

**DOCUMENTI  
IAI**

**IN SEARCH OF STABILITY AND COOPERATION  
IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE:  
A TURKISH PERSPECTIVE**

*by Mustafa Kibaroglu*

Paper presented at the conference on "Regional Cooperation and Reconstruction in South-East Europe"  
*Rome, 29-30 October 1999*

IAI9929

**ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI**

# IN SEARCH OF STABILITY AND COOPERATION IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE: A TURKISH PERSPECTIVE

by Mustafa Kibarođlu

Turkey pays utmost attention to achieving a lasting peace and stability all over the South-Eastern Europe with the belief that another spark in the future can set the whole region to fire. With a view to achieving this goal, Turkey puts forward a series of concrete proposals that calls the countries in the region into cooperation. Some of these proposals are set at bilateral level with Turkey's immediate neighbors, while some others require multilateral action of the countries in the region. Before elaborating further on these bilateral and multilateral schemes, I would like to discuss the security challenges in the South-East Europe as perceived by the Turkish security elite.

The most serious security challenge in the South-Eastern Europe from the perspective of Turkish security elite is the return of Russia, in one way or another, to its former sphere of influence. As Turkey was a frontline NATO country during the Cold War period, it had to sacrifice a lot, in many respects, in order to stand firm against a potential Soviet invasion. With the abolishing of the Warsaw Treaty Organization and the demise of the Soviet Union, the minimum time required to launch a surprise attack to Turkey from the Warsaw Pact countries has increased considerably. This meant a very significant relaxation for the Turkish military who could then focus on other immediate security challenges that emerged in the Middle East.

Hence, the ongoing process of consolidation of democratic transformations as well as transition to liberal market economies in its neighbors which were formerly members of the Warsaw Pact is considered by Turkey to be a guarantee of the irreversibility of the structural changes that have taken place in the Eurasian landscape at large. Withstanding these positive developments, Turkey desires the process of transformation to be coupled with the inclusion of the former Warsaw Pact countries in its immediate neighborhood such as Bulgaria and Romania into the Atlantic Alliance as fullfledge members at the earliest date possible. In this manner, it is believed that the remaining geographical passage for a potential Russian intervention in the former Yugoslav territory in the future will be blocked by the NATO member states.

As the pace of the developments during the Kosovo crisis has revealed, Russia does not want to loose its influence in the Balkans. Although Russia could not prevent NATO countries from taking military coercive action against its staunch ally Serbia, it nevertheless threatened NATO with redeploying nuclear missiles to Belarus. Other concomitant declarations by the Russian authorities thus confirmed the fears of the Turkish security elite that, unless cooperative schemes among the countries in the Eurasian landscape are initiated and then strengthen, serious conflicts and hot confrontations may be inevitable in not too distant future. Accordingly, Turkey has devised a policy to initiate or to participate in bilateral and multilateral cooperation schemes with particular emphasis assigned to the military-strategic issues.

As an exemplary case, I may mention the cooperation between Bulgaria and Turkey in almost all areas possible, with a special reference to far-reaching steps taken in the military sphere. Turkish-Bulgarian relations were marred, towards the end of the 1980s, because of the mistreatment of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria by the communist administration. Both sides have then suffered the unhappy consequences, economically and politically, of the significant influx of Turks fleeing Bulgaria and coming to Turkey. With the dramatic changes that took place in the former communist regimes, Turkish and Bulgarian authorities have then exploited every opportunities in order to improve bilateral relations. Beyond a drastic increase in political, economic and cultural exchanges at all levels, significant improvements have been achieved in the military issues as well. For instance, following a series of high level talks, the Turkish and the Bulgarian General Staff have agreed to relax the security measures towards each other by way of withdrawing troops for some 50 kilometers from the border as well as keeping the common borders and adjacent areas free of anti-personal mines. By the way, I would like to add that Turkey intends to conclude a similar agreement with its north-eastern neighbor Georgia.

Turkey has also undertaken an active role in initiating and/or supporting a number of multilateral cooperation schemes including the South-East European countries. The one that deserves a special mention is the creation of the South-Eastern Europe Multinational Peace Force. Although the structure and the composition of the Multinational Peace Force is not yet crystal clear to the outsiders, the objective envisaged by the military authorities is said to establish an effective peace-keeping capability in the volatile South-East Europe where small-scale atrocities which have the potential to escalate to large-scale confrontation can be subdued at their initial stages when they can be controlled.

Similarly, Turkey has played a leading role in the creation of a Black Sea Force with the contribution of the naval forces of the six countries littoral to the Black Sea, namely Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia and Turkey. The aim is said to increase cooperation among the Black Sea fleets of the littoral countries by carrying out search and rescue exercises regularly, and then expand into other areas of cooperation. In this manner, Turkey hopes to increase the level of mutual understanding and build confidence among its neighbors in the Black Sea region which comprises a highly strategic landscape extending from the Balkans to Caucasia.

Needless to say, peace and stability in the South-East Europe heavily depends on good neighborly relations between Greece and Turkey. Nevertheless, the history of Greek-Turkish relations is very much colored with animosity, conflict and war whose net result is today's lack of confidence on both sides. Therefore, building confidence between the two countries should be assigned the highest priority not only by Greek and Turkish authorities, but also by all relevant bodies and organizations in the South-East Europe and in the West. In this regard, initiatives taken by a number of NGOs and the representatives of the media of both countries, as well as the recent rapprochement between the Greek and the Turkish officials especially at the Foreign Ministerial level seem to be highly promising, for the time being.

While I do certainly praise such initiatives that should be taken in every domain possible and at all levels, I'm, however, rather sceptical about the net result, so long as achieving substantial improvement in the Greek-Turkish relations are made dependent, by the Greek

authorities, upon the condition of reaching a “solution” to the Cyprus problem. Cyprus is just one of the issues of contention between Turkey and Greece and probably the most difficult one to solve due to a variety of reasons. Of these, however, the military-strategic significance of Cyprus for Turkey makes the problem all the more difficult to solve. Let me tell you why.

Because of the existence of a significant number of military aircraft on several Greek islands on the Aegean Sea just a few miles off the Turkish coast, the Turkish security elite fears the potential gained by the Greek air force to stage a surprise attack on Turkey, should the Greek politicians decide to do so. Turkish military aircraft would be unable to respond to a surprise attack in an adequate time frame. For Turks, such an attack would cause unacceptable damage to Turkish military bases, industrial complexes and a wide range of military and civilian installations in western Turkey.

Whereas Greece has the strategic advantage of staging a surprise attack on the Turkish mainland, Turkey does not have the same advantage (i.e., staging a surprise attack on the Greek mainland) because of the strategic depth of Greece. Moreover, Turks cannot cause substantial damage to Greece with a surprise attack on the Aegean islands only. Besides, such an operation would not be feasible as the political costs involved would far outweigh the military benefits.

The Turkish security elite also takes into consideration the very high likelihood of third party intervention, especially by the United States, and thus not being able to retaliate in kind, should Greece resorts to a surprise attack. Consequently, they argue that the assured US intervention in a Greek-Turkish dispute which may result in preventing the Turkish military units from retaliating in kind will provide the Greek decision-makers with a strong incentive to consider resorting to a surprise attack as a viable option. Hence, due to its geostrategic advantage, Greece may be better-off by striking first given the high probability that Turkey will not be able to respond with a second strike onto Greece. Sensible or not, this is a “*low risk high consequence*” scenario for most Turkish security elite.

One may ask at this point why Greek politicians do not resort to their strategic advantage and cause enormous damage to their historic rival if they know that Turkey would not be able to retaliate in kind? The answer is that Turkey indeed has a comparable strategic advantage over Greece that is capable of off-setting the Greek strategic advantage. Turkey has the advantage of having deployed sufficient number of troops in the Turkish sectors of Cyprus which are capable of retaliating to a Greek surprise attack on Turkey by way of making a military operation on the island. Although the political, economic and military costs associated with keeping this strategic advantage is extremely high for Turkey, it is nonetheless believed to be highly effective in prohibiting Greece from making miscalculation.

Hence, should Greek politicians decide to take advantage of the geographical proximity of their military bases in the Aegean to strategic installations in western Turkey by resorting to a surprise attack, Turkey would retaliate by invading the Greek sectors of Cyprus. In this manner, Greece’s expected gains from striking first, would be off-set by severe losses that would be incurred in Cyprus by Turkey’s second-strike capability, if

need be. Thus, Turkey's military supremacy in the Mediterranean and its ability to control Cyprus is strongly believed to deter Greece from acting first. Such a situation is also believed to help maintain a stable strategic balance with Greece.

In this light, Turkey's stubborn opposition to plans including the demilitarization of Cyprus or the imposition of a no-fly-zone over the island which are the *sine qua non* conditions for Greece should be considered along with suggestions for the demilitarization of the Greek islands in the Aegean. Otherwise, expecting Turkey to agree to such plans as withdrawing a considerable number of troops from Cyprus without asking Greece to make a comparable move to demilitarize the Aegean islands will not lead to a fair and lasting solution to the Cyprus problem.

Against this rather realistic, not necessarily pessimistic, perspective, I would like to conclude by hoping that the future of Greek-Turkish relations can be bright. I therefore suggest that the current favorable climate emerged in the aftermath of the earthquakes in Turkey and in Greece should be exploited to the most in all areas possible with a view to establishing a strong basis for building confidence and mutual understanding at all levels among the decision-makers of the next generations.