

PM Simitis & FM Pangalos Test Aegean Waters in Washington

For those who are used to the Turkish idea of a "diplomat," Theodoros Pangalos comes as a shock. Greece's blunt foreign minister, with his imposing height and weight matched by a basso profundo voice à la Kissinger, was the center of attention during Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis' visit to Washington this week.

In contrast to the cautious and measured approach of Simitis, Pangalos rumbled from one acidic adjective to another to grab Washington's ear on the Aegean question and Cyprus. Like a team combining an urbane Hacıvat and a profane Karagöz, Simitis and Pangalos tested the waters in Washington to find an equitable way out of the Aegean malaise.

The Greek delegation has left town and now it's time for reckoning. Was the visit a "failure," as some Turkish press stories opined? Did Simitis rattle his saber with a "war cry" — as other Turkish press accounts suggested? Was a "deal" cut at the White House? To have a better idea one must look beyond the theatrics that have always accompanied Turkish-Greek discourse.

Pangalos certainly supplied enough dramatic pyrotechnics to last for a while. During his discussion with Probe and daily Sabah, he did not hesitate to call Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz's unconditional call for a dialogue "rubbish." When the specter of Turkish-Greek friendship was raised, he snapped back: "Friendship" is a word we should not use. "Normal relations" is enough for me. I am a very moderate man," he claimed. During a separate interview with the Washington Times he said: "We don't want to love [the Turks]. I don't imagine any Greek of my generation wants to love them. Friendly relations are impossible [between Turkey and Greece]. What we want are normal relations."

Yet barely 24 hours later, the same Pangalos told Turkish journalists that he was glad Foreign Minister Emre Gönensay had accepted his offer to meet during a Black Sea Economic Cooperation Zone meeting in Bucharest on April 27.

Pangalos insisted that there was nothing to discuss with Turks concerning the Kardak/Imia islet. "Dialogue for what?" he asked Probe. "There are international laws. We won't discuss Aegean issues" with Turkey, he said. Yet, shortly after, he told Turkish journalists that he was ready to discuss "everything" with Gönensay.

Similar Mehter-march-like calculated reversals could be observed in Simitis' rhetoric as well. During his National Press Club luncheon, Simitis parted the waters by saying, "Of course, we do not reject dialogue with any country." Then he went on to explain at length why he refused to enter into a dialogue with Turkey "unconditionally."

It all boils down to Turkey's apparent reluctance to go to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague for a binding resolution of the sovereignty of Kardak. If Turkey said yes to the ICJ, Greece would agree to discuss, or negotiate, both the continental shelf issue and "overall cooperation."

During his Oval Office photo-op remarks, President Clinton certainly said enough to concern some Turkish observers.

"Let me say that, first of all, I think all these issues should be resolved without the use of force, or the threat of force, with both parties agreeing to abide by international agreements and with mutual respect for territorial integrity," Clinton said. "With regard to the Imia [Kardak] question, the United States has already said we believe it should be submitted to the International Court of Justice or some other international arbitration panel, and we feel strongly that these things have to be resolved."

Observers who closely followed Simitis and Pangalos around town suggested that Clinton's phrase "the threat of force" referred not to Simitis' earlier remark on fighting with Turkey, but to former Prime Minister Tansu Çiller's often repeated threat of "casus belli" if Greece extended her territorial water limits from the current six to 12 miles. On that point Clinton

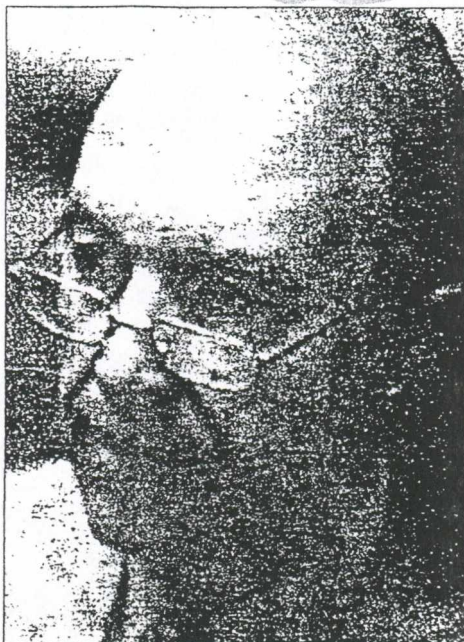
seemed to be siding with Greece.

By bringing up the ICJ, despite the conjunctive phrase that also referred to "some other international arbitration panel," Clinton again seemed to lend a sympathetic ear to the Greek lament.

Here one must explain the circumstance under which Simitis uttered the dreaded W-word that made headlines back in Turkey. His response was to a provocative question asked at the end of an hour-long address.

"If Turkey moves to take over another islet, as it recently did, will you resist this by force? Or will you back off, as you did in the recent incident?" was the question that put Simitis on the spot.

"We didn't back off," Simitis started, and the mostly Greek-American audience responded with nervous laughter. "We did not want war, and I think that nobody wants war." (Applause.) "Nobody wants people to be killed without sense." (More applause.)



Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis

"But this does not mean that in future cases, we will not decide to fight. We are ready to fight, and we will fight when it is necessary," is how Simitis rounded off his obligatory piece.

Simitis signaled his peaceful intentions several times during the same speech, once when he was asked "What can modern-day Greece learn from the ancient Greeks about how to solve Greece's current economic and international problems." Instead of invoking the imperialistic exploits of Alexander the Great, Simitis recalled that "the ancient Greeks were people who were logical and realistic. So, I would say we should also be very logical and realistic." Again, he didn't sound like a man itching for a fight.

According to informed circles close to the U.S. State Department, the Clinton administration was actually impressed by the way Simitis presented the Greek point of view, with concrete policy proposals that went well beyond the blind rhetoric that has usually been the unfortunate fate of Turkish-Greek exchanges on the issue.

Both Simitis and Pangalos made it clear that Greece had a "pragmatic and step-by-step approach" in mind if Turkey would find a face-saving solution to back out of the Kardak imbroglio. That's probably what Pangalos was referring to by "peace with honor" during his interview with *The European*.

When Yilmaz unleashed his offer for a dialogue in late March, Turkey left Greece in the dust of this unexpected pedal-to-the-floor lurch forward. In Washington, by laying out the concrete conditions of such a dialogue, Greece got back on even terms. Now the ball seems to be in Ankara's court once again. No wonder one informed observer of Greek-Turkish relations told Probe that the Turkish-Greek diplomacy used to look like a slow hand of poker. "Now it's a game of speed chess, played against the clock," the observer said.

What is the "step-by-step approach" in question? Probe learned that, as an alternative to the unconditional bilateral talks that Turkey suggested, Simitis offered the following three steps to Clinton to close the rift with Turkey. The first step involves the formation of a joint committee of experts to reach a common understanding on some of the legal terms that the sides have bickered over for too long. The second step harks back to an offer Turkey made in 1994 during Mümtaz Soysal's short tenure as Turkish Foreign Minister: Joint committees should be formed to solve low-level disputes in such innocuous areas as enhancing tourism, fighting smuggling, etc. The third step involves agreeing on a method and schedule to scale down the military buildup of both countries along the Aegean coast.

But for such progress, Greeks insist that the Kardak issue must be resolved by going to the ICJ. Since there is no honorable way in which Turkey can unilaterally withdraw its territorial claim on the islet, ICJ or other third-party arbitration seems to be one way out.

Another way is to let the issue drift on its own dying momentum, without any final resolution, until the islet's status becomes irrelevant to the new initiative under progress. Through a mutual conspiracy of silence, the parties may choose to move on to more important issues. But Pangalos' loud contention that Turkey has a territorial claim on the whole Dodecanese island-chain does not leave much room for such delicate lateral moves.

Cyprus was another issue taken up during Simitis' visit. "This has been an area of special interest to me since I became president," Clinton said. "I spent an awful lot of personal time on it. We intend to explore this year whether there's something else we can do to help resolve that matter." Yet, in this post-Holbrooke era, it seems that Cyprus will wait for the solution of Aegean issues first. State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said on April 10 that Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs John Kornblum, who was expected to visit Athens, Ankara and Nicosia in a few months, had been replaced by Richard Beattie, President Clinton's special Cyprus coordinator. To some observers that sounded like "downgrading" the effort in recognition of the primacy of the Aegean questions. That's exactly what

Yilmaz had in mind when he limited his dialogue offer to Aegean issues. Issues of the "eastern Mediterranean" could be taken up separately afterwards, he said.

A second instance of Washington advancing the Turkish agenda while acknowledging Greek concerns came during Secretary of State Warren Christopher's breakfast with Simitis and Pangalos on Wednesday morning. "We did raise the issue of terrorism," spokesman Burns said. "In a very effective way we did raise the issue of the PKK. We know that there are PKK people inside Greece, offices and so forth," he said. Probe learned that National Security Adviser Anthony Lake and Ambassador Kornblum took the lead during the breakfast to express U.S. concern that the PKK was being allowed to prosper in Greece. "We don't have any evidence that the Greek govern-



Greek Foreign Minister Theodoros Pangalos

ment gives logistical or financial support to the PKK. But we are concerned that private groups in Greece may be supporting the PKK. The PKK operations in Greece are a point of concern for us," Burns said.

Washington's fine balancing act has made the continuation of this new momentum in Greek-Turkish relations a possibility. If the Pangalos-Gonensay meeting is followed soon by a Simitis-Yilmaz summit it will be the proof of an old Turkish adage that "there is something auspicious behind everything that happens." The Kardak crisis might have been the kick in the seat of the pants that both sides needed to jump-start their engines. They must continue to squeeze every drop of peace out of the lemons they have got for one simple reason: They have no other choice.

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