

Falling Toward War in the Aegean: A Case Study of the Imia/Kardak Affair

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Abstract

On Christmas day 1995, a Turkish freighter ran aground on a rocky islet in the northern Dodecanese islands, setting off a chain of events that would lead Greece and Turkey to the brink of war. Senior officials in Washington later admitted that the countries were literally hours from conflict over an issue of which decision makers in America and Europe were completely unaware prior to military forces being deployed. The Imia/Kardak affair raised significant questions on all sides about how relations between two NATO countries with well-known, ongoing tensions could have deteriorated so rapidly without drawing international attention till the last moment. The conflict highlighted problems in both Athens and Ankara related to the exchange of information between civilian and military leadership. It also revealed that strategic warning in emerging conflicts might not appear when the cause of the incident remains unknown until after the commitment of forces or when the pace of conflict moves too quickly. In such a situation, decision-making architecture within a coalition or alliance may prove too cumbersome to react to unexpected problems.

1. Introduction

Four miles off the Turkish mainland and two miles from the uninhabited Greek island of Kalolimnos lies a pair of rocky islets at the northern edge of the Dodecanese chain. The larger of these islets is known in Greek as Imia and in

Turkish as Kardak. It consists of ten acres of grass and rock, home to a few wild goats and some rabbits with only the ruins of a small hut to suggest prior human attention. The only consistent human contact prior to this conflict was the delivery of goat food by animal protection activists. The anonymity of this islet ended on Christmas day 1995, elevating its name as a by-word for Turkish and Greece tensions in the Aegean.

On that day, a Turkish freighter ran aground on Imia/Kardak. The captain of the ship radioed for help. A Greek tug was nearest to the islet and responded first to the distress call. When it arrived, the Turkish captain told the Greek captain that he was aground on Turkish territory and that Turkish tugs from the mainland were on their way to assist him. The Greek captain insisted on helping because of the salvage fees. His tug towed the freighter to the nearest Turkish port. The tug's captain filed the necessary papers to receive his fees for rescuing the freighter from what he believed to be Greek territory. The freighter captain protested the Greek's salvage claim, arguing that the freighter had been in Turkish territory and was properly waiting for a Turkish tug. The competing claims quietly worked their way through the normal bureaucracy without further notice.

Foreign and domestic attention in both Greece and Turkey was focused elsewhere as 1995 came to an end. Greek Prime Minister and leader of the ruling PASOK party, Andrea Papandreou, had

fallen terminally ill in November. Despite his incapacitation, Papandreou continued to act as party chief and head of government, leading to confusion within the governing institutions and internal competition in PASOK to become his successor. Papandreou-appointees dominated the cabinet and were generally hard-line nationalists who saw Turkish expansionism in the Aegean to be Greece's primary security threat. Moreover, they followed the Papandreou tradition of being suspicious of American intentions when it came to conflicts between Athens and Ankara.

The situation did not improve with Papandreou's resignation on 15 January 1996. Three days later Costas Simitis, the former Commerce and Industry Minister, won the vote in the PASOK Parliamentary Group against Akis Tsochatzopoulos and was named Prime Minister. However, Simitis did not become PASOK leader and he inherited a cabinet dominated by party rivals. Papandreou continued to hold on, although his health was failing and most people realized it was only a matter of time. The situation left Athens in an extremely weak position both internationally and domestically. Simitis found himself surrounded by potential contenders for PASOK leadership in a post-Papandreou era, forcing him to consider the short-term political implications of every policy decision. This dynamic was particularly critical in bilateral relations with Turkey where Simitis faced heavy criticism from Defense Minister Yerasimos Arsenis and Chief of the Hellenic General Staff, Admiral Khristos Lymberis. Arsenis had already challenged Simitis for the prime ministry and controlled a critical block of votes within PASOK.

As weak as the Greek government appeared, it was in better shape than its counterpart in Ankara. The coalition government consisting of the center-right True Path Party (DYP) and the center-left

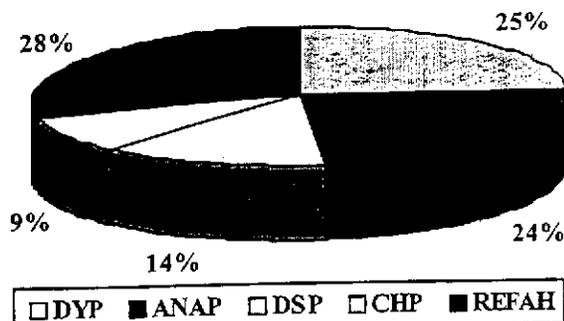


Figure 1. Turkish Parliament January 1996

Republican People's Party (CHP) led by prime minister and DYP party leader Tansu Çiller collapsed in the fall of 1995 with the withdrawal of CHP from the coalition and the call for national elections. Turkey went to the polls on the day before Christmas. As the Turkish freighter ran aground on Imia/Kardak, Turks were awakening to the realization that the elections had further complicated the domestic situation. Necmettin Erbakan's Islamist Refah Party led the polling with just 21.38 percent of the popular vote, giving them a plurality in parliament with 158 of the 550 seats. DYP won 19.18 and the other center-right party ANAP 19.65, leaving them with 135 and 133 seats respectively—the discrepancy reflects proportional shifts in the electoral laws. The nationalist, Democratic Left Party (DSP) gained 75 seats and the former junior coalition partner CHP was reduced to 49 members in parliament. Prime Minister Çiller assumed a caretaker role until a new coalition government could be formed.

The challenge of guiding the formation of a new government posed a dilemma for President Süleyman Demirel. The first chance to form a coalition traditionally fell to the leader of the plurality party. Necmettin Erbakan and his Refah Party, however, had run their campaign on a controversial foreign policy platform, which, if implemented, would have serious implications for Turkey's security relations with Europe and the United States. Moreover, the Turkish military was extremely suspicious of Refah's intentions and actively worked behind the scenes to oppose Erbakan's bid for the prime ministry. The obvious alternative would have been a center-right coalition between Çiller's DYP and Mesut

Yılmaz's Motherland Party (ANAP). These two political leaders personally despised each other, and they had mutually leveled charges of criminal behavior in the run up to the election. The campaign ended with a broadly televised debate in which the two verbally attacked each other in crude terms. Opinion polls commissioned around this time indicated that 60 percent of the population felt strenuous efforts should be made to form a DYP-ANAP coalition, but 71 percent felt that Çiller and Yılmaz at some level were personally to blame for the likely failure to realize this goal.¹

Within these parameters, President Demirel gave the mandate to form a government to Erbakan, expecting him to fail to find a coalition partner and then giving Çiller and Yılmaz no alternatives but to settle their differences. The situation, however, left Çiller's caretaker government in a vulnerable position until a new coalition could be formed. Any actions she took could be criticized as posturing for domestic gain while at the same time any mistakes would leave her and the DYP in a weakened bargaining position. The circumstances also undermined what little civilian oversight and control existed over the Turkish General Staff and increased the level of nationalist rhetoric as the competing party leaders polished their Kemalist credentials to gain the military's political support. As in Athens, Turkish leaders in Ankara had more than enough on their domestic plate without having to tackle any foreign policy crisis.

2. Where Relations Stood

Unfortunately, relations between Turkey and Greece were already strained by the end of 1995 over a series of disputes related to sovereignty in the Aegean. The Greek parliament ratified but did not implement the United Nation's Law of the Sea (LOS) resolution, giving Greece the legal right to extend its territorial waters from a 6-mile to a 12-mile limit. Ankara had protested during the LOS

negotiations that implementation in the Aegean would turn seventy percent of the Aegean into Greek sovereign territory and unacceptably restrict freedom of navigation. Turkey refused to recognize the validity of the LOS. Moreover, Prime Minister Çiller publicly warned throughout 1995 that an extension of territorial limits in the Aegean would constitute a *casus belli*. Although many Turks believed this position reflected Çiller's attempt to secure support from the Turkish military and to posture for nationalist voters, the public took the implied threat of LOS implementation seriously

Ankara also rejected Athens' position on airspace in the Aegean. Turkish leaders had protested what they believed to be abuses by the Greek government of the flight information region (FIR) responsibilities it held for the Aegean. According to the Turkish interpretation of the 1944 Chicago Convention, Athens was in violation of its FIR duties by requiring that official Turkish aircraft—including all military aircraft—file plans for flights in international airspace over the Aegean. Turkish leaders had also refused to accept Greece's ten-mile national airspace claim, which was seen to be in contravention of recognized standards because it did not correspond to the six-mile territorial sea limit. Turkish air force fighters had failed to file flight plans in Athens and knowingly flew into the disputed space between the ten and six-mile limits. This resulted in intercepts by Greek fighters, the crash of several aircraft over the years, and mutual recriminations about violations of sovereign airspace. Most importantly, the airspace issue required that the air forces in both countries remain at a relatively high state of alert and that pilots on either side were already willing to press engagements.

A long-running dispute over the location of the continental shelf—and by extension rights to exploit potential oil reserves under the sea bottom—also remained unresolved at this time. It was this issue that had caused the most recent

¹ *Turkish Daily News*, 7 February 1996.

confrontation between Athens and Ankara. Following the March 1987 crisis and the Davos agreement which brought this crisis to an end, the Greek and Turkish governments agreed in principle to pursue a series of confidence building measures designed to reduce immediate tensions in the Aegean and to provide a conflict resolution process. Though the dispute over the continental shelf had faded in prominence, the Davos process and the confidence building measures remained largely unconsummated.

American and European policy makers recognized the delicacy of the Aegean problems, having had to manage the impact of the tensions on other issues. Greek and Turkish representatives to NATO had used the Aegean dispute to affect alliance planning and operations such as Partnership for Peace Programs in eastern and southeastern Europe. NATO infrastructure projects touching the southern region had been placed on hold, disrupting the budget process. Most prominently, the tensions had prevented the establishment of subordinate command structures in the southern region, in particular the nomination of a regional land forces headquarters.

Greece-Turkey



Figure 2. Issues of Dispute in the Aegean

The Greeks further claimed that the Turkish intervention in Cyprus in 1974 obviated Article 14 of the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty, which called for the demilitarization of the Aegean islands—in particular the Dodecanese chain and the large off-lying islands like Lesbos and Chios. Ankara felt the presence of military forces on these islands was unnecessarily provocative and posed a potential threat to Turkish maritime access to the Aegean.

Nevertheless, the assessment of the strategic threat posed by Aegean disputes was radically different in both countries at the end of 1995. Greek Minister of Defense Arsenis had publicly stated that Turkey posed the main security threat to Greece and that Athens would embark on a military modernization program to counter perceived Turkish aggression. On the other hand, senior Turkish officers continued to focus primarily on areas east of the Aegean. The Turkish General Staff assessed that a re-emergent Russia posed the greatest long-term strategic threat to Turkey. On a shorter horizon, Kurdish terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, disputes with Syria, and the situation in Iraq all loomed as greater challenges than the tensions with Greece. Although the Cypriot problem constituted a distinct risk to national security, Turkish leaders saw it as primarily a political, not a military, issue. From a Turkish perspective at the end of 1995, bilateral relations with Greece were a low-level, persistent annoyance, but it was an issue that ranked fairly low on the threat scale.

American and European analysts were well aware of the historical tensions between the two countries. The international media covered the fragile political state as the Islamists bid for power in Turkey and as Papandreou waned in Greece. Yet, the sequence of events from the grounding of the Turkish freighter to the brink of war

progressed in ways that escaped strategic warning and masked the seriousness of the conflict. Domestic instability, international complacency, and the ambiguous nature of the dispute created a context in which two NATO allies found themselves falling toward war without being fully aware of where they were going.

3. The Post-Christmas Lull

According to Minister of Defense Arsenis, at some point around January 16th or 18th the Foreign Ministry informed him of an exchange of diplomatic notes between Ankara and Athens.² The dispute over the salvage fees between the Turkish freighter captain and the Greek tug captain led to a routine request to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, asking to whom did Imia/Kardak belong. Arsenis noted that Ankara had queried the Greek Foreign Ministry over whether the islet was Greek. This characterization of the initial Turkish request corresponded with Ankara's post-crisis position that Turkey did not *de facto* claim sovereignty over the islet, although Imia/Kardak' official status was—according to the Turks—ambiguous given the language in the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty and the 1947 Paris Treaty.

The confusion that developed as this crisis unfolded suggested the Turkish Foreign Ministry's original request reflected ignorance rather than an attempt to manipulate the situation for greater strategic purposes. Nevertheless, it is easy to understand why Athens felt threatened by the question of Imia/Kardak's sovereignty because it implied that ownership of thousands of similar rocks throughout the Aegean might also be open for debate. At this juncture, neither side saw any reason to inform their political leadership of the dispute. According to Arsenis, the Greek Foreign Ministry asked the Defense Ministry to increase supervision and attention to activities in the area of the islet under the direction of Admiral Mamberis and the Hellenic General Staff. On the

Turkish side, the diplomats awaited an answer to their question.

An answer did not take long in coming. The mayor of Kalymnos—the nearest inhabited Greek island—traveled to Imia/Kardak on the 20th of January. He built a flagpole and raised the Greek flag. This action seems to have gone unnoticed in Turkey, as the public was unaware of the dispute and at an official level Ankara was still waiting for a diplomatic response. Imia/Kardak crossed definitively into the public domain on January 26th during a radio news conference given by the Greek Foreign Minister Theodoros Pangalos.³ During a long and rambling interview covering a wide range of Greek foreign policy issues, Pangalos mentioned in passing that Ankara was raising the level of confrontation in the Aegean by claiming that Imia/Kardak was in Turkish territorial waters. He stated that this was the first such claim in the Aegean by Turkey and that he hoped this move was not part of a deliberate strategy by the Turks to excite bilateral tensions. Pangalos repeated Arsenis' earlier point that from what his ministry understood Ankara was not demanding Greek territory *per se* but was instead—according to him—introducing the issue of ambiguous sovereignty over the islet in a calculated attempt to shape domestic politics.

Although it was a small piece in a larger interview, Turkish journalists picked up on the comments. They had long monitored Pangalos' speeches because of his extreme anti-Turkish positions and his habit of providing them with explosive sound bites. A team of *Hürriyet* journalists from the Izmir office attempted to exploit the issue by giving it a jingoist spin. They rented a helicopter and on January 27th flew to Imia/Kardak, replaced the Greek flag with a Turkish flag, and then presented the story to the Turkish public for the first time.⁴ *Hürriyet* reporters noted that the Turkish Foreign Ministry disapproved of the action, quoting Under

² Athens ET-1, 31 January 1996.

³ Athens *Elliniki Radiofonia*, 26 January 1996.

⁴ *Hürriyet*, 27 and 28 January 1996.

Secretary Inal Batu as saying that the dispute over the islet should be solved peacefully through diplomatic channels. Observers at the time dismissed the journalists' actions as one more stunt to raise circulation in the great paper wars and as an attempt to draw public attention away from the deadlocked coalition negotiation, which had failed to create a new Turkish government. Nonetheless, the Greek Defense Ministry and the Hellenic General Staff had monitored the flag exchange and were prepared to respond outside of diplomatic channels.

At this point, there was no way for outside observers to realize that Greece and Turkey were potentially days from war. Even if NATO had picked up indications or warnings that tensions were increasing, it is unclear what measures it might have taken to defuse the situation using the decision-making architecture available to the alliance. There are limited provisions within NATO policy structures to mitigate inter-alliance disputes involving purely bilateral issues. Equally troublesome, it became clear when the dust settled that a lack of communication between the civilian and military leadership in Athens and Ankara led to a series of poor decisions, accelerating the pace of the crisis to a point where outside intervention became increasing unfeasible.

4. Raising the Ante

A radio broadcast on the 28th of January alerted the people of Greece, telling them that "Turkey has perpetuated a new provocation against our country."⁵ In a press release, the Ministry of Defense reported that Turkish journalists had hoisted the Turkish flag on Imia/Kardak. On Arsenis' direct orders a contingent of commandos from the naval vessel *Panagopuolos* landed and restored the Greek flag. The broadcast also indicated senior officials held a meeting at the Defense Ministry to assess the crisis and concerns were high because an armed Turkish coast guard vessel had been sighted in the vicinity of the islet

less than two kilometers from the Greek ship. In retrospect, it was hardly surprising that Ankara had dispatched a coast guard ship to investigate the problem, given the newspaper article published the prior day.

On a diplomatic level, Foreign Minister Pangalos met separately with ambassadors from America, Russia and Turkey to brief them on the incident. His deputy summoned the fifteen ambassadors from the European Union to a joint consultative session. Publicly, Pangalos tried to downplay the seriousness of the issue. A journalist asked the Foreign Minister in a private interview about what was happening on the islet. Pangalos responded that he did not believe the incident was grave and that "there had been a lot of noise about nothing."⁶ He went on to argue that, if Turkey were willing to act responsibly, there would be no Aegean issue and that there was therefore no need for confidence-building measures. This political message was reiterated the evening of the 29th when Prime Minister Simitis presented the first post-Papandreou, PASOK government, and policy statement to the chamber of deputies. He said Greece's willingness to defend its sovereign rights remained the basis of Greek-Turkish relations. He added that his country would not accept the legalization of a *status quo* imposed by military force.

The tenor of the public announcements in Athens on the 28th and 29th of January suggested the political leadership in Athens had come to some basic conclusions about the Imia/Kardak crisis. There was consensus within the government that the islet belonged to Greece. The ability of the Greek military to control the islet and the surrounding territory appears to have been taken as a given, despite the fact that the rocks were less than four miles from the Turkish coast and significantly closer to two major Turkish naval bases than the nearest Greek base. Athens also assumed that the legal and ethical propriety

⁵ *Athens Elliniki Radiofonia*, 28 January 1998.

⁶ *Athens To Vima Tis Kiriakis*, 28 January 1996, A24-A25.

of their position would swing international support in its favor.

Minister of Defense Arsenis and Chief of the General Staff Admiral Lymberis shared the political leadership's confidence in the Greek military's ability to project power to Turkish coast. Subsequent events showed that they did not believe that Turkey was likely to accept Greek control of Imia/Kardak peacefully. They placed Greek armed forces on a state of high alert as early as the evening of the 29th.⁷ In addition, Admiral Lymberis had sent the Greek navy into the Aegean and had established a task force of five patrol boats supported by larger vessels such as the destroyer *Themistocles* to control the area around Imia/Kardak.⁸ Senior military leaders embarked on a process of mobilization and deployment which assured some kind of response from Ankara, while the civilians leadership assumed that the situation would naturally defuse itself barring an overreaction from the Turks—a possibility that held some diplomatic advantages for Greece. The lack of coordination of political and military actions at a strategic level left Athens vulnerable when events did not proceed as planned.

In Ankara, the lack of communication between the civilian and military leaders was equally evident. The Turkish General Staff responded to the build-up of Greek forces near Imia/Kardak by sending the Turkish navy to sea. By the 29th one Meko-class frigate, two missile boats, and two patrol boats were cruising toward the islet.⁹ Another frigate was in route but still north of the immediate area. The military was reacting to a rapidly changing military condition just off its coast without a clear understanding of the diplomatic and political context. Moreover, the senior officers recognized that Prime Minister Çiller's caretaker government was likely to offer

only weak support and guidance given the domestic political situation.

This impression was underscored by Turkish press reports on the 29th. Articles on the difficulties between Turkey and Greece focused on the Cyprus problem and on the impending visit from United States Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke with little to no mention of the rising confrontation over Imia/Kardak. Çiller further confused the state of civilian leadership in Ankara in an interview with a hard-line nationalist newspaper.¹⁰ She indicated that she was prepared to take her party into opposition against an Islamist coalition. On the eve of an expanding military crisis, the Turkish prime minister declared publicly her willingness to abdicate her office to an Islamist prime minister, badly undercutting her authority and credibility as events began to unfold. Moreover, it raised a suspicion among senior military officers that her council over the next few days was guided more by domestic political calculations than Turkish national interests.

The discrepancy between the military situation in the Aegean and the political rhetoric coming out of Athens and Ankara confused the picture for outside observers. Analysts in Washington and Europe noted later that, although the military build-up around Imia/Kardak was evident by the 29th, diplomatic contacts and public announcements made the incident look no different than similar confrontations in the Aegean over the past decade. In fact, in comparison to the crash of fighter aircraft engaged in mock dogfights or confrontations during Aegean exercises—occurrences that had happened more than once—the current blustering over an uninhabited islet seemed less critical.

Furthermore, outsiders did not become clearly aware of what the cause of the current tensions was until the diplomatic meetings on the 28th and the press conferences on the 29th, and nobody was

⁷ *Athens ET-1*, 30 January 1996.

⁸ *Athens ET-1*, 31 January 1996.

⁹ *Athens ET-1*, 30 January 1996.

¹⁰ *Türkiye*, 29 January 1996, p. 15.

prepared to pass judgment or comment officially on the validity of the competing claims to the islet. American state department officials called on Greece and Turkey to exercise self-control and to find a solution to this problem themselves through dialogue and negotiations.¹¹ The same sources indicated that, although United States decision makers were aware of the press releases concerning Imia/Kardak, they were astonished by the incident and had no insight into motives or intentions. Officials admitted that they expected the embassies to clarify and evaluate the situation the following day. Neither NATO nor the United States had forces capable of intervening, even if European or American leaders had desired to do so at that point. The emphasis in Western capitals as darkness fell over the Aegean on the 29th was to figure out what was going on.

5. The Pace Increases

Prime Minister Çiller opened the morning of the 30th with a brief press conference.¹² She reversed Ankara's earlier position on the ambiguity surrounding sovereign rights over Imia/Kardak, declaring the islet Turkish. According to her, Foreign Ministry officials had assured the Prime Minister of the correctness of Turkey's claim. She repeated Greek Prime Minister Simitis' declaration that the status in the Aegean could not be changed by *faits accomplis*. She stated that the National Security Council had met for three hours the previous night, where senior civilian and military officials had reviewed the situation. Foreign Minister Baykal supported Çiller's position by saying that negotiations must begin at once. However, both leaders added that the twelve Greek commandos and the Greek flag must be removed from the islet immediately regardless of the status of negotiations and that Ankara reserved the right to pursue these two goals separately.

Greek papers played down the tensions in the Aegean by switching the focus to diplomatic

efforts.¹³ In a dispatch from Washington, Dhimas reported that Greek diplomats were holding high level discussions with their counterparts in America and Europe. Officials were looking at the Imia/Kardak issue within the framework of international law and treaties. Although "special sensitivity is required in an area where there are armed forces on both sides and any move is being noted," Dhimas concluded that the problem continued to reflect mostly domestic posturing in Turkey and held no imminent threat.

Unfortunately, a mid-day press conference in Athens broke this sense of calm. Following a series of meetings with the Prime Minister, cabinet officials, and selected deputies that had begun at 4:30 in the morning, Press Minister Reppas, Minister of Defense Arsenis, and Foreign Minister Pangalos held a live interview to discuss the Aegean situation.¹⁴ The press conference began with an admission that the presence of Turkish warships near the islets had caused the entire armed forces of Greece to be placed on alert. Arsenis said, "today a Turkish navy ship violated our territorial waters. It was warned to withdraw, but so far has not withdrawn. A Turkish navy helicopter also violated our airspace and flew over the rocky islet." Furthermore, he confirmed the full alert of military forces and pronounced that "we are ready to confront any threat." Arsenis and Admiral Lymberis had assured Prime Minister Simitis that the Greek military could project sufficient power around Imia/Kardak to prevent Turkey from making a military response. This military assessment combined with Athens' confidence in the legitimacy of its claims to the islet discouraged the Greek government from opening discussions with Ankara. Moreover, Pangalos stated that although America, the European Union, United Nations, and NATO had been briefed on the incident, Athens rejected any need for mediation.

¹¹ *Athens Eleftherotipia*, 30 January 1996, p.16.

¹² *Ankara Türkiye Radyoları*, 30 January 1996.

¹³ *Athens Eleftherotipia*, 30 January 1996, p. 16.

¹⁴ *Athens ET-1*, 30 January 1996.

At about the same time, Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Ömer Akbel held a live interview in Ankara to relate the discussions held between the Greek ambassador Nezeritis and Under Secretary of the Foreign Ministry Oymen.¹⁵ Akbel reiterated Çiller's earlier statements, saying that Imia/Kardak belonged to Turkey. He also indicated Turkish diplomats were preparing to brief American, European, and various international organizations on Ankara's view of the Aegean tensions. For the first time, the Foreign Ministry publicly raised the possibility that the question of sovereignty over Imia/Kardak had implications for all the unnamed "pebbles" in the Aegean. Turkey's position, according to Akbel, was to resolve these issues through bilateral negotiations. He made no mention of Turkey's military assessment of the crisis, but called once again for the Greek military to withdraw its forces from the immediate vicinity of the islet.

Yet, the Turkish military had begun preparations based on directives from the National Security Council to resolve the Imia/Kardak situation. Orders went out to place Turkish forces in areas outside the Aegean in a position to deter the conflict from spreading. Turkish armored units in northern Cyprus moved toward the Green Line, which separated the Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities.¹⁶ Cypriot National Guard Chief, Lieutenant General Vorvolakos, told reporters that in response he had implemented an alert of the Cypriot forces and had opened continual contact with the Greek military staffs as called for in the joint defense doctrine. At the same time, Prime Minister Çiller held a series of late-night calls to President Clinton and other high level American and NATO officials.¹⁷ According to her, it was "a very hot night" when she tried to convey Ankara's determination to have progress on the negotiations or else, she threatened, there were to be grave

consequences. Without announcing its intentions, the Turkish General Staff was ready to act.

In retrospect, there were two serious miscalculations on the 30th of January. The Greek military misjudged its ability to project power off the coast of Turkey. Military assurances gave the civilian leaders in Athens the courage to stand firm on what they believed to be a justifiable claim of sovereignty over Imia/Kardak, declining any effort to negotiate. Ankara knew, on the other hand, that it had the military capability to shape the situation in any manner it wanted. However, there were initial reservations about the legitimacy of Turkey's claims to the islet. Neither the political leadership nor the senior military officers were certain of the legal or diplomatic prerogatives. Prime Minister Çiller's public assertion—based on Foreign Ministry advice—of Turkish sovereignty over Imia/Kardak removed the last consideration preventing military action. As in Athens, this decision also discouraged Ankara from engaging outsiders in mediation. Turkish leaders stopped taking calls as the night progressed. Internal miscommunications about political objective and military means hampered effective crisis management and, in fact, increased the pace of the conflict.

6. When Discussions Fail

Turks woke on the morning of the 31st to confusing news. Morning papers carried an interview with President Demirel conducted the previous evening. In one account, the president stated that "it would be unwise to escalate tensions and that abandoning peaceful ways would not be in anyone's interest."¹⁸ Yet, initial television and radio reports indicated that Turkish commandos had landed on Imia/Kardak, a Greek helicopter had gone down, and Greek troops along with the Greek flag had withdrawn from the islet. Was resolution at hand or were the two countries at war?

¹⁵ *Ankara TRT*, 30 January 1996.

¹⁶ *Nicosia Cypriot Broadcasting Corporation*, 31 January 1996.

¹⁷ *Ankara TRT*, 31 January 1996.

¹⁸ *Hürriyet*, 31 January 1996, p. 21.

Prime Minister Çiller announced that same morning “the Kardak crisis has been resolved” and “the flag is lowered and the soldiers have gone.”¹⁹ Foreign Minister Baykal issued a statement at the same time on his way to a National Security Council meeting.²⁰ He claimed the crisis had ended at 8:30 local time with the withdrawal of Greek forces from the vicinity of the islet. He added that Turkey was also preparing to remove its naval forces from the area. Turkey, according to Baykal, had achieved its objectives without an armed conflict. However, clearly something had happened on Imia/Kardak to change the military balance.

Approximately an hour later, Prime Minister Simitis addressed the Greek parliament and the details began to emerge.²¹ Simitis opened by saying, “the Greek government achieved the disengagement of the Greek and Turkish forces...this disengagement was achieved without negotiating with the Turkish side.” He told the deputies that the Greek military had performed its duty and had suffered losses. Although the Greek forces were withdrawing from the islet, Simitis claimed that the territory continued to belong to Greece and that Turkey’s plan to force Athens into negotiations had been foiled. He thanked America for its efforts during the crisis. Simitis’ vague statements were interrupted frequently by protests.

In response to Simitis’ announcement, the opposition leader Miltiadhīs Evert accused the government of lying to the people. “The withdrawal of Greek military forces and the lowering of the Greek flag constitute the abandonment of national territory and an act of treason.” Evert referred to some undetermined military action staged by the Turks that morning without the Greek military’s awareness. He ended by calling for the immediate resignation of all ministers.

¹⁹ *Ankara TRT*, 31 January 1996.

²⁰ *Ankara TRT*, 31 January 1996.

²¹ *Athens ET-1*, 31 January 1996.

Minister of Defense Arsenis responded in parliament that Greece faced the decision of open war or a political solution.²² Foreign Minister Pangalos added that Greece was not prepared for an all-out war with Turkey—contradicting the previous day’s statements made by Arsenis and Admiral Lymberis—and that war would have ended in negotiations, negotiations that were exactly what the Simitis government wished to avoid. Declaring victory and going home was the only way out of the situation. Nevertheless, the Simitis government was not clear as to what had happened.

Rumors began to spread that the Turkish military had landed commandos on Imia/Kardak at night without the Greek forces noticing them. This possibility immediately undermined public confidence in the ability of the Greek military to defend Greece in the event of a war. If these rumors were true, the entire momentum of the crisis had changed. The Simitis government could not allow speculation to continue and made an attempt to spin the news in its favor. In a television interview that afternoon, Arsenis told reporters that at 2:00 in the morning about ten Turkish commandos landed on a smaller rock 150 yards off the main islet of Imia/Kardak without being observed by Greek forces.²³ The Greek Ministry of Defense was unaware of the presence of Turkish forces on the islet until over an hour later when officials in Ankara and Washington called to inform Athens of the change in situation. According to Arsenis, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke telephoned Foreign Minister Pangalos to indicate that American sources confirmed the presence of Turkish troops.

Arsenis authorized the Greek navy to launch a helicopter to verify the new information. It was still night and there were heavy rain and high seas. The helicopter pilot sighted the Turkish commandos, reported back, began to return to the

²² *Athens Elliniki Radhiofonia*, 31 January 1996.

²³ *Athens ET-1*, 31 January 1996.

Greek frigate, and went down into the Aegean with two crewmembers. The cause of the crash was unknown at the time, although subsequent investigations determined that pilot error in difficult flying conditions caused the loss.

Greek leaders were now faced with the decision to respond not knowing whether the helicopter had been shot down or had crashed from other causes. Arsenis claimed that it was his recommendation to order Greek forces to land on the smaller islet and arrest the Turkish commandos. He and Admiral Lymberis had discussed this possibility during the night and felt the armed forces were capable of carrying out the mission. According to Arsenis, however, the other members of the National Security Council had begun to lean toward de-escalation in meetings, which had begun after midnight. When faced with the new implications of Turkey's military position, the majority of the council decided to withdraw Greek forces and the flag at 6:00 a.m. Arsenis continued to argue that the Greek military was still capable of defending Imia/Kardak and that the decision to withdraw was a political one made by the Prime Minister.

Arsenis' remarks led to a firestorm of public accusations by various cabinet ministers.²⁴ Some tried to separate themselves from Simitis' remarks thanking the United States for intervening in the crisis. Others distanced themselves from the Security Council decision not to go to war, playing up their nationalist credentials for the upcoming struggle for control of PASOK. Most demanded an investigation into the senior military leadership responsible for placing Greece in such a vulnerable strategic position, hinting at the immediate resignation of Arsenis and Lymberis. Although the Simitis cabinet clearly avoided a disastrous war, the cost was a weakened government and the public humiliation of the Greek armed forces. The decision also highlighted the dangerous rift between the moderate PASOK leadership and the military backed by such hard-

line nationalist politicians as Arsenis and Pangalos.

In a later radio interview, Arsenis—joined by Admiral Lymberis and the chiefs of the Greek Army, Navy and Air Force—restated that the decision to withdraw from Imia/Kardak represented a political decision alone.²⁵ The Greek military was, according to them, prepared to fight and win a conflict over the islet. In a rather baroque misdirection, he noted that military “planning prevented the penetration of [Turkish] commandos from the rocky islets,” though apparently the planning had not considered how to keep them from getting there in the first place. Finally, Arsenis repeated the curious idea that Greece had won because Turkey had not forced Athens into a dialogue. In other words, any attempt to diffuse the emerging conflict through negotiations would have been difficult if not impossible. One party to the conflict believed diplomatic discussion was the enemy's actual objective, raising serious questions about how outside parties would have resolved the crisis had they even been aware of it in time.

On the Turkish side, the gamble of introducing Turkish commandos onto the second islet appeared to have paid off. The National Security Council met for a long session to consider the events on Imia/Kardak. The press received a statement, indicating that the Çiller government and the Turkish General Staff were pleased with developments.²⁶ The Turkish military had demonstrated its competence and its ability to avoid overreacting to what it saw as Greek provocation. Çiller had turned aside initial criticisms of her foreign policy decisions and positioned herself to be a stronger voice in the search for a new coalition government. Moreover, Ankara appeared to have cooperated with Washington in defusing the crisis, while leaving the door open for future negotiations. The Turks were left in the position of saying “we think the

Athens ET-1, 31 January 1996

²⁵ *Athens Elliniki Radhiofonia*, 31 January 1996.

²⁶ *Ankara TRT*, 31 January 1996.

islets are ours but let's talk about it." Unfortunately, these victories proved fleeting. While the Greek military felt abandoned by its political leadership, the Turkish military came away from the incident with a renewed boldness in foreign affairs. Senior officers believed they could stake out policy positions based on military realities and then afterwards let the politicians and diplomats provide justification.

Ankara soon squandered the diplomatic and strategic success it had won, following its defense of Imia/Kardak's ambiguous status and its measured response to the imprudent show of force along the Turkish coast. In a NATO exercise conference in June, a Turkish naval officer attempted to claim that the sovereignty of Gavdhos—an inhabited island south of Crete—was in the same disputed category as Imia/Kardak. American and European leaders found this argument silly and indicative of the naivete of senior Turkish officers regarding international relations. Athens' analysis about Turkey's real intentions during the Imia/Kardak crisis gained greater credibility following the Gavdhos incident. The Greeks and the Turks had almost fallen into war in the Aegean through miscommunication between civilian and military leaders and were lucky the same miscommunications averted conflict in the final hours. However, neither side appeared to have drawn the correct lessons from the experience.

7. The American Game

Of all the outsiders aware of the Imia/Kardak crisis as it unfolded, only the United States appears to have played a direct, if somewhat indecisive, role. Simitis and Çiller both publicly acknowledged discussions with senior American officials on the 30th of January, including President Clinton. Yet, the tenor of these discussions was indicative of the limitations for crisis intervention in a conflict between two states with modern military equipment and effective command and control systems. This proved

particularly true in a situation where American ignorance over the root causes of the conflict handicapped effective diplomatic efforts to buy time.

A Greek editorial accused President Clinton of encouraging Turkish actions by insisting that both sides negotiate their difference.²⁷ From a Greek perspective, Ankara cultivated the crisis and provocation in the Aegean with Washington's full encouragement, in order to get Athens involved in a dialogue on non-existent issues. The Simitis government looked for an American endorsement of Greece's rights during the crisis. Instead, American information in the early morning hours of the 31st simply confirmed the reality that Turkish military capabilities overshadowed Greece's. Opposition politician accurately noted that it was not American intervention that resolved the crisis. It was the Turkish military that imposed its will on the situation. The United States merely agreed to monitor the withdrawal of forces by both sides and serve as a referee for future complaints. America showed its willingness to mediate the status quo but not the conflict itself.

In part, the miscommunication among Washington, Athens, and Ankara stemmed from a fundamental lack of mutual understanding. Greek and Turkish leaders were fundamentally concerned that justice—as seen from the two capitals—was achieved in resolving the Aegean conflict. Moreover, neither side was willing to allow what it understood as a unilateral change in the current status. Continued tensions were better than an unjust resolution imposed by military power. On the other hand, American—and to some degree European leaders—had a different view. Iranian analysts accurately argued that for the United States the real issue at stake was the increasing possibility of two NATO members becoming embroiled in a military confrontation.²⁸

²⁷ *Athens Eleftherotipia*, 31 January 1996, p. 8.

²⁸ *Tehran Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 31 January 1996.

Prior to the resolution of Imia/Kardak, neither Athens nor Ankara had raised the question of Article 5 commitments for NATO member states in the event of an Aegean war. In the past, Turkey and Greece have been willing to push confrontations in hopes that it would force the United States and the European Union to pick sides. The positive lesson from Imia/Kardak was that an actual conflict would likely lead to the isolation of both states from Western alliances and partners. The negative lesson, however, was that unilateral military actions followed by an immediate call to negotiate put the opposing side at a diplomatic disadvantage in international fora unless the enemy was willing to risk isolating itself. The current SA-10 missile issue in Cyprus fit into this model. The Cypriot government—under advice from Athens—purchased the missile system from Russia, unilaterally changing the balance between Greece and Turkey through military means with the expectation of opening discussions under new terms. Although the pace of this new crisis has been drawn out over months, reactive diplomatic intervention has proven equally ineffective in addressing the problem.

The different national security agenda in Washington also put pro-American politicians and military officers in a weakened position in Greece and Turkey. Evert used Simitis' decision to withdraw from Imia/Kardak to accuse the Prime Minister of placing United States interests above Greek interests, making it more difficult for Simitis to agree to American brokered negotiations on larger Aegean and Cypriot issues. In Turkey, Islamist and nationalist politicians noted that it should not have been necessary to hold intensive diplomatic contacts with the United States or the European countries in order to defend Turkish interests. American intervention without actual resolution of the issue made it more likely that outside interference would be rejected in future conflicts. Considering that during the Imia/Kardak crisis diplomatic contact was the principle strategic warning for the NATO

member states, the increased disincentive to call on outside mediation until one side or the other has achieved its strategic objective makes conflict management less effective.

American efforts to reduce tensions between Greece and Turkey are counterproductive over the long-term if they fail to resolve specific issues and simply buy time. Reactive diplomacy underscores the growing gap between the speed of command, control, and communication systems and the ability of civilian and military decision makers to comprehend and analyze complex patterns of information.