Make Greece and Turkey Behave

By Louis J. Klarevas

WASHINGTON — If Bosnia is the conflict that made NATO useful in the post-Cold War era, Cyprus is the one that can make it useless.

Traditionally a powder keg sitting between two NATO allies, Cyprus has in recent months been providing reminders of how quickly the alliance can be brought to its knees by exercises in brinkmanship between Greece and Turkey.

Both sides have been arming and practicing for a military showdown since 1974, when Turkey invaded in response to a coup sponsored by the military junta ruling Greece at the time. Turkish forces have remained in Cyprus since, controlling the northern third of the island, which in 1983 declared its independence but has since been recognized only by Turkey. Today Cyprus is one of the world's most militarized areas.

Recently Greece and Turkey engaged in provocative military maneuvers. Greece and Cyprus undertook a joint military exercise called Nikiforos from Oct. 10 to 14. Turkey responded by sending military aircraft into the region. In the process, both parties violated a six-month-old moratorium on military overflights of Cyprus. More threateningly, Turkish military planes more than once buzzed the C-130 aircraft carrying the Greek defense minister.

In an unusual public criticism of a U.S. ally, the special presidential emissary for Cyprus, Richard Holbrooke, referred to this airborne harassment as "an unacceptable act which does not help in defusing tension between Greece and Turkey." He called it "a very serious incident in which human lives were put in danger."

NATO's utility and credibility would be damaged irreparably should the two NATO allies go to war. Simply put, how can NATO promote peace and defend the alliance's security if it cannot even get two of its allies to behave peacefully toward each other?

Greece and Turkey's NATO allies should actively engage them in concrete actions aimed at reducing tensions. As the Turks have reservations about most international organizations in Europe, especially the European Union, NATO is well situated to serve as a mediator.

Recently, NATO's secretary-general, Javier Solana, and other NATO officials have taken a more active role in discussing differences between the two allies. One of the first positive results came a few weeks ago when the two countries worked out some of their long-held differences over military command and control of the Aegean.

The Western allies, especially the United States, should put their diplomatic muscle behind four endeavors:

• Turkey and Greece should be reminded of their pledges at the Madrid NATO summit last July to "refrain from unilateral acts, on the basis of mutual respect and willingness to avoid conflicts arising from misunderstanding."

• Both should agree again to an open-ended moratorium on military flights over Cyprus.

• Both need to accept a binding "incidents at sea" agreement prohibiting reckless and dangerous conduct by naval vessels.

• Greece and Turkey should be encouraged to forgo any future non-NATO war games, especially if (1) the mock enemy is the other NATO ally, (2) the exercises take place in the Aegean or Mediterranean, or (3) they involve any Aegean islands, Turkey's western coast or the shared border area between Greece and Turkey in the north. Turkey recently took a step in the right direction when it canceled a scheduled Aegean military exercise.

It is time for the remaining NATO allies to take a tough stand. If this means that Greece and/or Turkey have to be banned from NATO military exercises or that military assistance to the two states has to be suspended, then so be it.

Demanding that Greece and Turkey institute confidence-building measures is a fair price to pay to maintain peace in the region as well as to preserve NATO's future.

The writer, a research associate at the U.S. Institute of Peace, contributed this comment to The Washington Post.