

TURKEY ESCALATES IN AEGEAN, SEEKS CONFLICT TO VALIDATE CLAIMS

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Thirteen years ago this month, during a freezing, stormy night at the end of January 1996, Turkey sent its commandos to occupy one of the Imia rocks near the Greek Dodecanese island of Kalymnos.

Imia, a pair of uninhabited rocky outcrops like so many other similar ones in the Aegean clustering around larger Greek islands, had been chosen by the Turkish military establishment as the testing ground of Greek reactions in Ankara's Aegean play of threats of the use of force, ongoing and unbroken since the invasion of Cyprus in 1974.

The Imia crisis had been carefully choreographed; the commando landings came last in a string of actions that included the refusal of a stranded Turkish merchant captain to accept Greek SAR assistance, thus demonstrating the Turkish non-recognition of Greek SAR jurisdiction nearer the Asia Minor coast, and the arrival of Turkish heliborne "reporters" on Imia to hoist a Turkish flag, which was pulled down by the Greek military.

The Imia crisis was "resolved" through US intervention as Greece and Turkey teetered on the brink of war; the solution resulted in the infamous formula of "no ships, no flags, no troops" as a precondition for the withdrawal of the Turkish commandos. The Turkish blackmail worked out perfectly. As we speak, Imia, a tiny corner of Greek *sovereign* space, has been transformed into a disputed "grey zone;" access to the rocks is denied to Greek citizens, who are prevented from approaching *by their own Coast Guard* for fear that another "hot incident" with Turkey may be triggered. Turkey routinely sends its patrol craft to harass Greek fishermen in the area and issues stern warnings to Greece over violating Turkish "territorial waters" surrounding what Ankara has named the "Kardak" rocks.

Lately, Turkey has embarked on a pattern similar to Imia's, this time though focusing on two *inhabited* small islands of the Dodecanese, Pharmakonisi (37°17 16"N 27°05 07"E) and Agathonisi (37°27 49"N 26°58 09'' E).

In the days just before Christmas 2008, Turkish fighters begun low-altitude overflights of both Pharmakonisi and Agathonisi in blatant breach of international aviation conventions, not to mention breach of Greek sovereignty. But the Turks did not confine themselves to that.

In a clear demonstration of intent to escalate the challenge, Turkish air defense controllers begun warning Greek military helicopter pilots approaching the two islands that they - the Greek pilots - were "violating" Turkish airspace (!) and would be intercepted unless they turned back and left the area. On December 31, the same warning was given to a Greek army helicopter bringing in Armed Forces chief, General Grapsas, and Army chief, General Voulgaris, for a visit with the military special forces detachment stationed on Pharmakonisi.

On January 6, Epiphany Day, Greek president Karolos Papoulias arrived in Agathonisi to celebrate Mass with the local population and publicly blast the Turkish army's involvement in politics as the primary source of trouble in bilateral relations and the Aegean.

Within hours of the president's departure, Turkey was busy again in a macho response to Papoulias's words (and presence on Agathonisi) harassing a Greek SAR helicopter that had been sent to the area around the two islands following an apparently bogus call to help supposedly drowning illegal immigrants. With Turkish jets executing dangerous maneuvers right across the path of the helicopter, the pilot quickly landed to avoid a major accident. At sea, a Turkish Coast Guard vessel circled a Hellenic Navy gunboat also sent to the vicinity to assist the non-existent illegal immigrants. A Turkish protest was lodged because, the note said, the Greek Coast Guard cutter that had brought President Papoulias to Agathonisi had violated Turkish territorial waters. Turkish fighters continued their overflights.

What is the purpose of all this?

Ever since the invasion of Cyprus, which went unanswered by the crumbling military regime in Athens and was nonchalantly watched by the "great powers," Turkey has engaged in a deliberate, methodical, highly focused effort to redraw the Aegean map, and force Greece into a "co-sharing" scheme that would bring at least half of the Archipelago under Turkish control and dominate, if not absorb, the Greek islands nearer the Asia Minor coast. In short, Turkey is attempting to neutralize international treaties in force through open threats of war and blackmail a neighboring NATO "ally" into accepting the Finlandization or surrender of much of its island territory through a "negotiated" settlement. *The Agathonisi-Pharmakonisi operation is the latest phase of this persistent process that has been evolving for over three decades of "good neighborly relations."*

Why now?

Turkey is not blind. Growing political instability, economic woes, and the December Riots, when the Greek government retreated in the face of street violence and allowed a large part of the Greek capital and other cities to suffer wartime-like damage, have been noticed by the Turkish military, which exclusively controls Turkish relations with Greece and Cyprus. The Turkish timing was based on the growing fragility of the Karamanlis administration; and the Turks never overlook the reluctance with which the post-junta Greek political class approaches national security and defense under the impression that "belonging to Europe" automatically reduces external threats to inconsequential levels. Furthermore, who from among the "international community" would really care about two specks on the map when the Middle East is again going up in flames?

This latest onslaught shows that Turkey is not even remotely interested in playing along with the illusions of Greek politicians *across party divides*.

Turkey won't be "tamed" by the prospect of EU membership -- as a whole contingent of "pragmatists" in Greece have been arguing for years by regurgitating various versions of their own wishful, and patently mistaken, thinking.

Turkey won't retreat under a Greek peace offensive -- as the socialist PASOK leader Mr. George Papandreou, who's lately blasting Turkish violations from opposition benches, promised while he was foreign minister.

Turkey won't stop flying armed fighters into Greek air space because dilettante Greek "experts" go through repeated rounds of conferencing and "analysis" of

"mutual confidence building measures" and "rapprochement" theories.

Turkey won't abide by international treaties because Greek foreign ministers wear an ear-to-ear smile and are dapper in their diplomatic meetings.

And Turkey won't abandon its plans in the Aegean because Greece will lodge yet another round of diplomatic protest notes with a noncommittal NATO and a reluctant European Union, divided unto itself and cross-eyed in every direction, including Turkey's.

Agathonisis and Pharmakonisi simply re-confirm that Turkey's strategy in the Aegean is one of raw power and naked threats of force, undiminished and unchanged over the years, against a country that has accepted, as part of the natural order of (diplomatic) things, stepping back every time it is challenged.

Those in Greece who still advocate unilateral "friendship" with Ankara as a means of longer term good relations miss the key point: no state in history stopped an aggressive adversary bent on expansion by slapping him in the face with a bunch of roses.

You cannot be friends with those who won't be friendly and you **always** pay the price of your own gullibility.