

The neutralization of NATO's southern flank

by Thierry Lalevée

George Bush's planned meeting with Mikhail Gorbachov on Dec. 2-3 in the middle of the Mediterranean, just off the coast of Malta, is symbolic in many ways. One of them is the implicit acknowledgement of the Mediterranean as a common American-Soviet *Mare Nostrum*, though neither country has any common shores with that sea. Having nothing to do with symbolism, but a very concrete matter, is the fact that by the time they meet, the process of military neutralization of that region, under their joint overlordship, will have moved a step further.

For example, whatever the results of the national parliamentary elections in Greece, the process leading to the evacuation of the U.S. Air Force base near Athens, is unlikely to be reversed. And even if the next Greek government were to prove a hardened supporter of the old NATO line, the American Congress has announced that 12 U.S. military bases abroad are to be closed down. The bases on NATO's Southern Flank are high on the list.

Crisis brewing over Turkey

This is also the rationale that stands behind the sudden outburst of crisis between Washington and Ankara. Publicly, the crisis is over the fact that Sen. Robert Dole (R-Kan.) succeeded in getting a bill through a Senate committee, calling for April 24 to be designated Armenian Genocide Day. The next step should be for Congress to ratify the proposal and for President Bush to sign it. This is unlikely to happen, in the present circumstances; but what is at issue is not so much the question of Armenia in itself, as the timing and the political will behind the move. Dole's intentions have not been lost on Turkish officials. Last July, he made headlines through a violent denunciation of Israel for its kidnaping of a terrorist Hezbollah sheikh, a denunciation which, in retrospect, was all the most cynical and hypocritical, given that only two months before, the Department of Justice and Congress had just approved a proposal allowing the FBI to kidnap and arrest anyone, anywhere, ignoring the national sovereignty of the territory they were operating in. What Bush could not say publicly, Dole did for him.

So, such a slap in the face could not go without retaliation. On Oct. 18, Ankara started to implement five counter-measures, including bringing down to 24 from 36 the number

of U.S. jet fighters deployed in Turkey; reduction of U.S. military training flights; restrictions on U.S. war vessels anchoring in Turkish ports; and restriction of the movement of U.S. military personnel on Turkish territory. Should the Dole bill pass Congress, it will generate "the worst crisis between Turkey and the United States since World War II," in the words of a senior Turkish official—even greater than the mid-1970s U.S. military embargo against Turkey following the Cyprus crisis.

Congress is to vote next spring on renewing the bilateral treaty of military cooperation between the two countries. Should Turkey maintain its sanctions against U.S. military activities by then, Congress will certainly veto the treaty. Formally, this may not mean ending Turkish membership in NATO, just as the 1974 embargo did not hinder Ankara's commitment to Western defense. But the situation has changed a great deal since.

From a Turkish point of view, it ominously coincides with assaults on several fronts. For example, by breaking its agreement of 1987, Syria has dropped all pretenses and is publicly harboring the Kurdish terrorists of the PKK. Since the beginning of this year, there has been again a continuous escalation of PKK terror actions against Turkey, on a scale not seen since early 1987. It reached a point critical enough for Prime Minister Turgut Özal—who is to become Turkey's eighth President on Nov. 9—to warn that Turkey may simply cut off the water from the Euphrates flowing into Syria, as a retaliation. The threat for Syria is serious enough. There is an additional rationale for the move from Turkey's standpoint: Because of the spring and summer drought, Turkey is very short of water this year, and will have to import close to \$1 billion worth of agricultural goods.

At the very same time that the PKK was going on a rampage, Socialist International networks gathered around the mercurial Danielle Mitterrand, the French President's wife, met in Paris to herald the cause of Kurdistan. She then went on to Washington to lobby for the Kurds. Earlier this year, she had created a scandal by visiting Turkey for several days without making any public comments, but as soon as she got back to Paris, she had held a press conference to blast Turkish treatment of the Iraqi Kurdish refugees. In the polemics that ensued, many forgot that Turkey has welcomed tens of thousands of Iraqi Kurds—who have been rejected by most members of the European Community (EC). Adding insult to injury, Amnesty International has just put out a report on "Torture in Turkey," and the European Parliament is calling for suspension of economic aid to Turkey.

According to Turkish officials, the name of the game is simple: Isolate Turkey. "It is a game which is sponsored by both the U.S. and the Soviets, just as they are sponsoring the creation of a disunited state of Europe, which they would totally control." From all evidence, the EC members, for their own reasons and shortsightedness, are playing that dangerous game.