

West's nightmare scenario takes shape as Greek Cypriots buy Russian arms

Bellicose Turkey stokes Nato fears in Cyprus standoff

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WESTERN diplomats are increasingly concerned that Turkey is contemplating a decisive break with the West and that the supreme expression of its disaffection could be war with Greece over Cyprus, a nightmare scenario which would pitch two members of Nato against each other.

The United States special envoy, Carey Cavanaugh, arrives in Nicosia today, but many American diplomats believe that Turkey, driven by a nationalist Islamic government, is a 'loose cannon'. Ankara, playing an enfeebled Russia off against Western powers by which it feels rebuffed, may be ready to resume a dominant role in the region.

The Greeks, dismissing Turkey's war-like noises as 'a cultivated climate of crisis', are refusing to budge from their support for Nicosia's plans to deploy, in about 18 months, sophisticated S-300 anti-aircraft missiles from Russia.

By the end of last week Turkey's denunciations had turned into an explicit threat of military action. Tansu Ciller, the Turkish Foreign Minister, said 'we will do what is needed'. She added: 'If that means they need to be hit, they will be hit.'

Ciller will visit northern Cyprus this week. Press reports said she would discuss plans for a naval and air base to counter Greek forces in the South.

The Greek Cypriots are extending a civilian airfield at Paphos international airport on the west of the island for F-16 fighters from Greece. President Glaskos Clerides's government has also announced plans for a naval base in the framework of Cyprus's recently activated common defence agreement with Greece. Athens announced yesterday that Costas Efidias, the Greek Cypriot Defence Minister, would visit the Greek capital for talks with his hardline Greek counterpart, Akis Tsochadzopoulos.

Cyprus has about 10,000 troops on the island, plus Greek military advisers, against the 30,000 Turkish forces in the breakaway north of the island. The missiles, together with Greece's expanded arms budget and Nicosia's recent acquisition of about 40 Russian T-80 tanks, will disturb

the balance of power in which Turkey holds air superiority.

The S-300, a kind of 'super-Patriot' missile, has a range of about 90 miles but has never been fired outside Russia. Nicosia insists its deployment will be purely defensive.

The hopeful analysis is that Turkey may be trying to force the international community — and that largely means the United States — to attach greater urgency to the search for a permanent solution to the Cyprus problem.

Turkey wants a confederal arrangement in which the two zones have equal status. Greek Cypriots have also agreed to a bizonal federation, but the two sides in Cyprus have, since Turkish troops invaded the island in 1974, been unable to

two weeks ago when Christos Roza-kis, a deputy Greek Foreign Minister who advocated dialogue with Turkey, resigned, ostensibly for health reasons but more probably because of his moderate approach and attacks on him for his Jewish background.

In Athens this weekend, the talk was not of a war with Turkey, but of incidents of the kind that broke out about a year ago over the disputed ownership of a rocky islet in the Aegean.

On that occasion war was narrowly averted. Greece and Turkey have not gone to war since the early 1920s, but diplomats believe there is no room for complacency. The Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis, although a moderate, has come under increasing pressure from hawks in the ruling Socialist Party to take a hardline stance with Turkey.

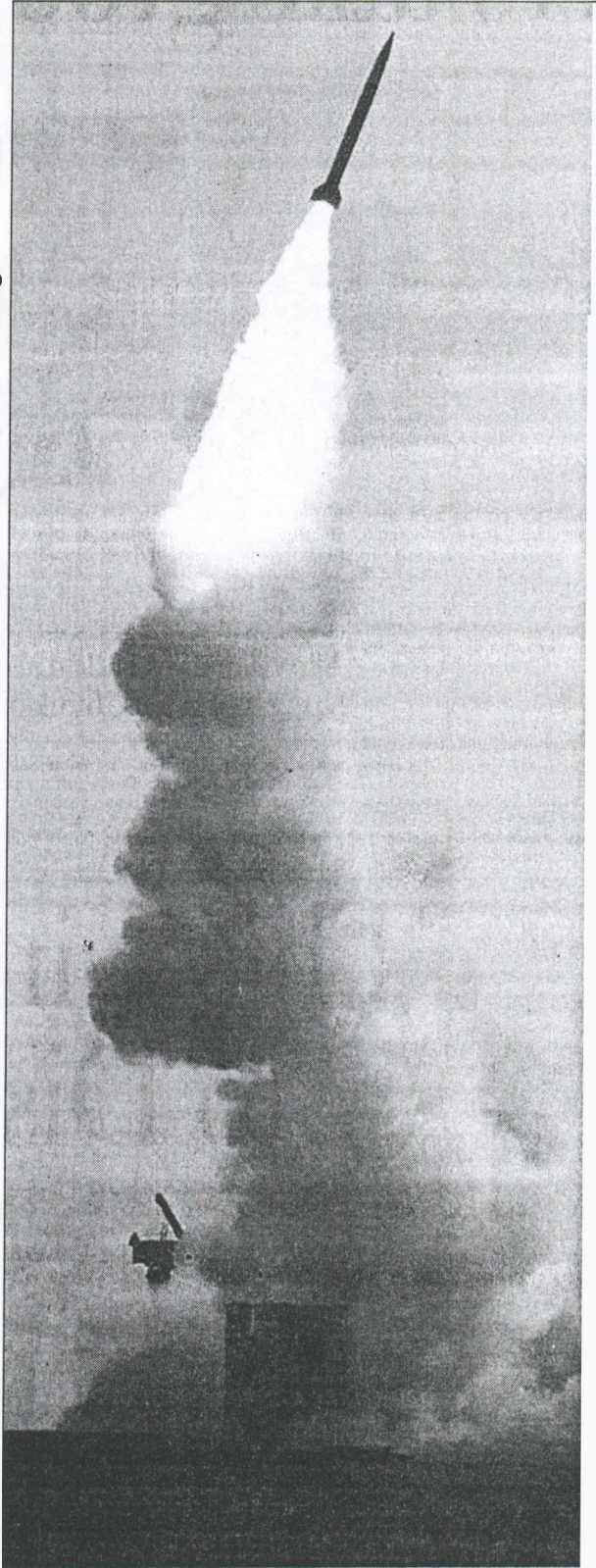
But Cavanaugh who is expected to visit Athens tomorrow, may find he has more influence there than in Ankara.

The West has one substantial point of leverage — Greece's desire to join the European single currency and Cyprus's aspiration to join the European Union, with which Turkey has strained relations.

The Russians have called their decision to sell the missiles to Nicosia purely commercial. But matters are more complicated than they seem. Cyprus has been a big outlet for laundered Russian mafia money. It may seem apt, then, that the Greek Cypriots are giving something back — to the sector of the Russian economy which most needs help, the military-industrial complex.

The deal also comes at the start of a year which will see more strident claims from Moscow and Ankara to offer the best route for the export of the world's last great untapped reserves of fossil fuel, the oil of the Caspian states of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Relations between the two former empires will affect the security of Western energy supplies for decades.

Western oil companies — BP prominent among them — are relying on this oil to provide secure world energy supplies outside the control of Opec (the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries) as demand surges with increased industrialisation in the next century.



The planned deployment of Russian S-300 anti-aircraft missiles is raising tension in the Mediterranean. Photograph: Vladimir Ger