

## ***S-300s REVISITED***

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The Cyprus problem is certainly going through a delicate phase. At the international level the quiet yet intense diplomatic motions behind the scenes are as yet to produce any tangible movements on the ground. At the European level the ongoing application of the Government of the Republic for accession to the EU could potentially sabotage Turkey's relations with the European Union. As such Ankara is anxious to sever this process through whatever means available. Her national interests dictate that short of a settlement in Cyprus, Cyprus' accession to the European Union would put her in the most uncomfortable position of being the occupier of the territory of a member of the European Union. She does not want that. And for that matter, nor do the Europeans. What is to be done?

S-300 is now a phrase all too familiar to all Cypriots and those following Cypriot current developments. This saga which took new turns in opposite directions every so often had provided the Turks with the ideal scenario they could wish for. And as an added bonus for them it was a scenario they had not created. It was handed to them on a plate. The introduction of the S-300 missiles would have reinforced the military aspect of the problem in Cyprus and that would have been a welcome development for the Turks in two respects.

Firstly as Turkey enjoys overwhelming military superiority vis-a-vis Cyprus and Greece, the transformation of the struggle for Cyprus from political arenas to military battlefields would only strengthen Ankara's negotiating hand. It is usually at times of direct military confrontation or just before it that the more powerful can extract more concessions from the military subdued party. We have already seen that in Cyprus in 1967 and 1974 when in the former case 10,000 Greek troops had to leave the island at the behest of the Turks and in the latter period when the introduction of Turkish military power into the equation changed both the nature and the prospective solution to the problem of Cyprus.

Moreover, had the missiles arrived and been deployed in Cyprus, the threat of a military action by Turkey would have been enough to deter the tourists from the islands for as long as that threat remained in force. Such a scenario would have been detrimental to the development of Cypriot economy. Ankara would not even have needed to fire a bullet but keep the pressure on the economy of Greek Cypriots by repeating and keeping the threat of a strike alive. Deterring tourists is a far easier task than attracting them. In such an eventuality even after the issue of the missiles had been resolved it would have taken money, time and effort to re-attract the deterred tourists who in the meantime may have discovered new holiday

resorts.

Secondly and perhaps even more importantly would have been the impact of the missile crisis on Cyprus's application to join the European Union. Had the missiles arrived and been deployed - which would have been against the opinion of almost all EU member states - the resulting tension could have only delayed the process of accession. It is quite a different proposition to allow a divided Cyprus into the Union at the risk of disrupting EU-Turkey relations and disregarding the wishes of Washington, from one in which Cyprus as prospective member would have seemed at the brink of war or military confrontation with Turkey. Even if the former were not a terribly attractive scenario, the latter would appear a desirably avoidable one.

Such a development would have automatically assisted Turkey in tackling her problems as regards Cyprus' application for full membership. Without having played a role in the resultant political drama and therefore bereft of any blame for it, her case against Cyprus' admission into the EU would have been backed up by a new and powerful reality on the ground: the volatility of the situation. No doubt she would have also claimed that it was an untimely and ill-advised position taken by the EU on Cyprus' application that proffered Greek Cypriots the misguided courage to indulge in such a military procurement. Furthermore even when her European partners advised Cyprus to refrain from importing the missiles, Ankara would have added, Greek Cypriots went ahead and acted unilaterally. These arguments and more would have not been helpful to project a positive image of Cyprus to Europeans particularly at a time when they wish and work for their full cooperation.

Two other points beg to be mentioned here. One was the position of Athens and the other the question of Russia. As the least developments indicate (and they have been indicated for a long time) the Government of Prime Minister Simitis, to put it mildly, was not fully behind the importation of the missiles into Cyprus. Why? The reasons are clear and simple. What was Greece going to achieve from a military confrontation with Ankara? Probably nothing. There were and are no foreseeable gains in such an act for Athens, be it military, political, economic or social. What was she going to lose from such a confrontation? Probably quite a lot; the most important of which would have been a deferment of her plans to join the European single currency; not to mention the renewal of hostility with Ankara which as a long-term political strategy Greece seriously wishes to avoid. Therefore why should Greece have supported this move? There are no convincing answers to that question.

The question of the Russian Federation vis-à-vis Cyprus should not go unheeded either. The Russians and their predecessors, the Soviet Union, have always been interested in gaining a foothold in Cyprus. The S-300 missiles would have given the Russians exactly that long-awaited chance. The deployment of the missiles would have required permanent stationing of Russian military personnel who would, in the

final analysis, have been operating the system, at-least for some time to come. Consequently the Russians would have had a new, however minor, role in the military configuration in the island. Considering the unstable nature of the Russian politics at the moment such a scenario would inevitably have raised a few eyebrows in Washington and London. Therefore this scenario was not viewed with sympathy in the Western quarters.

The Russian ambitions to gain a foothold in Cyprus have so far been strenuously and successfully resisted by the West. Even though the Cold War no longer dominates every twist and turn in the international political arena, it would be premature to assume that the West is now prepared to fully up-grade Russia to an equal status as its own. The absence of an enemy from the scenery does not necessarily suggest the departure of basic tenets of contemporary international life. States still persevere to further their national interests and there is no reason or development to indicate that their behaviour has now found a new basis. The fundamentals of international relations are essentially the same as they were during the Cold War. The framework of alliances, however, may have gone through some changes. To be brief, the United States and the West still operate in a manner compatible with their national interests and the end of the Cold War has not shifted their allegiance to the prime motivator of policy.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the missiles did not arrive. The losses that were avoided were far greater than the perceived advantages that could have been gained from the missiles in Cyprus.

For one thing a serious rift with Athens, the primary mover and initiator of Cyprus' accession negotiations, if not inconceivable is hardly desirable. Secondly, the likely consequences of their importation into Cyprus as regards Turkey's actions and their impact on the Greek-Cypriot economy were at best unwelcome and at worst disastrous. Thirdly, Nicosia was ill-advised to embark upon an action so blatantly against the wishes of the West. Particularly when she is in a tentative state of requiring their support for her bid for the Greek Cypriots to reinforce the military aspect in search for a Cyprus solution. The Government of Cyprus is best to press on with diplomatic efforts, which is her strongest international card.