



The Heritage Foundation
Executive Memorandum

No. 553

October 5, 1998

DEFUSING THE MISSILE CRISIS IN THE AEGEAN

JAMES H. ANDERSON, PH.D., AND JAMES PHILLIPS

The scheduled November delivery of Russian-made surface-to-air missiles to Cyprus has increased the likelihood of armed conflict, either through miscalculation or design, between Greece and Turkey, two North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies. Such a clash would undermine U.S. security interests by shattering the cohesion of NATO's southern flank. To prevent this from happening, the U.S. should promote a fresh set of initiatives to defuse the crisis.

Anatomy of a Crisis. Tensions in the Aegean Sea escalated in January 1997, after Cyprus confirmed the purchase of S-300 missiles from Russia. Designed to shoot down aircraft, these missiles have a range of 150 kilometers (about 95 miles). This poses a threat to Turkish air space along Turkey's southern coast, less than 70 kilometers away. Turkish forces already have rehearsed operations to destroy the missiles if they are deployed. Although such action could ignite a war between Greece and Turkey, Turkey's political leaders are reluctant to back down, particularly with parliamentary elections scheduled for April 1999.

Greek Cypriot President Glafcos Clerides, who has benefited politically from the decision to purchase the missiles, has refused to cancel the deployment unless there is progress on long-stalled reunification talks or Turkey agrees to demilitarize the island. Neither appears likely. For its part, Russia has warned that any attack on Russian ships transporting the missiles would be considered an act of war.

Clarifying U.S. Interests. U.S. efforts to mediate the Cyprus missile crisis should be grounded in a clear-eyed appreciation of U.S. regional security interests: defusing the possibility of armed conflict between Greece and Turkey, as well as between Greek and Turkish Cypriots; preventing any attempt by Russia to use the missile sales to undermine NATO's integrity or exploit Cyprus as a platform for espionage activities; keeping Mediterranean sea lanes open for commercial shipping; and discouraging a destabilizing arms race in the Aegean.

Without neglecting important U.S.-Greek ties, U.S. policy must acknowledge Turkey's unique geo-strategic position. A key bulwark against Soviet aggression during the Cold War, Turkey remains a vital bridge between Europe and the Middle East. Turkey has helped the U.S. to contain Saddam Hussein in neighboring Iraq, has supported the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, and has played a positive role in the Balkans, the Caucasus region, and Afghanistan.

Defusing the Crisis. Greece and Greek Cypriots have raised the possibility of canceling the missile deployment in exchange for a U.S.-enforced flight

Produced by
The Kathryn and Shelby
Cullom Davis International
Studies Center

Published by
The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C.
20002-4999
(202) 546-4400
<http://www.heritage.org>



Executive Memorandum

moratorium over Cyprus. Turkey recently rejected a similar U.S. offer, but the idea likely will resurface. It represents, however, another potentially open-ended commitment which the U.S. can ill afford to undertake as it already enforces no-fly zones over Bosnia and Northern and Southern Iraq. The U.S. should dampen any expectation that it will support the no-fly zone proposal unless it becomes clear that no other alternative can prevent war.

The missile crisis must be considered within the broader context of the divided island's political problems. Defusing the crisis requires a focused set of policy prescriptions. The U.S. should:

- **Urge the Greek Cypriots to cancel or postpone delivery of the Russian missiles.** The United States could help the Greek Cypriots save face by encouraging them to purchase shorter-range missiles that would not destabilize the military balance. If the Russian missiles are delivered, the United States should press for a "no-deployment pledge" to reduce tensions.
- **Pressure Russia to reconsider the missile sale.** Given its potential to raise tensions and trigger outright conflict in the Aegean, the missile sale casts doubt on Russia's willingness to play a constructive role in European security matters.
- **Encourage the European Union (EU) to reconsider Turkey's bid for membership if it plays a positive role in resolving the missile crisis.** At the December 1997 Luxembourg conference, the EU put Cyprus accession negotiations on the fast track while effectively excluding Turkey from serious consideration. This has fueled Turkey's disillusionment with the EU and could prompt a backlash against the West.
- **Press the EU to freeze accession negotiations with Cyprus until the missile crisis is resolved.** Cyprus is less likely to deploy missiles if it believes this will harm its chances for EU membership.
- **Recommend a fresh set of confidence-building measures to reduce tensions among all parties.** For example, the U.S. could help set up hot lines between Athens and Ankara and encourage the two Cypriot communities to share more information about their military forces and exercises. Where possible, the U.S. should work in conjunction with Great Britain, which is a guarantor of the 1959 London Agreements by which Cyprus gained its independence from Britain.
- **Demonstrate U.S. determination to avert a crisis.** The Clinton Administration should act quickly to appoint a successor to Richard Holbrooke as Special Presidential Envoy for Cyprus. Holbrooke, nominated to be U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations in June 1998, no longer has time to focus extensively on Cyprus. Washington also should alert both sides that, if the missile crisis escalates, it will issue a travel warning to Americans that will hurt tourism in both zones of Cyprus, and possibly in Greece and Turkey as well.

Every sovereign state has a right to provide for its own self-defense. At issue is not Cyprus's right to acquire foreign military equipment, but rather the wisdom of deploying missiles capable of threatening Turkish airspace in a particularly volatile political environment. This purchase of missiles by Cyprus already has escalated tensions to a dangerously high level; their deployment would raise tensions even higher, possibly triggering armed conflict either by design or by accident. The United States should move swiftly and determinedly to keep the missile crisis in the Aegean from spiraling out of control.

—James H. Anderson is Defense and National Security Analyst, and James Phillips is Director of Administration, in The Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis International Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.