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Cold War Tension, Regional Pressures, Intra-allied Disputes, and the Abortive Efforts to Establish a Mediterranean Defence Pact, 1946-50

After mid-1946, developments in Greece and Turkey caused increased apprehension to local governments and the US and British policy makers over the security situation in eastern Mediterranean and Soviet intentions. In Greece, the Greek guerillas culminated their military operations against government forces and formed the Greek Democratic Army. Furthermore, in August, the Soviet government delivered a new diplomatic note to Ankara demanding the revision of the regime of the Straits; the increase of Soviet pressure to Turkey led to the intensification of discussions between that country and US and British officials on how to respond to the Kremlin.

Until early 1947, Greece and Turkey continued to rely primarily on British aid and support to fight Greek communists and withstand Soviet pressure respectively, but were also seeking some sort of US security commitment. The Truman Doctrine which was officially proclaimed on 12 March 1947 provided for US

financial and military aid and unofficial moral commitment to Greece and Turkey, but could not allay Greek and Turkish fears. The first priority of the Greek government was to suppress the communist insurgency and put an end to the Civil War, while Turkey's main concern was to convince the American and British policy makers to establish a pact which would guarantee peace and security in the eastern Mediterranean. Thus, in early March 1947 the Turkish Foreign Minister Numan Menemencioglu proposed the formation of an Eastern Mediterranean defense pact composed by Turkey, Egypt and Greece and backed by the West; this pact could be associated closely with another, Western Mediterranean, pact formed by Spain, Italy and France. By August, Ankara was favoring the US and British full inclusion into such a pact. The aim was to establish a solid security system in the whole Mediterranean which would contain Soviet attempts to expand beyond the Black Sea.

Then, in late 1947 and early 1948 Italian, Greek and Turkish security anxieties culminated because of internal and international developments. In Italy, elections were about to take place in April 1948, and it appeared highly likely that the leftist coalition, dominated by the PCI (the Italian Communist Party), might win. In Greece, the civil war had intensified and the Greek leadership expressed fears that Yugoslav and/or Bulgarian aggression, backed by the Soviet Union, was probable. In addition, the Soviets resumed their press campaign and pressure on Turkey and Iran. Furthermore, the communist coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 exacerbated the fears of the West over Soviet intentions and triggered the process which led to the signature of the Brussels Treaty by Britain, France and the Benelux countries in March. The Truman administration was determined to support this western European defense pact. Then, the Greek government took the initiative and pursued its aim of establishing a wider scheme which would include Italy, Greece, Turkey and all (or

most of) Arab states; according to Greek officials, such pact, or entente, could eventually link the Arab states with the United States and Britain. Greece also sought to establish a Greek-Turkish military pact to deter Yugoslavian and Bulgarian aggression, but Ankara was not interested: Greece was too weak and in the middle of civil conflict and was therefore a liability rather than an asset; while Turkish officials considered that even British support was not enough, and made plain that what they desired was a US security guarantee.

Furthermore, Turkey, Britain and the United States did not endorse Greek views of linking the Arab states with an eastern Mediterranean defense pact. The Foreign Office viewed that there was no point to plan long term pacts. The British wanted to see how things would develop, and advised the Greeks to strengthen their entente with Turkey (and then, possibly, with Italy). Nevertheless, the Greek Foreign Secretary Konstantinos Tsaldaris continued to press repeatedly with the idea of an Eastern Mediterranean bloc. Initially (April 1948) the State Department did not oppose the Greek and Turkish plans for the creation of an Eastern Mediterranean pact, but it did not consider that the Arab states should be included, at least so long as the Palestine problem remained unsolved. The British and the Americans understood that at the moment it was unrealistic to believe that the Arab states would participate in any pact sponsored by the major western powers, particularly after the state of Israel was proclaimed in mid-May 1948. Moreover, the Americans did not wish to be drawn into any fresh commitments for assistance to powers grouped in an Eastern Mediterranean pact. Only an alignment of Italy, Greece and Turkey appeared to be practicable and useful. For their part, Turkish policy makers resented Greek ambitions that Greece could become the bridge between the West and the Arabs and were

determined to keep for themselves the right to approach the Arabs should the time come for the establishment of a regional defense pact.

In essence, both Athens and Ankara considered that the Truman Doctrine was not a permanent US commitment and feared that American strategic interests and priorities were shifting from the eastern Mediterranean to Western Europe. In the summer of 1948 Turkish officials resumed their effort to commit the United States to the defense of their country. But the State Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were extremely cool towards the idea of a US-Turkish alliance or the extension of a direct American security guarantee to Turkey; therefore, Ankara regarded that the best means to get one was indirectly, through the link of a Mediterranean pact which would include Turkey, Greece, Britain, France but not Italy and the Arab states. At that stage, cooperation between the Western powers was far from cordial: for instance the Turks believed that Italy should not join a pact from the beginning; it was common belief (and not only in Ankara) that if Italy was a founding member, it would possibly blackmail by demanding the return of its colonies. Also, it could hardly make any positive contribution to collective defense. In any case, in 1947-48 it was considered that Italy did not seem eager to accede to any grouping of powers. It is also noteworthy that the Turks did not bother to inform the Greek officials for their plans; cooperation with Greece was considered unnecessary or even detrimental to Turkish interests, as it might restrict Ankara's freedom of action without adding to the latter's defense capabilities or diplomatic leverage. This is why the Turks were clearly unwilling to undertake additional responsibilities so long as they did not get a direct and permanent US security guarantee – after all, Turkey already had a military alliance with Britain and France since 1939.

Moreover, during the period under examination the US and British policy makers often had divergent views and priorities regarding strategy in the region. But at that stage both the United States and Britain were clearly unwilling to commit themselves in binding security agreements. In 1948 the British wanted to go slow on the matter of a possible formation of an Eastern Mediterranean pact. Despite their great concern for the security of the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East and their struggle to maintain British primacy and prestige in the region, they were fully aware that without US support, any attempt to establish a regional pact in the eastern Mediterranean or the Middle East would be futile, particularly as British relations with key Arab states were strained. Therefore, until the signature of the NAT in April 1949 the top priority of the Foreign Office was to secure US commitment in the defense of Western Europe.

Meanwhile, as negotiations between the Brussels Treaty members and the Americans and Canadians began to establish an Atlantic Pact, Greek and Turkish nervousness increased in autumn 1948, when it appeared that Italy's accession to it was probable. In October, Turkish Foreign Minister Necmedin Sadak approached the British and repeated the Turkish request for the establishment of a Mediterranean security pact which would also include the United States and Britain. Then in late November, both the Greeks and the Turks raised the issue of adherence of the Mediterranean countries in the Atlantic pact, especially should Italy was also included. However, Washington and London responded that the new pact was geographically restricted to the countries of the North Atlantic area. As regarded the establishment of a Mediterranean pact, so far there was no tangible and practical basis for the negotiation and conclusion of such a defense scheme. The main adverse factors were the Greek Civil War, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Italian military

weakness under the peace treaty, and uncertainties about the course Tito's Yugoslavia would follow after its split with the Soviet Union and the bloc.

Essentially, in the late 1940s Washington, London and particularly most of the European allies considered Greece and Turkey, and the Eastern Mediterranean as a whole, too remote from the important centers of power in Europe. NATO was supposed to cover those centers and an early expansion to the South-east would dilute the already limited defence capabilities of the West. The strategic importance of Greece and Turkey was not questioned by the major western powers, but they were considered not as vital European territory which should be covered by the North Atlantic Treaty, but as ramparts of the West in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, regions which were significant for Western European security and economic development. Therefore, the Americans rebuffed Turkish attempts to link directly or indirectly NATO with the Anglo-French-Turkish treaty of 1939, but tried to reassure the Turks that despite the absence of a formal US guarantee, American commitment to the security of Turkey remained equally strong.

However, Italy became a founding member of NATO. Thus, the inclusion of Italy and French Algeria to NATO established a significant, though still western, Mediterranean component. So the Turkish government continued to express its interest for a credible US security guarantee and Turkey's association with western defense arrangements. Greece was too weak to demand its admission to the Atlantic Pact and was preoccupied with the definite defeat of the communist insurgents and then with internal stabilization, and left the initiative to Ankara. The Truman Doctrine did not constitute an alliance, and the duration of US commitment and economic aid remained uncertain. What Ankara (and Athens) wished was a formal US security

commitment, which would institutionalize their relation with the United States, hopefully followed by a long-term program of military and economic aid.

Meanwhile, high ranking US policy makers tried to allay Turkish fears by arguing that the establishment of NATO was only the first, though decisive, step for the organization of the West's defensive perimeter around the Soviet bloc. Then the Truman administration would study further actions to strengthen regional security; possible steps could be inclusion of eastern Mediterranean countries into NATO or the formation of a Mediterranean security Pact. After all, from the Anglo-American perspective, long before the Atlantic Pact was conceived, the United States and Britain had demonstrated their determination to defend the eastern Mediterranean countries against communist aggression.

However, during the following months, and despite Turkish requests, no specific initiative was undertaken by Washington, which was slow to consider the extension of a formal US security guarantee east of the NATO area. On its side, London began to shift its interest on the creation of a Middle East defense pact which would also include at least Egypt. In April and May 1950 Turkey, followed by Greece, once again asked for a formal US commitment either by the conclusion of a bilateral alliance or through the establishment of a Mediterranean Pact. Subsequently, Ankara officially appealed for NATO membership, but to no avail.

The outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950 worked as a catalyst. Before that, Greek and Turkish initiatives for inclusion into NATO had gained the support only of the Italian government and, in May 1950, of French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman. The lack of a US and British security guarantee had led the Greek and the Turkish governments to express publicly their disappointment and

dissatisfaction. Then, the new Turkish government headed by Adnan Menderes sent troops to Korea and in late July 1950 appealed again for NATO membership.

Greece left the initiative to Turkey but was equally interested to obtain some formal US guarantee. By August 1950 Ankara appeared less willing to accept other alternatives, short of NATO membership, to get a formal military alliance with the United States. US officials considered any options available at the moment, and concluded that the best short-term solution was the granting of associate status to Turkey and Greece so that both countries could participate without delay in coordinating regional planning with NATO. This associate arrangement would not involve any particular organizational and administrative difficulties. Once the defense of the member states of NATO was assured, raising the question of full membership for Greece and Turkey could be considered. The establishment of a new security pact initially consisting of Greece, Turkey and Iran, under which the United States, Britain and France might either enter into reciprocal commitments (on the NATO model), or give a non-reciprocal commitment, was rejected as a more complicated and less effective and satisfactory solution.

The US proposals were discussed by the representatives of the United States, Britain and France (these countries constituted the Standing Group of NATO – the permanent steering body of the alliance) in Washington in late August-early September 1950. Significantly, the three powers also considered the broader question of Near Eastern security, of which the Turkish and Greek issue had been but one aspect. Therefore, after the summer of 1950, the issue of the Greek and Turkish admission became interconnected with the whole allied defense planning in the Near East. Indeed, in September 1950 Greece and Turkey were offered the status of associates with NATO's military planning in the Mediterranean.

Although France endorsed US proposals, Britain tried to minimize the extent of that association, as it was not eager to consider the extension of NATO's area to Greece and Turkey. Whitehall's preference was either the formation of a British-led eastern Mediterranean pact which would be more or less directly linked with a Middle East defence pact, or the direct inclusion of Turkey, and possibly Greece, in that British-led Middle East pact, as a means to sustain the waning British power in this critical area. However, the Mediterranean defence pact schemes proved abortive, not least because of US opposition to British plans. By May 1951 US civil and military officials had decided that a formal and definite security commitment should be made to Greece and Turkey. After much debate, and despite British unwillingness, they assessed that Greek and Turkish full membership to NATO constituted the best solution to integrate eastern Mediterranean into western defense arrangements, and until September they pressed and eventually convinced their NATO allies to accept full Greek and Turkish admission into the alliance.

Indeed, obviously admission to NATO was the best solution both in the short and the long term. Any other defense schemes in the region proved either abortive (the Mediterranean Pact and the MEC and MEDO projects) or stillborn (the Baghdad Pact/CENTO) partly due to antagonism between the United States and Britain or because of regional conflicts. On the contrary, as an alliance NATO showed remarkable resilience on the political field and managed to stabilize to a significant degree Italy, Greece and Turkey. On the military field, it managed to cover effectively the three Mediterranean members as it deterred Soviet bloc aggression. And, of equal importance, it tied these countries permanently to the West, in a manner that a Mediterranean Pact would most certainly fail to accomplish.



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