

Missile threat pushes Cyprus towards war

THE INDEPENDENT p.17.

HAVE THEY or haven't they? The consensus last night was, probably not. But if Russia has, in fact, already delivered the long-promised S-300 missiles to Cyprus, then a full-scale showdown between Greece and Turkey over the divided island has moved a giant step closer.

The confusion began with a front-page article in the Russian newspaper *Sevodnya* yesterday, claiming that the state-of-the-art missiles had already been shipped, at least two months before the August or September date previously signalled by the government in Nicosia.

Greece, Cyprus and Russia all refused to comment on the report, written by the paper's highly regarded defence correspondent, Pavel Felgenheuer: "The very nature of the matter demands that the issue is kept out of the limelight," Christos Stylianides, the Cyprus government spokesman, said.

Turkey, however, which has several times announced that it would destroy the missiles if they arrived on Cyprus soil, threw cold water on the suggestion. "This couldn't have been done without our knowledge," a foreign ministry official told the semi-official Anatolian News Agency, "We are watching very closely." And on balance, experts are inclined to agree.

The missiles, fired from tubes mounted on special transporters, measure some 7m (23ft) in length. Along with the radar required to operate them, they could be ferried into Cyprus aboard a large transport aircraft. Once unloaded, however, "it wouldn't be too long before someone noticed", a London-based defence analyst said yesterday.

If they have arrived, the news would dismay not only Turkey, but Britain, a guarantor power

BY RUPERT CORNWELL

of the 1960 treaties setting an independent Cyprus, and the United States, who all argue that they would upset an already tense regional balance of forces around the most heavily militarised island in the world.

The S-300s are as modern an air-defence weapon as they come, compared with the Patriot anti-aircraft and anti-missile system of the US. Highly mobile and reaching a speed of six times the speed of sound (Mach 6), they have a range of between 15 and 30 miles, and are effective against aircraft at altitudes of up to 100,000ft.

The question is, what military purpose do they serve? However irritating to Ankara, the missiles would not even dent Turkey's strategic superiority, ensured by 35,000 troops garrisoned in the Turkish statelet in northern Cyprus (TRNC) and by the mere 40 miles separating Cyprus from the Turkish mainland. In the event of all-out war, the Greek Cypriot two-thirds of the island would be overrun. Greece proper, by contrast, is 500 miles away.

And even unused, the S-300s are an unwanted extra ingredient in the Greco-Turkish feud, and the connected problems of disputed islands in the Aegean, the search for a Cyprus settlement, the mooted accession of Cyprus to the European Union, and Turkey's own anger at the refusal of the EU to accept its candidacy for membership.

Earlier this year, the US envoy Richard Holbrooke, architect of the 1995 Dayton accords on Bosnia, attempted to break the logjam, offering cancellation of the S-300 deal for Turkish Cyprus joining in the EU negotiations. But Rauf Denktasli, 80-year-old President of the TRNC, barely gave him the time of day.

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