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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Cyprus Coup: Implications
For The Aegean Dispute

The Cyprus coup came during a lull in the Aegean dispute. Both sides appeared to be awaiting developments from the Law of the Sea Conference which opened in Caracas toward the end of June 1974 before deciding on their next moves to resolve their dispute over sovereignty and ownership of potential minerals in the bed of the Aegean Sea. By the end of June the initial confrontation over the Aegean had reached an impasse. Both parties continued to hold their original positions: the Turks seeking formal negotiations over the disputed area, the Greeks claiming that even to accede to negotiations would derogate from their sovereignty.

Genesis of the Dispute

The Aegean dispute is only a recent manifestation of the centuries of latent hostility reflected in the last 50 years in Greek-Turkish conflict over the treatment of respective minorities and over the status of Cyprus. It reflects the particular mistrust existing between the new thinly-veiled military government in Athens (formed in November 1973) and the precariously balanced civilian coalition in Ankara (formed in January 1974).

The Ioannidis government in Athens from the start has been narrowly nationalistic and parochial in its views. It has been more firm in asserting its rights against Turkey than was the previous Papadopoulos regime and has been more adventurous in dealing with regional issues. Like many Greek officers who have served on Cyprus, Ioannidis has a special interest in the island's fate. He is a determined foe of

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President Makarios and has an exaggerated view of the Communist threat on Cyprus. He regarded Makarios' efforts to remove Greek officers from the National Guard, the major military formation on the island, as a direct challenge. It was this confrontation which triggered the move to oust Makarios.

The formation of the Ecevit coalition government in Turkey in January 1974 also added momentum to the rise of tension in Greek-Turkish relations. While Ecevit has little in his background to suggest particular animosity toward Greeks and has publicly renounced aggressive intent, the weakness of his coalition regime and his inexperience in government leadership may have given more scope to popular nationalist suspicions of Greece. In any event, the coalition government protocol committed him to pursue the exploitation of offshore mineral resources and to accelerate prospecting for basic energy resources. In addition, his initial government policy proclamation endorsing a federated state in Cyprus contradicted earlier assurances that the Turkish were not seeking a "federal" solution and that they accepted the principle of a "unitary" Cyprus. Ecevit's statement, therefore, was read in Greece as provocative.

It was the discovery of oil, however, that triggered the Aegean crisis. Conflicting claims to the seabed are longstanding, but this controversy did not gain serious dimensions until early in 1974 after oil was found in what promised to be substantial quantities off the Greek island of Thassos in the northern Aegean. The seabed here is undisputedly Greek, but the presence of oil suggested that the Aegean might overlie other significant deposits. The Turks have long been frustrated by seeing valuable oil reserves discovered near their borders (in lands formerly part of the Ottoman Empire), while Turkey has had only minor success in finding oil in commercial quantities within its own boundaries. The Turks granted concessions to the Turkish Petroleum Monopoly; and in order to press its claim to the Anatolian shelf, the Ankara government in February 1974 sent Athens a note formally asserting sovereignty over the seabed up to the 100 fathom line, notwithstanding that the area in question lay to the west of numerous Greek islands that line the Aegean coast of Turkey. And the Turks asked for negotiations to delimit the continental shelf.

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Greek and Turkish Positions

The Greek Government regarded the Turkish request for talks on this matter as a challenge to Greek sovereignty. Athens maintained that even to agree to negotiate would be tantamount to admitting that Ankara's position had some validity. Hence, the Greek regime delayed answering the Turkish demarche. Greek contingency plans for military action against Turkey were dusted off, some troops were moved to the islands off the Turkish coast, and in general the Athens regime took steps to prepare to defend its claimed rights by force if it should deem necessary. At the same time, informally, the Greeks sought to enlist US backing for their position. And on May 24 Athens finally replied to the Turks in an ambiguous fashion, hinting that it might entertain some sort of preliminary discussions, though not agreeing to formal negotiations. A subsequent note on June 14 reaffirmed the basic Greek position.

Greece has for some time indicated an intention to extend its territorial waters from the present six miles to 12. Since such a move would apply to its many islands, it would effectively transform the Aegean into a Greek lake. Athens is not likely to act before the Law of the Sea Conference in Caracas has considered the question of territorial waters, but a unilateral extension by Greece would be viewed by Ankara as a serious challenge to its claimed rights in the area. And an extension to 12 miles without a blanket grant of right of innocent passage for warships of all nations would embroil Greece with the USSR in particular as well.

The Turks throughout have sought to force Athens to agree to negotiations over the status of the disputed seabed. In April, the Ankara Government publicized its decision to permit oil exploration in the seabed west of the Island of Lesbos. When this announcement failed to induce the Greeks to negotiate, the Turks increased the state of readiness of their forces. In June, they sent a Turkish hydrographic vessel into the Aegean for a brief survey of the area in question, accompanied by Turkish naval units, some of which were on route to participate in the bilateral NATO exercise "Good Friendship." This move was calculated to demonstrate Turkish determination to press for Ankara's alleged undersea rights.

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While these Turkish tactics contributed to the increase in tensions, they have not accomplished the aim of securing full-scale negotiations. Ioannidis, although viewing the Turkish actions as provocative, decided to ignore the Turkish hydrographic vessel and has assured the US that he would not consider military response unless and until actual oil drilling began. Athens cites the precedent of having tolerated Soviet surveying operations in international waters over the Greek seabed.

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The Greeks are relying on what they regard as a strong legal case, improving their military readiness but avoiding action that would provoke the Turks.

This impasse was not broken by high-level diplomatic contacts between Greece and Turkey in mid-June. The respective foreign ministers discussed the problem at the NATO meeting in Ottawa. There the Greeks rejected Turkish proposals to create a special negotiating forum to deal with this issue. Athens was willing to consider the Aegean problem only within the framework of normal diplomatic interchange. Moreover, the Greeks continued to refuse to admit that the Turkish case had any merit. This contact ended with both sides reserving the right to assert their positions by other means.

Presently the parties are awaiting the outcome of legal discussions at the Law of the Sea Conference now underway in Caracas. Athens had from the start wished to have in hand the results of this Conference before considering substantive negotiations with the Turks in hopes that the general principles worked out here would bolster the Greek case. The Turks too hope that they can gain international acceptance of their position that the Aegean Sea is a special case in which a median line for seabed exploitation must be drawn by mutual agreement of the parties at issue.

The present dispute promises to be stubborn. Even if negotiations were to begin, the issues would not yield easily to satisfactory solution. The controversy is likely to be prolonged at least in part because it will be particularly difficult for the Turks to force the pace of mineral exploration. The amount of actual exploratory activity that the Turks can

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perform is extremely limited. Oil drilling rigs are in short supply and are already committed to drill elsewhere. Moreover, as long as the area remains in dispute, oil companies will be unwilling to make available the oil rigs necessary for actual drilling. Thus the issue of delimiting the continental shelf boundary and of oil exploration in this disputed area is likely to drag on, carrying with it potential for further damage to the NATO alliance.

The Likelihood of Armed Conflict*

Although these moves and countermoves could touch off an armed conflict, neither Greece nor Turkey has been actively seeking to trigger hostilities with the other. The leadership in both countries is aware of the far-reaching implications of military conflict between NATO members. Both states would like to be less dependent on the US, but still regard their relations with the US as the central facet of NATO membership and of their defense strategy. From past experience in crises over Cyprus they fear dislocation of this relationship if war should break out. What pressures emanate from the respective military establishments to have recourse to arms have not reached proportions so far that would lead the decision-making levels deliberately to initiate armed conflict.

While deliberately initiated war seems unlikely in the near future, some sort of armed clash or incident remains possible. Greek and Turkish naval units in the disputed area could through some miscalculation exchange fire. With present inflamed tempers, other incidents (say over fishing rights) could lead to a localized engagement. Should Athens unilaterally declare a 12 mile territorial limit, the danger of incident would increase. But even in these cases, it seems likely that Athens and Ankara would seek--undoubtedly through US mediation--to prevent larger-scale conflict.

*At annex see the interagency memorandum "The Likelihood of Conflict Between Greece and Turkey" dated 21 June 1974 for a detailed discussion of the balance of forces, the impact on other countries of Greek-Turkish hostilities, and other related matters.

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Should major intercommunal fighting break out on Cyprus or should the regime of Nicos Sampson declare union of Cyprus with Greece, i.e., enosis, the danger of Greek-Turkish hostilities in the Aegean would rise significantly. The Turks would be under strong pressure to intervene on Cyprus. Even though the Ecevit government in Ankara would not want to become thus involved, it is precariously balanced, hence would find it difficult not to be responsive to the national mood. Popular feeling on the Cyprus issue is easily inflamed in both Greece and Turkey, and the Turkish military establishment has in the past been more hawkish than Turkish civilians. Though a Turkish military move in the first instance would be focused on Cyprus, once the Turks entered the fighting, conflict might spread to the Aegean.

Implications for the Aegean Dispute

Besides increasing the likelihood of Greek-Turkish conflict in both Cyprus and the Aegean, the Cyprus coup will in any event affect the course of the Aegean dispute. It is already adding to the general tension and mistrust between Athens and Ankara. The Turks do not accept the claim that Greece was not involved in the effort to overthrow Makarios. Ankara is particularly upset by the appointment of Nicos Sampson as President. Sampson is well known to the Turks as a foe and as an avowed exponent of union with Greece. Thus particularly when they begin to reassess developments in Cyprus, the Turkish leaders are likely to scent an underhanded attempt by Athens to consummate enosis to the detriment of Ankara's rights. This rising suspicion by the Turks against the Ioannidis regime in Athens will undoubtedly make resolution of the Aegean dispute all the more difficult.

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