

Demilitarization in the Eastern Aegean Islands: A Historical Perspective

Dimitrios-Merkourios Kontis*

The issue of the demilitarization of the Aegean islands was first brought up by Turkey to the Security Council of the United Nations in 1976. In his letter dated 13 August 1976, the permanent representative of Turkey İlder Türkmen would inform the Secretary General concerning the “Greek Violations in the Aegean.” Türkmen would state that “the security of the Anatolian peninsula is much dependent on a great number of islands encircling it in the Aegean with very close geographic proximity. This question of security has become of vital importance particularly, when, for the first time in history, the sovereignty over the Anatolian peninsula and over the islands were conferred to two different states some 50 years ago.” “This peculiar geographic configuration necessitated the reconciliation of the sovereignty over the islands with the security imperatives of the Anatolian peninsula.”

It is clear Türkmen was referring to the change of the status quo in 1912, were during the Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912) over Ottoman Libya, Italy occupied the Dodecanese Islands while during the First Balkan War Greece liberated the Eastern Aegean Islands. According to Türkmen, this change of circumstances led to the demilitarization of the Aegean Islands, in order to safeguard the security of the Anatolian coast lying within a few miles from these islands. Today Turkey is fairly often invoking the so called “Decision of Six Powers” of 1914 to demand from Greece the total demilitarization of all Eastern Aegean Islands.

The Concert of Europe in 1912 (i.e. the six Great Powers) did require that all the Aegean islands liberated by Greece during the First Balkan War had to be neutralized under the collective guarantee of the Powers. This was at first derived by the British Admiralty for all the islands in the Aegean, months before the breaking of the First Balkan War, as the British wanted to make sure that no Great Power will ever have a naval base in the Aegean. The British were content with the status quo, were they controlled the area from the Suez Canal to the Straits with their superior navy operating from their naval base in Malta.

The alleged connection between sovereignty and demilitarization can be easily debunked by referring to the historical facts, especially how the Ottoman Empire unconditionally accepted the terms of the Six Powers in April 1st, 1913 in order for the Powers to mediate with the Balkan Alliance and end the First Balkan War. The Sublime Porte was in a weak negotiating position as the Balkan Alliance Army was marching towards Constantinople. The historical truth is that Greece and the Balkan Alliance won the First Balkan War against the Ottoman Empire in 1913, where the Greek Navy liberated the Eastern Aegean Islands. Therefore, Turkey did not have the authority to place any restrictions on Greek sovereignty in the Aegean Islands. As the Foreign Office stated at that time (December 1913), the principle that the fate of all the islands was to be decided by the Six Powers was accepted definitely and unconditionally by the Turkish government, by three separate diplomatic acts during 1913:

* DM Kontis is a historical researcher and author of two books regarding British Policy in the Aegean Islands during 1912-1914.

(1) Article 5 of the treaty of peace signed by the Turkish plenipotentiaries, and those of the three Allies, in London on May 30th, 1913.

(2) Article 15 of the treaty of peace concluded between Turkey and Greece at Athens on November 1st, 1913.

(3) The formal Note sent by the Porte on April 1st, 1913, in answer to the joint note addressed to them by the six ambassadors on March 31st, 1913.

The conflicting interests of the Powers in 1914 and Germany's refusal to take any coercive measures against Turkey, which never accepted Greek Sovereignty on the Islands mentioned in the Six Powers Decision, forced the Greek Government and PM Eleftherios Venizelos not to give his consent for the demilitarization of the islands, without explicit guarantees from the Powers regarding their peaceful possession by Greece. Also, Turkey had to formally accept the decision rather than just acknowledging its receipt, which was her official reply. Had Turkey outright rejected the decision of the Powers, the Powers would be then be obliged to enforce the decision on Turkey. Therefore, they were counseled by the Germans and the French to reply in an ambiguous way.

Immediately after the issuance of the "Decision of Six Powers" in February 1914, Greece was forced into bilateral negotiations with Turkey with the initiative of the Romanians, the Germans and finally the British. Venizelos was at first conciliatory as the Turks held a nuclear weapon in their hands, the threat of expulsion of all Greeks from Asia Minor, Eastern Thrace, Constantinople and Trebizond, which numbered more than 2 million people. In August 1914 the Turks had entered into an alliance with the Germans and, feeling strong, demanded the return of Chios, Mytilene, Samos and Lemnos in Turkish sovereignty, islands populated exclusively by Greeks. In September 1914 the British formally declared to the Turks that they considered the Turkish fleet as an annex of the German fleet and they would sink it if it sailed out of the Straits and into the Aegean. Therefore, Venizelos, with the Royal Navy effectively guarantying Greek sovereignty in the Eastern Aegean Islands ended all bilateral negotiations with the Turks.

Venizelos had for quite some time prepared a royal decree for the annexation of the Eastern Aegean Islands into the Kingdom of Greece. This would effectively mean that Greece would unilaterally enforce the Decision of Six Powers. The Greek Army had evacuated southern Albania, a prerequisite of the Decision for Greece to obtain Greek sovereignty over the islands. In September 1914 Venizelos was asked by the Turkish ambassador in Athens regarding his plans, where he informed the Sublime Porte of his choice to not implement unilaterally the Decision of Six Powers.

Venizelos did not want to return to Turkey the three Greek islands mentioned in the decision: Imbros, Tenedos and Kastellorizo neither he wanted to accept any demilitarization restrictions on Greek sovereignty for all Eastern Aegean Islands as this had been proposed and stipulated by Germany during the London Conference. Thus, he made plans for Greece to enter the Great War with the Entente Powers against the Germans and the Turks, hoping for a better future deal if his side won. On the other hand, the Turks were promised significant gains in the Aegean if only Germany won the Great War. Therefore, they were also happy to end bilateral negotiations with Greece, rooting for the Central Powers to win as this would have ensured Turkish dominion in the Aegean. Both Greece and Turkey were content in September 1914, for different reasons, with the de facto situation in the Aegean and thus the Decision of the Six Powers was eventually shelved.

During the Lausanne Conference in 1922-23, demilitarization restrictions were discussed explicitly only for eight islands in the Aegean Sea, the four islands mentioned in article 13 of the Lausanne Treaty, Chios, Mytilene/Lesbos, Samos and Ikaria, and the

four islands at the mouth of the Dardanelles mentioned in article 4.3 of the Lausanne Straits Convention.

Article 4 of the 1923 Straits Convention asked for the demilitarization of both shores of the Straits of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus. Also, in the Aegean Sea, the islands of Samothrace, Lemnos [Greek], Imbros, Tenedos and Rabbit Islands [Turkish] had to be demilitarized due to their proximity with the Straits. The 1923 Lausanne convention of the Straits was completely superseded in 1936 by the Montreux convention. As a result, all demilitarization restrictions regarding the above-mentioned islands were lifted.

Regarding the four islands of article 13, it was agreed that a new form of modified demilitarization would be applied, which explicitly let Greece to maintain the right of self defence. The modified demilitarization allows Greece to freely utilize aviation, construct airbases at the four islands, and maintain armed forces and gendarmerie (with some restrictions as specified in article 13). During the conference the head of the Turkish delegation, Ismet Inonu, dubbed the demilitarization as “almost illusory”, which depicts the true contractual obligations regarding the demilitarization of the Eastern Aegean islands that the Allied Powers decided in Lausanne and Greece accepted to uphold.

Turkey was the only signatory which at first did not agree with the proposed demilitarization, which was eventually included in the final draft of the Lausanne treaty as article 13. However, Turkey ratified the Lausanne treaty in its entirety on July 24, 1923, after a seven-month conference. It is also important to remember that Greece was on the winning side of WWI with Great Britain, France, the United States, and the other Allied Powers whereas Turkey was on the losing side, as the Ottomans allied with the Germans in August 1914. Greece had indeed lost the war against Turkey in Asia Minor, but the Allies had defeated the Ottomans and even conquered the capital of Constantinople (present day Istanbul) at the end of WWI in 1918. Therefore, all Turkish proposals for total demilitarization of the Eastern Aegean islands were rejected by the Allies during the Lausanne conference.