

Major Issues of Conflict between Turkey and Greece

Dr. Vikash Kumar

Research Scholar
Centre for West Asian Studies
School of International Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

ABSTRACT

Due to Geographical characteristics of Aegean Sea both countries want more sovereign control over Aegean Sea. Issue of Aegean Sea is also interrelated to Cyprus problem. Greece uses issue of Aegean Sea against Turkey for concession over Cyprus. Turkey through Cyprus issue wants more concession on Aegean Sea issue. Aegean Sea issue is related to both countries' national interest and security. Turkey and Greece' policy towards their Greek Orthodox and Muslim Turks minority has gone through many phases. After Turkish military invasion of Cyprus in 1974 Greece started discriminatory policy towards Muslim Turks of Western Thrace in socio-economic area. However, since 1990s Greece has recognized rights of Muslim Turks of Western Thrace and through reconciliation process has solved some issue of Muslim Turks minority like issue of language and issue of religious freedom. This study discusses causes of conflict between Turkey and Greece.

Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 was turning point for both countries' relations. External powers involvement in Cyprus has complicated issue. Greece and Turkey are involved on the basis of protection of interest and security of their related ethnic communities. However, Britain is involved in Cyprus issue by treaty of agreement, treaty of alliance and treaty of establishment. Due to external powers' involvement Cyprus issue has become international problem. United Nations' failure in settlement of Cyprus issue highlights its complexity. Until the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 the two neighbours faced the common enemy Soviet Union. They had maintained a regional balance. However, collapse of communism has ended balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean region. In the absence of balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean region conflict has escalated on knotty issues between both countries in the post cold war. Imia/Kardak crisis and S-300 missile crisis highlight continuation of disagreement on the core issues during post cold war. This study aims to analyse and examine the major issues of conflict between Turkey and Greece.

Keywords: Aegean Sea Dispute, Cyprus Conflict, Greek Orthodox, Turkish Minority

Introduction

Relations between Greece and Turkey remained tense in the 1990s, while Communism had collapse. Both countries' disagreement on major source of bilateral tension like Aegean Sea issue, Cyprus problem and minority rights are continuing in the post cold war. Greece parliament's ratification of the 1982 Law of Sea convention and Turkey's threat to war if, Greece applies the provision of the 1982 Law of Sea convention highlight continuous of disagreement in the post-cold war. Aegean Sea is core bilateral dispute between Turkey and Greece.

Aegean Sea dispute consists of series of contested issues like question of the delimitation of the continental shelf in the Aegean Sea, issue of delimitation of breadth of territorial waters in the Aegean Sea, issue of sovereign rights of airspace over Aegean Sea, issue of flight information region responsibility, issue of air corridor and air control zone in international airspace over Aegean Sea, issue of North Atlantic Treaty Organization's operational control zone, issue of search and rescue operation region, issue of demilitarization of eastern Aegean Islands and issue of sovereign right over uninhabited rocks, islets and islands in the Aegean Sea.

Lausanne treaty had provided provisions for status of territorial boundary between Turkey and Greece in the Aegean Sea. Lausanne treaty had recognized sovereign right up to three nautical miles in the Aegean Sea for Turkey and Greece. Both countries had followed provisions of Lausanne treaty till 1965. Till then this treaty played a stellar role in making peace in the region. But since second half of 1960s conflict occurred over a large number of issues related to Aegean Sea. In 1965 dispute started over continental shelf. In 1965 Greece's

research and exploration activity in the Aegean continental shelf had led to tension between both countries. Again dispute had occurred in 1974 when Turkey started exploration activity in Aegean continental shelf.

Turkey claimed that its exploration activity was within Turkish territorial waters. But Greece opposed Turkish exploration activity. Greece claimed that Turkish exploration activity was within Greek territorial waters. Greece argued that Turkish exploration activity violated provisions of the 1982 Law of Sea Convention. According to Turkey Aegean continental shelf has not been delimited by any bilateral agreements between Turkey and Greece. So, Turkey wants the delimitation of continental shelf through bilateral agreements. While Greece claims sovereign right over Aegean continental shelf on the basis of provisions of the 1982 Law of Sea Convention.

Issue of delimitation of the breadth of territorial waters in the Aegean Sea is another core area of dispute between Turkey and Greece. All areas of Aegean Sea dispute is related to issue of delimitation of breadth of territorial waters in the Aegean Sea. The 1982 Law of Sea Convention recognized maximum breadth of territorial waters up to 12 nautical miles. According to the 1982 Law of Sea Convention Greece claims extension of Greek territorial waters up to 12 nautical miles from present 6 nautical miles in the Aegean Sea. While Turkey's position on Aegean territorial waters is that Law of Sea convention should not applicable in the semi-closed Aegean Sea. Due to disagreement on territorial waters both countries came precariously close to war in 1976, 1987 and 1996.

Other areas of Aegean Sea dispute are closely related to Aegean territorial waters. All areas of Aegean Sea dispute are traditional and long-standing in nature except issue of sovereign right over uninhabited islets and islands in the Aegean Sea. Issue of extent of national airspace over Aegean Sea is another area of Aegean Sea issue. Greece claims sovereign right over airspace up to 10 miles over Aegean Sea. While Turkey argues that Greece cannot extend its national airspace over Aegean Sea beyond six miles. Dispute of air control, air corridor region and NATO's operational control region are also closely related to delimitation of national airspace over Aegean Sea. Both countries have disagreements over militarization of eastern Aegean islands.

According to Turkey militarization of eastern Aegean Sea would tantamount to a direct threat to its national security. Both countries also dispute over search and rescue region. According to Greece 1979 Hamburg convention on maritime search and rescue region has recognized Greek search and rescue region in the Aegean Sea. Contrastingly, Turkey claims that search and rescue region in the Aegean Sea should be delimited between both countries through bilateral agreements. Dispute of sovereign right over uninhabited islets and islands in Aegean Sea occurred in 1995-96 when Turkey for the first time claimed sovereignty over these islets, rocks and islands. Thus, Aegean Sea dispute is a serious impediment for bilateral relations between Turkey and Greece making peace elusive in the region.

Other disputed issue between both countries are issue of minority rights. Issue of minority right has complicated bilateral relations between both countries. There are Muslim Turks minority and Greek orthodox minority in Greek territory of western Thrace and Turkey respectively. Dispute of minority rights constitute many confrontation issues like issue of religious freedom, property right, freedom of expression of Muslim Turks of western Thrace and Greek orthodox of Turkish citizens, issue of denial of existence of Muslim Turks in the western Thrace, issue of stateless people in both countries, issue of control and management of wakfs of Muslim Turks. The disagreement between both countries on these issues had a deleterious impact on their bilateral relations.

Apart from bilateral disputes the involvement of both the countries in Cyprus problem has also contributed in deterioration of their relations. Although Cyprus issue is related to ethnic groups Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. But on the basis of same ethnicity, language and due to pressure from public opinion both countries are involved in Cyprus issue. Turkish military invasion in 1974 and partition of Cyprus into two parts have changed Cyprus problem. Both countries have conflicting positions on a wide range of issues related with Cyprus like issue of Greek Cypriots refugees, issue of autonomous region and settlement of Cyprus problem and issue of disarmament and demilitarization of Cyprus. Hence, there is a crying need for both the countries to find common ground on these ticklish issues through the process of dialogue on a bilateral basis.

Aegean Sea Dispute

The Aegean Sea dispute is a major obstacle in bilateral relations between Turkey and Greece. Aegean dispute is concerned with the national interest and sovereign right of both the countries. This dispute has posed a threat to peace and stability in the eastern Mediterranean region. The Aegean Sea is an eastern part of Mediterranean Sea. It links Black Sea to Mediterranean Sea and it is important maritime route for Turkey and Greece. Apart from Maritime route, for security perspective Aegean Sea is important for both countries because it is surrounded by the coasts of Turkey in the east and by the coast of Greece in the west. Through Aegean Sea Greece or Turkey could control armed activity of each other. Due to its unique geographical features, the Aegean Sea is of critical importance for both Greece and Turkey.

Hence, Turkey's view regarding Aegean Sea issue is that Turkey and Greece are having same rights and interests in the Aegean Sea. These issues impinge on both nation's security, economy and other traditional

rights under international law. Turkey's position is that Aegean is a common Sea between Turkey and Greece and the freedom of high seas and airspace over high seas should be open for both countries. Turkey's concern is that if Greece expands its territorial sea up to 12 nautical mile and established continental shelf and exclusive zone to the right of the Aegean Sea. Turkey will lose its right to move its ships and aircraft freely (Ayadin and Ifantis 2004, p. 125).

Greece's position is that Greece has sovereign right in the Aegean Sea under the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention, Lausanne treaty of 1923 and customary law (Kunz 1956, p. 34). Due to dispute over the delimitation of the continental shelf of Aegean Sea and Imia islets, both countries in 1976, in 1987 and in 1996 came to the brink of war. Aegean conflict is related to a group of disputes. These disputes are mainly related to jurisdiction and delimitation of the maritime boundaries over Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and fisheries zone, jurisdiction and sovereignty over continental shelf, breadth of territorial waters, Greek militarization of Aegean Islands, control of the air space beyond the territorial waters and dispute over Imia/Kardak islets All these issues are interlinked with each other and concerning with both countries' sovereignty and security. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty had established status quo in the Aegean Sea. The Lausanne peace treaty brought an overall settlement to the outstanding issues between Turkey and Greece and laid down the foundations of new relations. The Lausanne settlement represented a political balance based on harmonizing the vital rights and interests of the two neighbours (Bolukbasi 2004, p. 37).

Cyprus Dispute

In the post-cold war period, many ethnic disputes remain unresolved and revival of nationalist aspiration and interest of external powers in this dispute make difficult for the resolution of these dispute. Cyprus dispute represents this kind of ethnic dispute. Since the cold-war period the conflict between the two ethnic community-Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots are an important part of international politics. From the anti colonial uprising against British rule in the 1950s, through the emergence of fighting between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities in the 1960s, the Turkish invasion of the Island in the 1970s and subsequent thirty-year effort by the United nations to reunite the island, Cyprus has received a disproportionate degree of international attention (Lindsay 2011, p. 11).

Cyprus dispute is not only between Greek Cypriot community and Turkish Cypriot community but also it is between Turkey and Greece. In Cyprus, history has become the primary actor in battle fought on legal and diplomatic terrains as a result; narratives of the conflict represent a continuation of conflict (Bryant and Papadakis 2012). The strategic location and unique history of Cyprus have involved external parties in this dispute. External powers involvement in this dispute has created problem in permanent solution. The island's geographic proximity to Turkey and Greece, and their proclivity to protect and promote the interests of their related ethnic communities have influenced the scope and intensity of the conflict in Cyprus (Mohapatra 1997, p. 19).

Interest and position of Greece and Turkey differ in regarding of Cyprus dispute. Both Greek and Turkish government uses Cyprus as domestic political agenda and political purposes. Both countries' domestic politics and public opinion are important factor in settlement of Cyprus problem. Often if either the Turkish or Greek government is weak or if there is transitional uncertainty, it takes a hard line policy toward Cyprus to divert the attention of its people from domestic challenge, to criticise the policies of former governments and to improve its public opinion standing (Soysal 1999, p. 4).

Issue of Rights of Turkish Muslim and Greek Orthodox Minorities

There is always suspicion concerning the human rights of Greek and Turkish minorities living in Turkey and Greece respectively. Both Greece and Turkey accuse each other of mistreating minorities within their countries. Minority issue has affected relations between Turkey and Greece. Turkey castigates Greece for mistreating Turkish Muslim in western Thrace. Greece castigates Turkey for mistreating of Greek orthodox minority in Istanbul. Treaty of Lausanne had provided population exchange between both countries (Hirschon 2003, p. 13). The population exchange was between the Turkish nationals of Greek orthodox and Greek nationals of Muslim religion.

However Muslim Turks of western Thrace and Greek orthodox of Istanbul were exempted from the compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey. The Lausanne Treaty provided specific guarantees for basic individual and communal rights creating a framework that should have determined the conduct of minority policies in Greece and Turkey thereafter, minority repression has been apparent in both countries over a long period of time (Niarchos 2006, p. 31). Treaty of Lausanne defines right of both orthodox Greeks and Turks Muslim minorities and oblige both Greece and Turkey to respect the rights of minorities of Istanbul and western Thrace.

Greek State policies towards the minority have changed over time, mirroring the state of Greek-Turkish relations (Dragonas and Frangoudaki 2006, p. 25). Greece introduced discriminatory policies for Muslim Turks of western Thrace during 1960s and 1970s when bilateral relations between Turkey and Greece

had deteriorated due to dispute over Cyprus and Aegean Sea and Turkey's discriminatory policy for Greek Orthodox of Istanbul. These policies included the hampering of freedom of movement, land expropriations, restrictions in financial and administrative transactions and rescind of citizenship (Sitaropoulos 2004, p. 6). According to Turkey, Greece has violated regulation of treaty of Lausanne. Turkey accuses Greece for settlement of Greeks of refugees in western Thrace and violating of property rights of Muslim Turks. Settlement of Greek refugees has changed the balance between Greek and Turkish population in western Thrace in favour of Greek side. The Greek repression of Muslim Turks led political protest against Greek government. After politically protest for protection of human rights of minority in western Thrace, Greece has officially changed minority policy on the basis of legal equality and equal citizenship in 1990 (Stephen 1998, p. 4). However, Greece's official recognition of human rights of Muslim Turks of western Thrace has not solved minority problem in western Thrace.

Conclusion

There are mainly three major issues of conflict between Turkey and Greece. These are issue of Aegean Sea, Cyprus problem and issue of Greek orthodox rights in Turkey and issue of Muslim Turks rights in Greece. Issue of Aegean Sea and issue of human rights of minority are bilateral problems between both countries. Cyprus problem is consequence of both countries' involvement in this issue. These core issues of conflict are interconnected in terms of national security perception, their historical enormity and domestic politics. Issues of Aegean Sea and human rights of both Greek orthodox and Muslim Turks occurred after the 1923 treaty of Lausanne. But both countries misinterpreted provisions of the treaty of 1923 accordingly their interests. However, the two countries had established friendly relationship in 1930s and in early 1960s. However, during the Cold War and in the 1990s their relations deteriorated due to disagreement. Issue of Aegean Sea and minority issue are bilateral problems between Turkey and Greece.

References

- Ayadin, Mustafa and Ifantis, Kostas (2004), *Turkish-Greek Relations: The Security Dilemma in the Aegean*, London: Routledge, p.125.
- Kunz, Josef L. (1956), "Continental Shelf and International Law: Confusion and Abuse", *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 50.
- Bolukbasi, Deniz (2004), *Turkey and Greece: The Aegean Disputes: A Unique Case in International Law*, London: Cavendish Publishing Limited, p. 37.
- Koymen, Avukat Feridun (1978), "The Aegean Sea Continental Shelf Problem: Presentation of the Turkish Case", *International Business Lawyer*, Vol.6, No. 5, p. 498.
- Gross, Leo (1977), "The Dispute between Turkey and Greece Concerning the Continental Shelf in the Aegean", *American Society of International Law*, Vol.71, No. 1, p. 33.
- N. Nordquist, Myron (2011), *United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea, 1982: A Commentary*, Virginia: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Athanasopoulos, Haralambos (2001), *Greece, Turkey and the Aegean Sea: A Case Study in International Law*, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, p. 9.
- Schmitt, Michael N. (1996-97), "Aegean Angst: A Historical and Legal Analysis of the Greek-Turkish Dispute", *Roger Williams University Law Review*, No. 15, p. 33.
- Hellenic Republic of Greece (2013), Greek-Turkish Dispute over the Delimitation of Continental Shelf, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, [Online:Web] Accessed on 17 June 2013, URL: <http://www.mfa.gr/en/issues-of-greek-turkish-relations/relevant-documents/delimitation-of-the-continental-shelf.html>
- Ayadin, Mustafa and Ifantis, Kostas (2004), *Turkish-Greek Relations: The Security Dilemma in the Aegean*, New York: Routledge.
- Dyke, Jon M Van (1996), "The Aegean Sea Dispute: Options and Avenues", *Marine Policy*, Vol. 20, Issue 5, p. 40.

Athanasopoulos, Haralambos (2001), *Greece, Turkey and Aegean Sea: A Case Study International Law*, North Carolina: Mcfarland & Company.

Hellenic Republic of Greece (2013), Issue of Greek-Turkish relations- Relevant Documents, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, [Online:web], Accessed on 27 June 2013, URL: <http://www.mfa.gr/en/issues-of-greek-turkish-relations/relevant-documents/grey-zones.html>

Lindsay, James Ker (2011), *The Cyprus Problem: What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York: Oxford: University Press, p.11.

Brayant, Rebacca and Papadakis, Yiannis (2012), *Cyprus and the Politics of Memory: History, Community and Conflict*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., p. 2.

Mohaptara, Aswini Kumar (1997), "Cyprus Conflict: An Overview", in R.C Sharma and Stavros A. Epaminondas (eds.), *Cyprus: In Search of Peace and Justice*, New Delhi: Somali Publications, p. 19.

Soysal, Mumtaz (1999), "A solution for Cyprus through Statehood", *Perceptions Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.4, No. 3, p. 4.

Michael, Michalis Stavrou (2007), "The Cyprus peace talks: A critical appraisal", *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol.44, No. 5, p. 592.

Kaloudis, George (1999), "Cyprus: The Enduring Conflict", *International Journal on World Peace*, Vol.16, No. 1, p. 13.

Yiallourides, Christosdoulos (1997), "Turkey and the Cyprus Problem in the New World Order", cited in R.C Sharma and Stavros A. Epaminondas (eds.), *Cyprus: In Search of Peace and Justice*, New Delhi: Somali Publications, p. 184.

Niarchos, Georgios (2006), "Continuity and Change in the Minority Policies of Greece and Turkey", *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 6, No.1, p.31.