

The Imia/Kardak Rocks Dispute in the Aegean Sea

Martin Pratt and Clive Schofield

Introduction

In late January a dispute blew up over the ownership of two small, rocky islets called Imia and Kardak Rocks respectively by Greece and Turkey. The quarrel over sovereignty led to vitriolic exchanges between Athens and Ankara, a build-up of military forces around the disputed features, and intervention by the United States in an attempt to defuse tensions between the two NATO allies.

The disputed features lie between the Greek island of Kalolymnos and the islands fringing Turkey's mainland Bodrum peninsula (see map). The two islands, or, more accurately, islets or rocks,¹ are small, barren, uninhabited and have hitherto represented little more than a navigation hazard. In addition to their apparent lack of intrinsic value, the narrow nature of the channel in which they lie means that they are likely to have a minimal effect on any future maritime boundary delimitation between the two countries. The Imia/Kardak case therefore appears to be something of a contrast to other recent island disputes in that no great maritime areas and thus marine resources such as fisheries or hydrocarbons appear to be at stake. Why then, has the islets issue generated such a fierce reaction by the claimant states?

The dispute's significance lies in Greece and Turkey's tortuous bilateral relationship. The Greek-Turkish dispute over the islets represents just the latest in a long catalogue of contentious problems between these traditional adversaries and should be seen in that light. This article aims to set the Imia/Kardak dispute and the Aegean dispute as a whole in its wider geopolitical context.²

In addition, while it is probably fair to say that the value of Imia/Kardak Rocks to Greece and Turkey is more symbolic than material, it is nevertheless interesting to consider the merits of competing claims, particularly from a historical perspective. There have been several international agreements concerning the status of Aegean islands over the course of the twentieth century; a secondary aim of this article is to identify which of them, if any, is relevant to the recent sovereignty dispute.

Geopolitical Context

Greece and Turkey's numerous disputes and strained relations have generated an extensive literature. The aim of this section is merely to highlight the key geopolitical factors against which any analysis of the current Imia/Kardak quarrel should be set.³

In the modern period Greece and Turkey's mutual antipathy stems in large part from the struggle for Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire and their bitterly fought war of 1920-22 ending in the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923. The two states differ over a number of key issues including Aegean Sea rights, military issues, minority rights and the Cyprus question as well as European Union and NATO-related issues.

The Aegean Dispute

The 'Aegean dispute' itself encompasses four distinct, yet interrelated, facets: the extent of territorial waters within the Aegean, continental shelf rights, jurisdiction over airspace, and concerns over the militarisation of certain Aegean islands. Of these, the territorial waters and continental shelf issues are perhaps the most contentious.

Territorial Waters

Both Greece and Turkey currently claim 6 nautical mile (nm) territorial seas in the Aegean. However, on 31 May 1995 the Greek parliament ratified the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea which includes, under Article 3, the stipulation that "*Every State has the right to establish the breadth of its territorial sea up to a limit not exceeding 12 nautical miles.*" Turkey, which is not a signatory to the Convention, maintains that 12nm represents the *maximum* the territorial sea can be extended to and that this is inappropriate in a semi-enclosed sea such as the Aegean. Furthermore, Ankara has reiterated its oft-repeated threat that were Greece to extend its territorial sea to 12nm this would represent a *causis belli* for Turkey. Indeed, the recently appointed commander of the Turkish naval forces, Admiral Govan Erkaya, has indicated that if Greece made

such a move, Turkey would seriously consider seizing some of the Greek islands close to the Turkish mainland (Boyne, 1996: 120).

The Turkish argument centres on the fact that even with the current 6nm territorial sea claims, Greece, with its 2,383 islands in the Aegean, many of which lie close to the Turkish mainland, is accorded 35% of the Aegean as territorial sea while Turkey is allotted only 8.8% (see map).

Were both Greece and Turkey to opt for 12nm territorial sea not only would the proportion of the Aegean beyond territorial waters be dramatically cut from 56% to 26.1% but the Greek share of the Aegean as territorial sea would leap to 63.9%. Turkey's share, meanwhile, would only rise to a meagre 10%.⁴ Such an act would, according to Ankara, turn the Aegean into little more than a 'Greek lake' (see map).

From a Turkish perspective such a scenario is inequitable and unacceptable as all shipping to and from Turkey's Aegean ports and, indeed, that transiting the Turkish straits to and from the Black Sea would be obliged to pass through Greek territorial waters. For its part, Athens has emphasised that navigation rights, covered by the right of 'innocent passage' laid down in the 1982 UN Convention, would not be threatened by an extension of Greek territorial waters to 12nm. Furthermore, Greece points out that Turkey itself has extended its territorial seas to 12nm off its Black Sea and Mediterranean coasts. Nevertheless, in the face of such strong Turkish opposition, Athens has, as yet, not formally extended its territorial seas in the Aegean and has merely reserved the right to do so in the future.

Continental Shelf Rights

In essence, the Turkish position is that the Aegean should be shared equally between the parties with Greek islands east of the median line between the two mainland coasts being restricted to 6nm territorial waters claims and thus enclaved. Greece, unsurprisingly, rejects this view and favours the Greek islands being accorded full maritime jurisdictional rights, thus severely restricting Turkey's share of the Aegean continental shelf and potential exclusive economic zone.

The dispute over continental shelf rights emerged in 1973 when Turkey awarded exploration rights in the eastern Aegean and published a map indicating the limits of Turkey's continental shelf rights as being to the west of Greece's easternmost islands. Despite Greek protests, the Turkish survey ship *Candarli*,

accompanied by no less than 32 warships, spent six days cruising along the western limits of the Turkish claim in 1974. A further voyage was made by the *Sizmik 1* in 1976 which spent three days surveying Greek-claimed continental shelf west of Lesbos. The Greek government duly appealed to the UN Security Council and started proceedings against Turkey before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The Security Council did not apportion blame for the dispute, instead calling on the parties to strive to reduce tension in the area and seek a negotiated solution, while the ICJ ruled in January 1979 that it lacked jurisdiction to rule in the *Aegean Sea Continental Shelf* case.

Airspace Jurisdiction

The issue of airspace jurisdiction is intertwined with that of continental shelf rights in that both relate to Turkey's desire to extend its jurisdiction to the Aegean Sea's median line and Greek resistance to these attempts.

In 1931 Greece claimed a 10nm zone along its coasts "*as regards matters of air navigation and its policing.*"⁵ Moreover, in 1952 the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), in which both countries participate, ruled that except for a narrow strip of national airspace along the Turkish coast, responsibility for Aegean airspace should fall to the Athens Flight Information Region.

As with territorial seas, Turkey rejects any suggestion that Greek national airspace extends beyond 6nm from its coasts in the Aegean. Furthermore, in 1974, in the wake of the Cyprus crisis, Turkey demanded that all aircraft approaching Turkish airspace report their position and flightplan on reaching the Aegean median line. Greece rejected this unilateral action on the grounds that it contravened the ICAO decision, to which both countries had been party, and because the choice of a median line in Greek eyes had a political character. Greece subsequently declared the Aegean air routes to Turkey to be unsafe. To this day Turkey refuses to submit flight plans for its military aircraft to Athens resulting in Greek aircraft regularly being scrambled to intercept and identify Turkish military flights over the Aegean.



Map 1: Present distribution of territorial seas in the Aegean (6 nautical miles)



Map 2: Possible distribution of territorial sea in the Aegean (12 nautical miles)

Militarisation

Certain Aegean islands such as Lemnos and Samothrace, strategically located in the approaches to the Turkish Straits, were demilitarised under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Similarly, restrictions on the militarisation of the Dodecanese islands were included in the provisions of the 1947 Paris peace treaty. Greece subsequently remilitarised both sets of islands, particularly in the aftermath of Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974, citing its right to self-defence under the terms of the UN Charter.

The remilitarisation of the islands was used as a justification for the formation, in 1975, of Turkey's IVth Army, the so-called 'Army of the Aegean', deployed in southwestern Anatolia. This force is not assigned to NATO and is equipped with the largest non-ocean-going landing force in the world. The presence of this substantial force, coupled with its amphibious capabilities, in close proximity to Greece's outermost islands has proved a source of great concern to Athens and has provided a rationale for reinforcing Greek forces there as a first line of defence against Turkish attack. In contrast, Ankara views the IVth army as a protective shield against attack from fortified Greek islands just a few hundred metres from the Turkish mainland.

Related issues

Two other concerns are also seldom far from the surface in Greek-Turkish relations – the issue of minorities and the divided island of Cyprus. Concerning minorities, although major population exchanges were provided for under the Treaty of Lausanne, approximately 110,000 Greeks remained in Turkey, mainly in Istanbul, while about 100,000 Muslims (both Turks and Bulgarian-speaking Pomaks) remained in Greece, predominantly in rural communities in western Thrace where in 1923 they constituted a local majority. Since then the Greek community in Turkey has fallen to around 10,000, their emigration to Greece being encouraged by events such as the anti-Greek riots of 1955 over the Greek government's policy on Cyprus. Although the Muslim population in Greece has increased in absolute terms to about 110,000 this is far below the figure that might have been expected from natural increase since the 1920s. The Muslim community has suffered from emigration to Turkey and at the same time has been reduced to minority status in western Thrace by an influx of Orthodox Greeks.⁶ Each side periodically accuses the other, often with some justification, of discrimination and oppressive measures against their respective minorities.

Despite being distinct from the Aegean disputes, the question of Cyprus represents another poisonous influence in bilateral relations, though one which goes beyond the scope of this paper. The Greek-Turkish confrontations over all of these issues have also spilled over into NATO and EU arenas. For NATO, these two fellow allies' disputes and mutual distrust have disrupted operations and activities on NATO's southern flank. As far as the EU is concerned, Ankara is bitterly resentful of what it sees as Greek abuse of its position as an EU member with veto powers in obstructing the Turkish drive for membership in order to put pressure on Ankara over bilateral issues. Greece, for its part, is determined that Turkey should resolve outstanding problems such as those over the Aegean and Cyprus before it can be considered to be a credible candidate for full EU membership.⁷

The Status of Imia/Kardak Rocks

The key question in a historical analysis of the status of Imia/Kardak Rocks is whether they form part of the Dodecanese group. If so, the Greek claim appears to be virtually irresistible; if not, then the situation is much less clear cut. Perhaps inevitably, this question is not as easy to answer as it might first appear.

The story really begins in the spring of 1912 when Italy seized the Dodecanese islands from Turkey, primarily as a bargaining counter in Italian diplomatic manoeuvres in the Balkans and Asia Minor. Perhaps to Italy's surprise, Turkey was initially not particularly bothered at the loss of what Bosworth (1984: 62) describes as "*such ethnically Greek and economically valueless property*" but, with the outbreak of the Balkan Wars Turkey saw the necessity of reaching an accommodation with Italy and the two countries signed a treaty of peace in Lausanne on 18 October 1912. Under Article 2 of this treaty, Turkey agreed that Italy could retain control of the Dodecanese until all Turkish troops left Libya. Although this arrangement was nominally temporary in nature, neither party was desperate for it to end: Turkey was happy with the arrangement because it made it difficult for Greece to get its hands on the islands, while Italy retained a strategic foothold in the eastern Mediterranean to which other powers (particularly Britain, which was concerned about the security of its naval route to the East) found it difficult to object because the arrangement was 'only temporary'.⁸

The treaty of peace that followed the end of the Balkan Wars (signed by Turkey, Greece, Serbia,

Bulgaria and Montenegro in London on 30 May 1913) assigned the "...duty of deciding the fate of all the Ottoman islands in the Aegean Sea, except Crete, and of the Mount Athos peninsula" to the Great Powers.⁹ The resulting Conference of Ambassadors awarded most of the islands in the Aegean to Greece with the exception of Imbros, Tenedos and Castellorizo (which for strategic reasons were retained by Turkey) and, significantly, the Dodecanese, which the Conference felt were already covered by the 1912 Italian-Turkish treaty mentioned above. The Conference's decision was communicated to the Turkish government on 14 February 1914. In its reply on the following day, the Turkish government regretted the general attitude of the Great Powers but did not make any specific objection to the new arrangement.

With the outbreak of the First World War, Italy saw an opportunity to attain formal control over the Dodecanese. With the Triple Entente of Britain, France and Russia anxious to secure Italian cooperation in the war with Germany, Italy was able to extract the promise of a number of territorial concessions, including sovereignty over the Dodecanese. This promise was set out in Article 8 of the secret Treaty of London signed on 26 April 1915.

Despite their promise to Italy, when the division of the Ottoman Empire was discussed at the peace conferences of 1919, the Allies threw their support behind the ethnically justifiable claims of Greece and forced Italy to choose between ceding the Dodecanese to Greece and gaining Jubaland in Africa. Jubaland was seen as the greater prize and on 29 July 1919 Italy concluded a convention with Greece to hand over all the islands under Italian occupation with the exception of Rhodes.¹⁰ This convention was subsequently incorporated into a formal treaty due to enter into force at the same time as the Treaty of Sèvres, under which sovereignty over the Dodecanese was formally transferred from Turkey to Italy. However, the outbreak of war between Greece and Turkey meant that neither treaty was ever ratified and in the negotiations for the final treaty of peace with Turkey in 1923, Mussolini ignored the 1920 treaty with Greece, opting instead to hang on to the Dodecanese even though this meant sacrificing both Jubaland and a mandate over Iraq, at least for the time being. Article 15 of the 1923 treaty reads:

"Turkey renounces in favour of Italy all rights and title over the following islands: Stampalia (Astrapalia), Rhodes (Rhodos), Calki (Kharki), Scarpanto, Casos (Casso), Piscopis (Tilos), Misiros

(Nisyros), Calimnos (Kalymnos), Leros, Patmos, Lipsos (Lipso), Simi (Symi), and Cos (Kos), which are now occupied by Italy, and the islets dependent thereon, and also over the island of Castellorizzo."

Italian sovereignty over these islands lasted until 1947, when Italy, defeated in the Second World War, was finally forced to hand them over to Greece:

"1. Italy hereby cedes to Greece in full sovereignty the Dodecanese Islands indicated hereafter, namely Stampalia (Astropalia), Rhodes (Rhodos), Calki (Kharki), Scarpanto, Casos (Casso), Piscopis (Tilos), Misiros (Nisyros), Calimnos (Kalymnos), Leros, Patmos, Lipsos (Lipso), Simi (Symi), Cos (Kos) and Castellorizo, as well as the adjacent islets.

1. These islands shall be and shall remain demilitarised.¹¹"

Neither treaty makes specific mention of Imia/Kardak Rocks. The question then becomes: do they fall into the category of "dependent" (1923) or "adjacent" (1947) islets? Since neither treaty defines what is meant by these terms, the question is certainly open to debate. In simple distance terms, the islets are actually closer to the Turkish mainland than to the nearest named Dodecanese island (Kalymnos): does this mean that they are more 'dependent' on Turkey than on Greece? Possibly, although of course if distance from the respective mainlands was the main determinant of sovereignty, the entire Dodecanese group would be Turkish. Perhaps more telling is Article 12 of the 1923 treaty which, in addition to confirming Greek sovereignty over "the islands of the Eastern Mediterranean, other than the islands of Imbros, Tenedos and Rabbit Islands", also stipulated that:

"Except where a provision to the contrary is contained in the present Treaty, the islands situated at less than three miles from the Asiatic coast remain under Turkish sovereignty."

This would seem to establish an outer limit for islands which are 'naturally dependent' on Turkey of three miles. Unfortunately for Turkey, the shortest distance between the disputed features and the Turkish mainland is just over 3.5 nautical miles.

Further support for the Greek claim can be found in a 1932 agreement between Italy and Turkey which established the ownership of islands in the southern Aegean by drawing a line separating Italian islands

from Turkish islands. Point 30 of this line was agreed as being “*half way between Kardak (Rocks) and Kato I. (Anatolia)*”. The Greek argument is that since this agreement clearly established ‘Kardak Rocks’ as Italian possessions, they must form part of the Dodecanese group which Italy relinquished to Greece in 1947. The Turkish response is that this agreement, signed by relatively junior officials, was never ratified or deposited with the League of Nations and is therefore not legally binding.

To complicate the picture still further, the 1943 edition of the British Naval Intelligence Division’s Geographical Handbook for the Dodecanese notes in relation to the small island of Kalolimnos, which lies to the west of Imia/Kardak Rocks and is also not specifically mentioned the 1923 treaty, that “*the Italian map appears to assign Kalolimno[sic] to Turkey*”. Since Turkey does not appear to claim Kalolimnos, perhaps this indicates nothing more than a cartographic error;¹² nevertheless, it undoubtedly adds further uncertainty to an already confusing picture.

Conclusions and Prospects

As mentioned, a blow-by-blow account of the development of the dispute over the islets is included in the news section of this issue of the *Boundary and Security Bulletin*. However, certain trends are worth drawing out from these events as set against the geopolitical and historical background to the overall Greek-Turkish relationship.

Clearly, the presence of competing air and naval forces in close proximity together with elite military units facing off on the islets themselves, coupled with aggressive rhetoric from both sides, gave rise to considerable international concern that the dispute could easily escalate into outright war.

It is worth noting, however, that Athens and Ankara have been to the brink of war before, notably in the 1970s over continental shelf rights and the Turkish invasion of northern Cyprus in 1974, and again as recently as 1987, also over Aegean resource issues. Each time the two sides have pulled back from full-scale conflict.

Three related theories can be advanced to explain this caution. Firstly, memories of the consequences of the parties’ costly war in the 1920s have not fully faded. Secondly, there is a recognition that any contemporary confrontation between these well-armed NATO partners must necessarily be as

damaging, if not more so, than their earlier conflicts. Finally, as a consequence of their past, both sides seem to feel bound to ‘go through the motions’ of hostile bombast, military posturing and brinkmanship yet both seem to see little advantage in outright conflict.

That Greece and Turkey have once more come to the brink of conflict over such apparently worthless rocky outcrops is, however, testament not only to their deep-seated animosities and mutual distrust, but also to the enduring importance of territory, however insignificant in terms of size, population or apparent economic value, to states. Any threat to a state’s territorial integrity can be interpreted as a threat to that state’s legitimacy and ultimately its survival.

Territorial issues, therefore, are capable of generating intense, emotive nationalistic reactions as has been amply demonstrated in the two sides’ aggressive statements, the Greek and Turkish media’s hysterical reactions and the slightly absurd, if highly dangerous, ‘flag-race’ undertaken both officially and unofficially by the parties to the Imia/Kardak Rocks dispute. As such, boundary and territorial disputes are highly susceptible to exploitation, not only in order to boost newspaper circulations but also to further domestic political agendas.

In the Imia/Kardak Rocks case, the vociferous, if predictable, reaction from opposition parties in both Greece and Turkey to their government’s mutual decision to withdraw their forces in an attempt to defuse the crisis illustrates this trend. The leader of Turkey’s Islamist Welfare Party blasted caretaker Prime Minister Tansu Ciller, asking “*Why are we taking our own flag down and withdrawing from our own soil?*” Meanwhile, Greece’s new socialist government comfortably won a confidence vote in parliament but suffered defections as well as accusations of treason and calls for the resignation of the prime minister from opposition deputies. Indeed, the criticism of the Greek government forced Athens to cancel a proposed visit by US Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke in early February originally intended to help resolve both the Aegean and Cyprus problems and take in visits to Ankara and Nicosia.

One further factor perhaps conspired to make the Imia/Kardak Rocks dispute all the more volatile – the relative inexperience and/or instability of the two government’s concerned. The crisis represented the first foreign policy-test of the new Greek government – one to which it felt forced to react

with some fortitude thus sacrificing early hints that a more conciliatory and constructive relationship with Turkey was being contemplated. Meanwhile, in Ankara, drawn out negotiations had failed to deliver a new coalition government at the time the crisis broke. The Imia/Kardak issue therefore became a key issue in Turkey's turbulent domestic party politics, restricting scope for compromise and concessions on the issue.

Another aspect of the dispute worth highlighting is that despite calls from the UN Secretary General and the Secretary General of NATO urging a peaceful resolution to the dispute, it was US intervention in the shape of telephone calls to the two countries' leaders by President Clinton and intensive diplomacy from US envoy Richard Holbrooke which yielded the agreement on 31 January for both sides to withdraw from the disputed rocks. As Mr Holbrooke himself bluntly put it: "*While President Clinton was on the phone with Athens and Ankara, the Europeans were literally sleeping through the night. You have to wonder why Europe does not seem capable of taking decisive action in its own theatre.*"¹³

As this issue of the *Boundary and Security Bulletin* was going to press the new Turkish prime minister, Mesut Yilmaz, offered Greece unconditional talks on the future of the Aegean, saying on 24 March that: "*I am proposing to Greece to engage in a comprehensive process of peace settlement that will not exclude from the beginning any method of settlement including third-party arbitration.*" As Turkey has in the past consistently resisted repeated Greek calls to take the Aegean dispute before the International Court of Justice this perhaps represents significant progress. In a statement in keeping with the parties' antagonistic relations in the past, however, a Greek government spokesman stated on the day after Prime Minister Yilmaz's comments that the Turkish offer was "*insufficient.*" No swift resolution of the Imia/Kardak Rocks dispute or of Greece and Turkey's other long-standing quarrels therefore appears to be in sight.

References

- Beeley, B. W. (1989) 'The Turkish-Greek Boundary: Change and Continuity', pp.29-40 in Grundy-Warr, C. E. R. (ed.) *International Boundaries and Boundary Conflict Resolution*, Durham: International Boundaries Research Unit.
- Bosworth, R. J. B. (1984) 'Italy and the End of the Ottoman Empire' in Kent, M. (ed) *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire*, London: Allen and Unwin.
- Boyne, S. (1996) 'Tension Riding High in the Aegean', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 8, 3, (March): 120-123.
- Hydrographer of the Navy (1987, corrected to 1994) *Mediterranean Pilot: Aegean Sea and approaches with adjacent coasts of Greece and Turkey*, Volume IV, Taunton, 10th Edition.
- Lowe, C. J. and Marzari, F. (1975) *Italian Foreign Policy 1870-1940*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Naval Intelligence Division (1943) *Dodecanese*, Geographical Handbook Series B.R.500, 2nd Edition.
- Prescott, R. V. (1985) *The Maritime Political Boundaries of the World*, London: Methuen.
- Wilson, A. (1979) *The Aegean Dispute*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies Adelphi Papers, No. 155.

Notes

- ¹ The Admiralty Pilot for the Aegean (1987: 327) describes the features as "two above-water rocks."
- ² Full details of recent developments in the latest Aegean crisis are included in the news section of this issue of the *Boundary and Security Bulletin*.
- ³ For a more detailed analysis of the Aegean Dispute, Andrew Wilson's 1979 *Adelphi Paper* is strongly recommended.
- ⁴ Figures from Wilson, 1979: 5 and Prescott, 1985: 308.
- ⁵ Presidential Decree 6/18, September 1931 (quoted in Beeley, 1989: 37).
- ⁶ Especially, post-1991, from the former-USSR.
- ⁷ In the context of the present dispute Athens blocked a vote to approve a 375 million Ecu (US\$487 million) EU aid package to Turkey and followed this on 2 March by vetoing a 750 million Ecu (US\$940 million) loan to Ankara from the European Investment Bank. The Greek prime minister stated that Greece would block the aid "as long as Turkish aggressiveness persists." Ankara for its part vowed to resist "Greek blackmail."
- ⁸ The British frustration at this arrangement can be seen in the following limerick composed by a British diplomat:
They mustn't keep Rhodes or Stampalia
So they've sent a young man to Adalia
Where he's now hard at work
At cajoling the Turk
To cry 'viva evviva Italia!'
- ⁹ Article 5 (authors' translation)
- ¹⁰ Italy retained Rhodes on the understanding that it might be ceded to Greece if and when Britain surrendered Cyprus to Greece, although not before five years had elapsed.
- ¹¹ Treaty of Peace with Italy, Paris, 10 February 1947, Part I – Territorial Clauses, Section V – Greece (Special Clause).

- ¹² Irritatingly, the handbook provides no details of which map is being discussed.
- ¹³ Financial Times, 9/2/96; This assessment was, however, derided by the British Foreign Office as “*nonsense*”, The Guardian, 10/2/96.

Clive Schofield and Martin Pratt are researchers at the International Boundaries Research Unit.