dr. Sadi Çaycı
Colonel, Military Judge
Assistant Legal Adviser
Turkish General Staff