

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Kosovo: Greek and Turkish Perspectives

Carol Migdalovitz
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

Western governments have cited a danger of the Kosovo conflict spreading to NATO allies Greece and Turkey as justification for military intervention in Kosovo. These two eastern Mediterranean neighbors have difficult bilateral relations. Their overarching goals for Kosovo are similar, but their views of NATO's military campaign differ. Greece opposes NATO's approach for reasons based on history, culture, competing foreign policy goals, and public opinion. Its sympathies lie with the Serbs. Turkey supports NATO out of alliance loyalty and because of its shared history, culture, and attendant sympathies with the Kosovar Albanians. Turkey is participating in the military operation; Greece is not. Greece and Turkey both reject the notion that a war between them might arise from the current conflict. Greece is concerned about the refugee crisis destabilizing the region. It also is concerned about the implications that its position on Kosovo might have on relations with the United States and Europe, while Turkey does not accept that the crisis might have implications for its southeast and Kurds. See CRS Issue Brief 98041, *Kosovo and U.S. Policy*, and CRS Issue Brief IB10027 *Kosovo: U.S. and Allied Military Operations*. This report will be updated if developments warrant.

Introduction

On March 25, 1999, President Clinton addressed the nation to explain why U.S. and NATO action against Yugoslavia over Kosovo is critical to U.S. national interests. Pointing to a map, he said "Let a fire burn here in this area, and the flames will spread. Eventually, key U.S. allies could be drawn into the conflict." The U.S. allies he referred to are NATO partners Greece and Turkey.

Greek-Turkish Relations

Greece was the first part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire to seek independence in the early 19th century. Since then, relations between Greeks and Turks have often been strained. The two countries were on opposite sides in the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, and

in World War I. Although both joined NATO in 1952, bilateral relations did not reflect their new alliance. Crises developed over Cyprus twice in the 1960s and in 1974.¹ In recent years, differences over sovereign rights in the Aegean Sea have provoked tensions and, in 1996, brought the two neighbors to the brink of war.² Athens' continuing veto of European Union (EU) financial aid for Turkey and its contribution to the EU decision to deny Turkey membership candidacy caused bilateral relations to deteriorate further. They worsened in February 1999 after it was discovered that Greece had secretly sheltered Turkey's "most wanted man," Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the separatist/terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), at its embassy in Kenya. Turkish officials accused Greece of being a terrorist state, while Athens referred to its assistance to Ocalan as "humanitarian," and regretted his capture.

Views of Kosovo Crisis

The overarching Greek and Turkish views of the Kosovo situation are strikingly similar. They both favor a peaceful resolution of the crisis, maintaining the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia and the inviolability of regional borders, reinstating Kosovo's autonomy, and protecting Kosovar Albanian human rights. Both condemn ethnic cleansing. Their views on the NATO military operation, however, differ sharply.

Greece: U.S. officials overlook Greece's ambivalence when talking about the united views of the NATO alliance.³ Greece's perspective and policy derive from its history, culture, other foreign policy goals, and public opinion. Greece has historical ties with fellow Orthodox Serbs, who fought with it against the Ottoman Turks in the Balkan Wars, 1912-13 and were Greece's allies in two world wars. It is especially worried that Kosovo might lead to another wider war.

Former Foreign Minister Theodoros Pangalos and his replacement, George Papandreou, worked for a peaceful resolution of the Kosovo crisis. Greece initially opposed NATO's use of force without a U.N. Security Council mandate. Later, however, Prime Minister Costas Simitis said that if NATO decided that there was no reason to get a U.N. mandate, then Greece would not oppose NATO operations against Yugoslavia.⁴ Greece has gone along with NATO decisions, and Simitis has tried to convince his countrymen that this policy is in their national interest.

The Simitis government is operating under many constraints. In particular, it fears that lost investments, trade, and tourism resulting from a prolonged Kosovo crisis could prevent its achieving European Monetary Union (EMU) membership in 2001. It already has revised economic growth projections for this year downward by .5%, observed a drop

¹ See CRS Issue Brief 89140, *Cyprus: Status of U.N. Negotiations*, updated regularly.

² See CRS Report 96-140, *Greece and Turkey: the Rocky Islet Crisis*, March 7, 1996, and CRS Report 97-799, *Greece and Turkey: Aegean Issues -- Background and Recent Developments*, August 21, 1997.

³ U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, on Good Morning America, March 26, 1999.

⁴ Greece's Pangalos' Balkan Tour Viewed as a 'Challenge.' *I Kathimerini*, February 8, 1999, translation carried by Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) on line, February 9, 1999. All Greek and Turkish media citations in this report are to FBIS translations or transcriptions.

in exports, and suffered economic losses estimated at over \$600 million. Then there is the political dimension. Simitis had been weakened politically due to popular opposition to his economic austerity program, aimed at EMU membership, and mishandling of the Ocalan episode. Although Simitis retained his party's leadership at a congress in March, the conclave disclosed intraparty fissures. Moreover, the public, press, and Orthodox Church have condemned NATO's bombing of Serbia and complicate matters for him. Polls have indicated that over 95% of the public opposes the NATO operation. Anti-NATO, anti-U.S. demonstrations have been widespread. Communist demonstrators have temporarily blocked allied military shipments and troops bound for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) from leaving the port of Thessaloniki. Terrorists have bombed government and business sites belonging to NATO members, including the United States. Orthodox Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Khristodoulos claimed that the West hates the Orthodox people,⁵ while President Costas Stephanopoulos observed, "the entire Serbian people, which is bravely and proudly struggling for its rights, has our sympathy."⁶ Many in parliament have criticized the government for going along with NATO, and some want it to denounce NATO. Paradoxically, polls now indicate that the public increasingly approves of the government's statesmanship and that Simitis's popularity is rising.

Turkey: The Ottomans defeated the Serbs at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, at the cost of a sultan's life. The Turks remained in the Balkans into the 20th century. They have a great affinity for and kinship with ethnic groups in the region which the Ottoman Empire converted to Islam. Foreign Minister Ismail Cem said, "Kosovo is part of our history. We share a common culture, history, and faith with the Kosovar Albanians and Turks. We have pursued a very serious policy in order to prevent Kosovo from turning into another Bosnia.... Both in Bosnia and Kosovo, Turkey sought for the traces of our history not to be erased."⁷ While it favored a peaceful resolution to the crisis, Ankara holds Milosevic responsible for what it considers the need to use force.

In addition, Turks, especially the influential military, are loyal to NATO. With the EU's rejection, NATO is their main organizational link to the West. President Suleyman Demirel has stated that NATO must succeed in Kosovo.⁸

Military Role in Kosovo

Turkey: Turkey is a fully participating NATO ally in the Kosovo campaign. At first, Turkey committed 11 F-16 fighter aircraft only for air defense, and one frigate in the Adriatic Sea. In early May, it deployed 7 more planes. On May 12, Turkey agreed to station U.S. fighters and tankers at airbases in western Turkey and, on May 17, confirmed that its planes were bombing Yugoslavia. If NATO decides that they are necessary, Turkey would consider committing combat ground forces. A parliamentary mandate already exists, and a battalion composed of a mechanized unit and an armored unit is being

⁵ Greek Opposition Officials Condemn NATO Raids on Serbia, *Ta Nea*, March 29, 1999.

⁶ George Gilson, Popular Outcry Against NATO Strikes Mounts, *Athens News*, March 28, 1999.

⁷ Cem, Russian Envoy Comment on NATO Operation, Kosovo, Anatolia, March 25, 1999.

⁸ Speech at Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 27, 1999.

readied.⁹ Turkey also is prepared to commit 1,000 troops to a peacekeeping force. Turkish troops joined NATO's Operation Allied Harbor to assist refugees in Albania.

Greece: Greece decided not to veto NATO's use of force, but it is not participating in military operations. Greece has allowed NATO to use its ports and fuel lines, and a Greek destroyer is on NATO patrol duty in the Adriatic Sea. Foreign Minister Papandreou indicated that Greece would provide no facilities for the passage of forces to invade Yugoslavia.¹⁰ Greece has allowed Turkish humanitarian aid flights to use its airspace and would permit transit of peacekeeping forces, but it denied transit by Turkish fighter aircraft and supply planes. Greek troops assist refugees in Albania and the FYROM. A Greek medical group was the first non-governmental humanitarian aid organization that Belgrade allowed into Kosovo. Greece said that it would contribute to a U.N.-mandated peacekeeping force if all sides, including Yugoslavia, agree.¹¹ Greece abstained from voting when the European Union imposed an oil embargo on Yugoslavia but opposed ship inspections and questioned the legality of a possible maritime blockade. It also abstained from a EUTELSAT vote to end Serbian television use of a European satellite. Greece may have disrupted NATO plans to build up forces in the region via the port of Thessaloniki by requesting that no military personnel and equipment cross its territory from 10 days before until 10 days after June 13 European Parliament elections in order to free police for tasks related to the vote.

Prospects of a Wider Conflict

Wars can have unpredictable consequences, and events may occur during the Kosovo conflict that could destabilize Greek-Turkish relations. At present, however, despite their difficult history and differing views of the crisis, neither Greece nor Turkey believes that it would be drawn into the conflict against the other over Kosovo. The Greek and Turkish foreign ministers met with their Balkan counterparts on March 19, just days before the start of the bombing, and called on Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to accept the Rambouillet agreement. Since hostilities broke out, they have consulted by telephone, primarily on humanitarian/refugee issues.

Greece: Prime Minister Simitis told a European Union (EU) summit that he "disagreed ... that this development could lead to conflict with Turkey," and said, "Greece ... is a stabilizing force in the area. There is no reason for anyone to fear that there will be implications with Turkey." He concluded, "Mr. Clinton's view is not justified by any means."¹² Government spokesman Dimitris Reppas said that 'mistaken' spillover scenarios did not help ease regional tension.¹³ The Greek Ambassador in Washington made a demarche to the State Department, objecting to President Clinton's characterization.

⁹ Reuters, March 24, 1999, General Staff Says Turkish Battalion for Kosovo Ready, *Cumhuriyet*, March 29, 1999.

¹⁰ Interview, *Kiriakatiki Elevtherotipia*, May 16, 1999.

¹¹ Costas Jordanidis, A Serious Balkan Challenge, *I Kathimerini*, February 8, 1999. Also Simitis speech in parliament, May 3, 1999, NET television.

¹² Reuters, March 24, 1999.

¹³ Reuters, March 24, 1999.

President Stephanopoulos sarcastically observed that he had "never thought that a way to avoid a possibility (of a war between Greece and Turkey) would be the bombing of Serbia."¹⁴ Other politicians, such as Coalition for the Left and Progress leader Nikos Costantopoulos, wondered whether President Clinton's statement revealed a wider destabilizing (U.S.) plan.¹⁵

Nonetheless, Prime Minister Simitis acknowledged that refugees are not just a humanitarian issue, but a political one that could destabilize the region.¹⁶ He expressed concern that the economies of Albania and the FYROM cannot survive the disruptive effects of the refugee influx. Greece has increased humanitarian aid for the FYROM and Albania, as well as Yugoslavia, and lobbied the EU on the issue. A conflict spillover might occur if many Kosovar Albanian refugees are settled in southern Albanian regions inhabited by Albanians of Greek ethnicity, and clashes ensue.¹⁷ Greece might aid its kin, and Turkey might aid the Albanian government.¹⁸ However, Athens resolved earlier, albeit less momentous, differences with Tirana over Greek-Albanian rights by diplomacy, which would continue to be its preferred course of action. In another scenario, refugees might attempt to enter Greece, which would repel them by military force, prompting Turkish forces to aid the Albanians. Greece has secured its northern border with 1,000 additional police, and, while incidents may occur, it is unlikely to use force systematically to repel refugees. Greece hosts over 400,000 Albanian immigrants and must be sensitive to their possible reaction to the ill-treatment of refugees. However, Greece fears a resolution that would create an independent Kosovo, heralding a Greater Albania, which would further destabilize the region and could provoke a wider war.

Some suggest that Greece has territorial designs on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, based on the early 20th century Balkan Wars. But this analysis does not reflect modern Greece's self-image as a European state, satisfaction with its borders, homogeneity, and lack of desire to import the FYROM's ethnic woes or poverty. Greece's objection to the FYROM's name choice stemmed from concerns about the latter's improbable irredentism with respect to northern Greek territory, not from its own.

Turkey: Since 1923, the Turkish Republic has attempted to follow the precept of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, its founder: "peace at home, peace abroad." Thus, Turkey did not intervene militarily in Bosnia or in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, despite public demand.¹⁹ While Turkish officials disagreed with President Clinton's spillover theory, they were charitable in their reaction to it. Defense Minister Hikmet Sami Turk said that the U.S. President simply wanted to "point out possible developments."²⁰ Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem stated, "A state of war between Turkey and Greece due to the

¹⁴ NET, March 25, 1999.

¹⁵ NET, March 24, 1999.

¹⁶ Greek Prime Minister Makes Statement on Kosovo Crisis, NET, March 24, 1999.

¹⁷ U.S. Yugoslav Strikes Said Causing Regional Instability, *To Vima tis Kiriakis*, March 28, 1999.

¹⁸ Possible Greek Involvement in Yugoslav Crisis Seen, *I Kathimerini*, March 26, 1999.

¹⁹ Turkey views Cyprus differently due to its being a signatory to the Treaty of Guarantee. See CRS Issue Brief 89140, *Cyprus: Status of U.N. Negotiations*.

²⁰ Anatolia, March 24, 1999.

Kosovo crisis is possible only if Greece supports Serbia by leaving NATO and fights NATO. And I don't expect that such a situation will happen."²¹ Turkey has welcomed Kosovar refugees and does not view them as a potential problem. Some 6,000 early arrivals were housed with relatives or in reception centers, and a tent city was erected for the 20,000 more.

Other Implications

Greece: Prime Minister Simitis told his people that Greece continues to cooperate with NATO and the EU to avoid being marginalized.²² He has emphasized a political solution, the postwar period, and humanitarian issues. Aims for "the day after" include security, democratization, and economic development. Foreign Minister Papandreou has traveled widely among NATO members, Russia, China, and Yugoslavia to resolve the conflict. He and his Czech counterpart developed a peace plan to augment that of the G-8 industrialized states. Its centerpiece is a 48-hour bombing pause intended to spur diplomatic efforts toward a U.N. Security Council resolution.²³ Greek officials also are concerned about how their Kosovo policy might affect relations with the United States, including the U.S. role in resolving the Cyprus issue and regarding Greek-Turkish disputes in the Aegean and about a possible longer term popular alienation from the U.S. They are apprehensive that a pro-Serb stance might lead the United States to favor Turkey. Simitis has suggested that Greece wants to prevent Turkey from using the crisis to enhance its role in the eastern Mediterranean and Balkans.²⁴ Greece also wants to avoid a perceived pro-Serb position that could detrimentally affect relations with neighboring Albania, whose ethnic kin are the victims of Serb violence.

Turkey: Turkey hopes to benefit from being a reliable ally of the West and humanitarian in the current crisis, and to have NATO allies compare its conduct favorably with that of Greece. Defense Minister Turk even suggested that Turkey's contribution might serve as an impetus for EU membership.²⁵ Foreign Minister Cem has sought a more active role in NATO decision-making. However, Turkey has discovered that European and American opponents of the NATO campaign are drawing analogies between the plight of the Kosovar Albanians and that of the Turkish Kurds. Critics question why the alliance had not acted over the years to defend the Kurds, among other oppressed ethnic groups, if it could now intervene to protect the Kosovars. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has been waging an insurgency aimed variously at autonomy or independence in southeast Turkey since 1984, and Turkey's abuses of Kurdish civilians' human rights in its counter-insurgency activities have been criticized by many, including the U.S. State Department. Turkey's insistence on Yugoslavia's territorial integrity is probably due at least partly to its insistence on its own.

²¹ Anatolia, March 25, 1999.

²² Reuters, April 5, 1999.

²³ See Text of Czech-Greek Proposal, Prague CTK, May 26, 1999.

²⁴ Simitis States Greek Policy on Kosovo Crisis, NET Television, March 29, 1999.

²⁵ Statement at Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 26, 1999.