

US envoy fears growing risk of Cyprus conflict

FROM MICHAEL THEODOULOU IN NICOSIA
AND JOHN CARR IN ATHENS

CAREY CAVANAUGH, the American envoy, arrived in Cyprus last night and issued a warning that the prospects for conflict in the eastern Mediterranean were rising and the divided island's future could be at a "pivotal point".

The State Department official criticised the Nicosia Government's decision to buy Russian-made anti-aircraft missiles, but insisted nothing could justify Turkish military action. "We may be at a pivotal point regarding the future of Cyprus. The political atmosphere has worsened. Prospects for conflict are rising."

In Athens, Costas Simitis, the Greek Prime Minister, summoned his ministers of defence and foreign affairs for a meeting today to moderate his country's diplomatic response to Turkey.

Tension mounted on the island as President Clerides insisted that there was no question of Nicosia rescinding

its missile deal with Russia. General Ismail Hakki Karadayi, Turkey's military chief of staff, is due in Turkish-controlled northern Cyprus today for two days of talks with Turkish Cypriot leaders.

"Our acquisition of the missiles is not negotiable," Mr Clerides said hours before Mr Cavanaugh arrived. After separate talks with Mr Clerides and Rauf Denktas, the Turkish Cypriot leader, Mr Cavanaugh flies to Greece tonight and then on to Turkey.

Mr Simitis, who has taken a low-key approach, is facing a potential revolt from Socialist bankbenchers who are demanding more aggressive support for the Cypriot decision to buy the missiles.

Turkish newspapers reported at the weekend that Ankara was considering blocking the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles to prevent the Russian missiles reaching Cyprus.

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The Eastern Question has returned, dangerous and complex

Turkey's threats to carry out a pre-emptive military strike on any air defence system installed on Cyprus shows how dangerously the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean has deteriorated. Once a dependable Nato ally, Turkey appears now to be drifting out of control. Tempers are rising in Cyprus, together with irresponsible brinkmanship. Athens and Ankara, relations at an all-time low, are accusing each other of preparing for war. And the Pentagon admits that its relationship with Turkey is breaking down.

Blame for the latest crisis lies unambiguously with the Cyprus Government. Its decision to buy an air defence system from Russia can only complicate attempts to broker a solution between the island's Greek and Turkish communities. Indeed, raising the temperature appears to have been the main reason for the deal, with the Cyprus Government hoping to provoke Turkey into the kind of bellicose response that will rally the rest of Europe behind Nicosia.

Such calculations are particularly irresponsible at present. For the Turkish Government of Necmet Erbakan, its Islamist Prime Minister, is in no mood to pay heed to any pressure from its Western partners. Mr Erbakan veers from one extreme to another, torn between the demands of his radical Islamic ideology and the constraints of pragmatism. Tansu Ciller, the Foreign Minister, is clinging to almost any liferaft that will prevent a wave of corruption charges breaking over her. A series of scandals has linked her True Path Party with underworld gangs. And the Turkish Army, always a formidable force, is waiting, frustrated in the wings, unable to win the

war against Kurdish terrorism or to break the political deadlock.

Equally important, however, is the breakdown in relations with Europe and America. Since the election of Mr Erbakan, Washington has had little dialogue with a man who appears, by his visits to Iran and Libya, intent on snubbing the Americans. And the traditional lines of communication with the army have been blocked by disagreement on two vital issues: Iraq and arms supplies. The army is resentful of the American presence in Iraq, dislikes the air patrols operating from the Incirlik base, and believes the protection of Iraqi Kurds has given safe haven to PKK terrorists trying to overthrow the Turkish state.

Turkish relations with Europe are little better. The European Union, having agreed to a customs union with Turkey, refuses still, under pressure from Greece, to release to Ankara Mediterranean funds amounting to some \$100 million at a time when Turkey is now suffering a \$10 billion trade deficit with the EU because of the customs union. The European Parliament has also raised the Kurdish issue and human rights to prevent any closer political dialogue.

Turkey occupies a vital geostrategic position. Its outreach into the Middle East, Russia and Central Asia is considerable; its regional military and economic strength is impressive. Yet it is falling into a political morass and spiritual malaise of its own making. Neither its European nor American partners have formulated a coherent strategy to rekindle their links with Ankara. The Eastern Question has returned in all its historical complexity and danger.