
Defense Report

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Congress Lifts the Turkish Arms Embargo—NATO and U.S. Security are the Real Winners

In 1974 Turkey invaded the island of Cyprus to protect the rights of Turkish Cypriots reportedly being discriminated against by the Greek Cypriots who make up the majority of the population. This was just another chapter in a long story of political unrest and disagreement between Turkey and Greece over the small island nation. The only new problem in the 1974 invasion, as far as the United States was concerned, was the use by the Turks of U.S.-supplied military equipment, in clear contravention of the foreign aid agreement between the U.S. and Turkey. The U.S. Congress reacted by placing an embargo on the sale or grant of military equipment to Turkey.

Each year since then the embargo has been renewed as members of Congress sympathetic to Greece and the Greek Cypriots overcame growing concern that the steady deterioration in the state of the Turkish armed forces as a result of the embargo was weakening the Southeastern flank of NATO. The Turkish army was equipped with a hodge-podge of World War II and Korea-vintage weapons. The navy was scrapping some of its old U.S. warships to find parts for those still operable and the air force suffered from the advanced age of its aircraft and the lack of parts to keep them operating.

As the military assistance bills for the upcoming fiscal year approached the floor of the House and Senate, President Carter made an all-out effort to lobby for relaxation of the embargo. The floor debate centered, finally, on the long-term impact continuing the embargo would have on NATO. House Majority Leader Rep. James Wright (D-Tex.) pointed out there was nothing Congress could do to change history or to ameliorate the long-standing conflict between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus. The Senate passed the military assistance bill and an embargo-ending amendment by a substantial margin. The House did the same but by the very narrow margin of just three votes.

Congress is to be congratulated on finally coming to the realization that it cannot solve all the world's problems. Specifically, it could not reduce the centuries-old animosity between Greece and Turkey. By setting the embargo Congress instructed Turkey it must comply with our laws relating to the use of equipment provided as military assistance. But to keep the embargo on for so long added insult to the tutoring.

At a time when Congress has been approving the expenditure of billions of dollars to shore up NATO's military capabilities in the Central European region it would have been foolhardy to permit the continued erosion of the alliance's potency along its only direct border with the Soviet Union. Hopefully, this divisive and counterproductive issue has been finally laid to rest.