THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: ROADBLOCK OR PATHWAY TO SOVIET EXPANSION

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(Essay)

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by

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THE EASTERN MEDITERREAN:

ROAD BLOCK OR PATHWAY TO SOVIET EXPANSION?

The question of the current importance of the Eastern Mediterrean as a strategic path for continued Soviet expansion has been somewhat overshadowed by the recent turmoil in the Middle East as a result of the Arab-Israeli war.

This paper will look at this area, limited to Greece, Turkey, and the waters adjacent to them, in light of current Soviet and US/NATO activities to see what is todays role of this traditionally critical area in the defense of Southern Europe. Of utmost importance is whether this has become a vulnerable flank of NATO or if it is an active area of Western containment of Soviet expansion. The military activities in the Middle East war and throughout the North African area are not addressed except as they either effect the Soviet/NATO confrontation or directly reflect its efforts.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Eastern Mediterranean has been a key area of conflict throughout history. The Trojan war of the 13th Century B.C. was fought essentially for control of the water egress from the Black Sea to the

Mediterranean. The historical perspective of the region is well pictured by Admiral Rivero, USN, while serving there.

> "Europe, Africa, Asia - the three continents that have held the stage of history longest, meet in the Mediterranean. History shows that every power bent on world domination sooner or later has been tested in the Mediterranean and the story of our own day proves that the contest for freedom cannot escape the fascination, pull and attraction of this stage. The ambition to control this inland and its littoral has been the cause of more rivalries, battles and wars than have been engendered in any other comparable body of water on the globe."[2]

Certainly this historical view but reinforces the obvious view that other than the North German plain, this area of Greece and Turkey Thrace offers the one high speed, large land mass army approach to a

critical western terrain feature, the Turkish straits, from the East.[3] For this reason alone the Eastern Mediterranean takes on an aura of importance from the standpoint of defense of Western Europe.[4]

The Turkish Role

By map inspection alone, Turkey is the key to the Eastern Mediterranean. As such she has been under the pressure of the Soviet Union for many years. Key to the formal controversies and in turn to the Mediterranean is the Montreux Convention of 1936 and the Turko-Soviet Treaty of Friendship of 1921. The latter insured a friendly border to the Soviet while the former insured the long sought access to the Mediterranean. The Montreux Convention was hailed as a major breakthrough for Russia in that it provided for transit of the Dardanelles to them and, as might be noted, access to the Black Sea for others. An option still exercised by the United States. However, its historical importance lay in its establishing the ligitimacy of Russian access to the open sea.[5] From this point forward the legal route of expansion into the Mediterranean existed for the Soviets.

Following the second World War the relations of Turkey and Russia followed that of its European

neighbors. In 1945 the Soviets renounced the Turko-Soviet friendship Treaty of 1921. Pressure was applied by Russia to revise the Montreux Convention by the Black Sea powers alone, allow Russian participation in the defense of the Dardanelles, provide special transit privileges to Russia and deny transit of war ships of non-Black Sea powers. In addition, the Russians pressured Turkey to cede several border provinces. The squeeze was on.[6] At this point it appears clear that the Soviets had begun their push against the gates of the Eastern Mediterranean, not only against Turkey, but against Greece as will be discussed below as well.

The Greek Role

Like its neighbor Greece faced post - World War II pressure from Communism. It did this handicapped with a long history of military coups and the immediate danger of a civil war and the attendent possible communistic take over upon the withdrawal of British troops after World War II.[7]

The Vital importance of Greece was recognized in the West. Macedonia and Greek Thrace are the overland

gateways to the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean and if Greece slipped into the Soviet Camp the Defense of the Dardanelles could not be assured.[8]

This threatening state led to the momentus decision on the part of President Truman to ask the Congress on 12 March 1947 for $400,000,000 worth of military and economic aid for Greece and Turkey. Essentially the United States was stepping forward, filling the vacuum left by the British and drawing the Southern European line of Soviet containment. The importance of this was summed up in the President's remarks to Congress.

> "It is necessary only to glance at a map to realize that the survival and integrity of the Greek nation are of grave importance in a much wider situation. If Greece should fall under the control of an armed minority, the effect upon its neighbor Turkey would be immediate and serious. Confusion and disorder might well spread throughout the Middle East and would have a

profound effect upon those countries in Europe whose people are struggling against great difficulties to maintain their freedom and their independence while they repair the damages of war."[9]

The Nato Role

By 1952 Greece had successfully concluded its civil war and American aid had stabilized both countries. As a result both nations joined the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance and the southern flank of Europe was secured as well as the historic Black Sea gate to the Mediterranean. NATO strategy recognized that the Turkish straits were vital to western security and barred direct access to the Middle East as well as NATO's southern flank.[10] This flank is highly dependent on the Mediterranean as its lifeline since Italy, Greece and Turkey are all physically separated from Central Europe by either Warsaw Pact or neutral countries.[11]

Today the strategic significance of that Eastern Mediterranean region still appears vital to the defense of Europe and despite the disruptive military coups

in both Greece and Turkey their pro-western stance continues as a vital link in NATO. This is particularly true in the light of the new Soviet threats that have arisen in the Mediterranean Basin.

SOVIET THREAT

Apparently defeated on the political front the Russian expansion took a new form in the penetration of the Eastern Mediterranean in the early 1960's by combat forces in the form of the Red Fleet. Admiral Richard Colbert, USN, sums up this change in this NATO report.

> "Not so long ago it used to be that the Mediterranean was an Allied mare nostrum. Its three egresses-Suez, Gibraltar and the Dardanelles/Bosporus - could be controlled in time of war to insure the integrity of the entire basin. Not only was the presence of naval opposition non-existent, no such opposition could be deployed to the Mediterranean from elsewhere. Now the situation has completely changed. Admittedly Gibraltar and the Sea of Mirmara would be under NATO

control in the event of hostilities, but these chokepoints have diminished in importance from the defense point of view in that there are powerful forces in being currently on either side of them."[12]

Political Background

Prior to the 1960's the Soviets did not wield either political or military power anywhere in the Mediterranean. However, as a result of the Anglo/French Israeli actions during the Suez crises of 1956 a series of political actions signaled Russia's entry into the Mediterranean Arena. The British began to withdraw from the Eastern Mediterranean and pressure on Mr. Ben Gurion by President Eisenhower forced Israel to withdraw its troops from Eygpt. Russia soon followed with assistance to Eygpt for the ASWAN Dam and military/economic aid to the Arab states. Soviet influence began spreading.[13]

Soviet Military Strength

Right behind Soviet aid came Soviet military power. Protected by this Montreux Convention the Soviets began sending naval units into the Mediterranean. By 1964 the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron, including

submarines, was permanently established there. This move appears to have coincided with a general Soviet change in policy from a defensive naval posture to an active challange to the United States at sea.

Concurrent with this growth of naval power in the region was the establishment of bases along the North African Littoral culminating with the commitment of Soviet combat forces into Egypt in 1970.[14]

The question is what real threat does the Soviet Fleet present to NATO? In general terms it is a "have" fleet supported by relatively short lines of communications. Its ships are relatively new. From a strictly technical standpoint the Soviets possess several weapons which the US and its NATO allies do not have available. The ship to ship missile SHADDOCK presents a sizable threat to our carrier forces. Additionally the Soviets have a submarine launched anti-ship missile. Both of these weapons offer the Russians a surprise capability against our carrier strike forces which must be considered.[15]

The Soviet forces in the Mediterranean, despite their size and technical competence have a number of limitations which require evaluation.

Perhaps most limiting is the present lack of naval air support. While it is true that North African bases have offered ground based air cover, the fact is that these bases are on foreign soil, fixed in nature and as such are vulnerable to attack or loss thru political/military action. Perhaps even more critical is that they must be resupplied by sea thru the very seaways in dispute. Overall the lack of sea based airpower is a critical limitation.[16]

As additional limitation is the matter of being base oriented. The current Soviet fleet lacks the expertise for underway resupply and for this reason must depend either on shore bases in the Mediterranean or similiar bases at home. Fortunately for them, as has been pointed out, their lines of communications are short. Additionally, there is no reason to believe that in the future this lack of expertise will not be overcome. For the present, however, the Soviets are limited in on-station time for their combat forces.[17]

How Real the Threat ?

In analyizing the reality of this new threat several considerations must be made. First, the

Russian view. It would appear logically that the Soviets consider this area of the Eastern Mediterranean a legitimate area of interest due to its proximity to their southern boundries and a natural desire for access to the open ocean. Additionally they cannot help but be attracted to the areas as a possibl: area for expansion of influence due to its political instability.[18]

Three basic threats to the West appear from the extension of Soviet military powers into the Eastern Mediterranean. First, the rather obvious threat to Western shipping lanes, particularly those vital links to Greece and Turkey. Second, the threat to the Arabian oil supply on which Western Europe is so dependent and finally, through a combination of military and diplomatic pressure, the threat to the political posture of the Middle East.[19]

In summary, the Soviet threat, represents the accomplishment by the current Soviet Leadership of what the Tsars were unable to accomplish in several centuries, reaching the Mediterranean.[20]

The impact of this is only now being spelled out within NATO. Eric B. Lumenfeld in reporting to the 14th Session of the North Atlantic Assembly

characterizes the situation well.

> "Less dramatic than the Central European Demarcation Line between East and West but at least as serious in their effect are the developments on the Southern Flank of this alliance."[21]

US/NATO MILITARY ACTIVITIES

As Soviet pressure on the Eastern Mediterranean grew over the years, positive responses, beginning with Gen Van Fleet's military mission to Greece in 1947, were generated by the United States and its NATO allies. Throughout the period from the Greek civil war to today Greece and Turkey have retained strong Western ties. Turkey, while experiencing a rising anti-American feeling, has stayed pro-NATO throughout a series of strong-man governments. Greece is perhaps our staunchest friend, particularly since the 21 April 1967 coup.[22] While both countries certainly cause political embarrasment they remain key to US/NATO response to Soviet expansion.

NATO Military Response

As the Soviet military presence spreads Western reaction began. Since adequate surveillance appeared

a necessity, in 1967 the United States, Great Britian and Italy set up a combined command called Maritime and Airforce Mediterranean (MARAIRMED)[23]. In 1968 this was later expended to include Greece and Turkey. Though the military aspects of this command are important, perhaps more important was its direct political impact. The southern NATO powers have taken a direct collective response to Soviet activities and the message was clear.[24]

Though MARAIRMED represented a positive step in NATO's response, the obvious weakness in the NATO military posture was the lack of a combined naval command. There has been, since 1969 an on-call force which has been brought together at frequent intervals. However, this is not a NATO equivalent to the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron.[25] The problem of the lack of such a force was reflected in the call by the then Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird to the NATO Defense Planning Committee in December 1971 when he stated that the Eastern Mediterranean was going into Soviet hands by default and called for an integrated NATO naval force in the Mediterranean.[26]

The western military response has not, of course,

been only at sea. Both NATO, and on a unilateral basis, the United States have been conducting a series of contingency operations in Greece and Turkey Thrace demonstrating their resolve to commit land combat troups to secure the Turkish straits. Deep Express 1970, Hellanic Express 1971 and similiar operations have clearly demonstrated the capability and willingness of the NATO powers to reinforce the southern region. The magnitude of these exercises, 100,000 men operating over an area of 2500 sq. miles, clearly underlines Western concern.[27] Additionally US Airborne forces have conducted extensive exercises in this area showing US concern for regional security.[28]

US Sixth Fleet's Role

Any military discussion of the Eastern Mediterranean is purely academic without consideration of the US Sixth Fleet. Though not a peacetime NATO force the Sixth Fleet represents the most important western military element. The fleet differs from the Soviet's in many respects. Its heart is the carrier strike force, generally two attack carriers.

Additionally, a shore oriented offensive force of a marine regimental size landing force is normally embarked. It is, or at least was, until recently, a fleet without a home base.[29]

Its mission is essentially offensive oriented on supporting the land battle and its greatest capability is its air power. Its greatest limitation is perhaps its age. The average age of its ships being around 19 years versus that of 7 years for the Soviet.[30]

Its operation role in the region has changed materially since the arrival of the Soviets. At one time the Sixth Fleet could roam at will. It finds that this is no longer true. Its operating habits have changed and we now see the two super powers intermingled throughout the area and one must pause to consider how different the naval battle might be in any future hostilities when each fleet is literally bow to stern with the other.

The Sixth Fleet has been sometimes accused of abandoning the Eastern Mediterranean but recent developments would indicate this is not true. Admiral Kidd, when commanding the Sixth Fleet, pointed out that if the numbers of ships have been reduced it has been by design rather than default. Training of

carrier forces requires open skies not found in the heavily commercial trafficked area of the Eastern Mediterranean. He reemphasised: "The fleet will continue to operate in the Deep Eastern Basin."[31]

Perhaps more significant than the rhetoric of the US commanders has been the decision to home port major elements of the Sixth Fleet in the region."

The United States has operated fixed bases in the Mediterranean, notably Naples and Signella in Italy, Rota Spain and the extensive naval air facilities at Soudha Bay Crete. However, only the flagship of the Sixth Fleet has had a home port in the Mediterranean. Now we are establishing a naval base, complete with several thousand dependents, deep in the Eastern Mediterranean. In September 1972, the first of six destroyers, part of an eventual carrier task force took up port in Pireaus, Greece.[32]

Perhaps most significant was that this was done in spite of congressional, as well as world, disapproval of the administration's support of the Greek military regime. However, as Secretary of State Rogers pointed out when announcing the home porting, this would be a great step forward in both

improving morale by allowing dependents to accompany the ships and improve readiness by reducing trans-ocean supply lines. Analysis of the move would indicate a fine distinction between military and political policy.[33] In any case the message of the permanency of the US base certainly cannot be lost on the Russians.

TODAYS PERSPECTIVE

In reviewing the importance of the region, the growth of Soviet military presence and the US/NATO responses to it in the Eastern Mediterranean certain things became clear.

First, the Russian move is not accidental. The solid front of Central Europe (3600 miles) makes it logical for the Soviets to seek some other area to probe in an attempt to expand. Additionally the Europeans for a number of years have underestimated the threat and its political and psychological implications. Serious problems face the West. The Red Fleet in the Mediterranean signals the transition of Russia from a continental to a world seapower. Two great navies now are intermingled in the Southern

European flank and perhaps most critical, the Soviet Fleet now lays interspersed between the US Sixth Fleet and the area of concern.[34]

A second thought is that the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean has not diminished. Some would argue that NATO cannot look only to the sea in the Mediterranean, but, must also look to extensive Soviet Air bases to the south which would balance the air superiority of the NATO powers. and that the future concern lies in the shores of North Africa as well. However, the logistic support which the Soviet aircraft would require must be supplied by sea and comes through the NATO controlled egresses to the Mediterranean. It appears that as long as the Greeks and Turks stand firm the Russians can be controlled.

A final and perhaps most important consideration is that this Russian presence is here to stay and this has been a critical move for them. Colonel Minton Wilson put it well.

"Russia has committed her own combat power, admittedly still limited, to the area. Once started the process is not easily reversed. Where could it lead? To a clash of the Titans, the US and

USSR? No one wants it. The possibility exists. Yes, the Russian Bear bathes in the warm Mediterranean, she has gained her goal, all done at great cost, but with patience. The critical years lay ahead."

In concluding this look at the strategic importance of the Eastern Mediterranean certain conclusions emerge. First, the Eastern Mediterranean has served the pathway to Soviet expansion but at the same time serves as a block to Soviet operations in time of war. Second, dynamic changes in both Soviet and US operations in the region keynote the fact that this is in fact an area of active East/West confrontation. And finally it is essential that the land Bridge of Greece and Turkey be held to insure that NATO's Southern flank doesn't become its Southern Front.

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COL, Field Artillery

FOOTNOTES

1. James T. Shotwell and Francis Deak, Turkey at The Straits, p. 1.

2. Admiral Horacio Rivero, "The Challange in The South," NATO's Fifteen Nations, April/May 1972, p. 61.

3. Shotwell and Deak, p. 49.

4. IBID, p. 50.

5. IBID, p. 125.

6. Stephanus Zotos, Greece: The Struggle For Freedom, p. 171.

7. C. L. Sulzberger, "Greece Under the Colonels," Foreign Affairs, Jan 1970, p. 302.

8. "A Vital Gap in NATO's Defences Was Closed When Greece and Turkey Accesed to the North Atlantic Treaty on 18 Feb 1952," NATO REVIEW, March/April 1972, p. 13.

9. Zotos, p. 171.

10. "A Vital Gap in NATO's Defences Was Closed When Greece and Turkey Accesed to the North Atlantic Treaty on 18 Feb 1952." p. 12.

11. Colonel Minten L. Wilson, "Bears in the Med," NATO's Fifteen Nation Supplement on SHAPE and Allied Command Europe, April/May 1972, p. 52.

12. Admiral Richard G. Culbert, "Sea Power in The Mediterranean - The New Balance," NATO's Fifteen Nation Supplement on SHAPE and Allied Command Europe, Oct/Nov 1972, p. 43.

13. "Soviet Threat in The Mediterranean," NATO Letter, June 1969, p. 4.

14. Wilson, p. 53.

15. John Marriott, "The Situation In The Mediterranean," NATO's Fifteen Nations, Aug/Sept 1971, p. 83.

16. Admiral Issac C. Kidd, Jr., "A View From The Bridge Of The Sixth Fleet Flagship," Proceedings Of The United States Naval Institute, Feb 1972, p. 23.

17. IBID.

18. Wilson, p. 50.

19. "Soviet Threat In The Mediterranean," p. 6.

20. Wilson, p. 50.

21. "Soviet Threat In The Mediterranean, "NATO Letter, Jan. 1969, p. 8.

22. Major E. Hinterhoff, "The Complex Problems Of The Southern NATO Flank," NATO's Fifteen Nations, April/May 1972, p. 35.

23. "Soviet Threat In The Mediterranean," NATO Letter, Jan 1969, p. 8.

24. "MARAIRMED," NATO Letter, Jan. 1969, p. 23.

25. "Fourth Activation Of NATO's Naval On-Call Force, Mediterranean," NATO Review, July/Aug. 1972, p. 21.

26. The International Institute For Strategic Studies, Strategic Survey 1971, p. 30.

27. Colonel William Brant, "Deep Express 70." NATO's Fifteen Nations Supplement On SHAPE And The Allied Command Europe, June/July 1971, p. 50.

28. "Three NATO Exercises," NATO Review, July/August 1972, p. 27.

29. Kidd, p. 20.

30. IBID, p. 25.

31. "Why The U.S. Navy Is Setting Up A 'Home Port' in Greece U.S. News And World Report, 11 Sept 1972, p. 43.

32. Sulzberger, p. 310.

33. The Center For Strategic and International Studies, NATO After Czechoslovakia, p. 50.

34. "Soviet Threat In The Mediterranean," NATO Letter, Jan. 1969, p. 8.

35. Wilson, p. 56.

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(An excellent view of the NATO strategy to the south.)

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(Contains excellent background on U.S. activities)

11. "MARAIRMED." NATO Letter, Jan 1969, pp. 20-23.
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18. "The Soviet Navy on NATO's Flanks." NATO Review, July/Aug 1972, p. 20.

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