The United Nations and the Cyprus Problem

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Abstract

Both communities in the Cyprus dispute have at different times objected to the intervention of the United Nations when in their view mediatory function was somewhat replaced by more forceful methods resembling arbitration. In 1965, the UN Mediator, Galo Plaza, issued a Report that met outright opposition from Turkey and Turkish Cypriots on the grounds that the mediator had acted as an arbiter. In 2004, the Annan Plan was rejected by the Greek Cypriots feeling that the kind of settlement proposed was an imposition by the outsiders.

This short paper aims to assess the intervening role of the UN in Cyprus in respect of peacemaking and peacekeeping from 1964 to the present day. Both the traditional nature of the UN peacekeeping force in Cyprus UNFICYP as well as the oscillating diplomatic efforts of the organisation to bring about a settlement have been discussed. The attitude of the belligerent parties to the UN involvement, their concerns and expectation as well as the influence of the major powers through the organisation to tailor a solution has accordingly been analysed.

It was in the 1950s when the Cyprus problem was first introduced to the General Assembly of the United Nations. At that time, the issue was that of self-determination for a colony of the United Kingdom. Greece as the 'motherland' of the majority community on the island, Greek Cypriots, had decided to pursue the matter internationally despite the wishes of the British government to the contrary.[1] The Cold War, the pre-eminent feature of global politics then, however, meant that the fulsome and wholehearted support of the Western superpower, the United States, for self-determination in Cyprus was contingent upon other factors, i.e. making sure that such an eventuality would not lead to a Communist penetration of the island. The mere presentation of the case in the world body in itself had already risked embarrassment for Washington, which considered both Greece and Turkey, 'motherlands' of the two Cypriot communities, as well as Cyprus within the Western Camp. It was thus deemed best to try and resolve the issue within the

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1   D.S. Bitsios (1975) *Cyprus: The Vulnerable Republic.* Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, note 30, p. 40.
2   U. Nasuh (2003) *The Cyprus Question as an Issue of Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkish – American Relations 1959-2003.* New York: Nova Science Publishers, p. 33.

Western family and outside of the United Nations, where the Soviet influence could have perceivably complicated matters for the West.[2]

And that is how the matter proceeded. A deal called the London-Zurich Agreements that went against the wishes of Greek Cypriots to achieve *enosis* (union with Greece) was struck in 1959-1960, whereby both union with any other country or partition (as had been advocated by many Turkish Cypriots) were excluded. Thus in 1960, Cyprus became what was at times referred to as a reluctant republic.[3] The bi-communal power-sharing arrangements that were said to have been institutionalised in the new Republic's constitution to ensure a harmonious beginning to the politically independent life of Cyprus and Cypriots, however, failed to fulfil their goal. Within three years hostilities between Greek and Turkish Cypriots broke out over thirteen amendments to the Constitution that Makarios as the head of state had unilaterally proposed but had expectedly faced stern opposition from Turkish Cypriots and Turkey. In order to contain the conflict and prevent its escalation into a Greco-Turkish war, both members of NATO, the United Nations agreed to the despatching of a peacekeeping force to the island. Thus Resolution 186 of 4 March 1964, adopted by the Security Council, authorised the stationing of such a military force named The United Nations Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) as well as the appointment of a mediator by the Secretary-General to seek an agreed solution to the problem confronting Cyprus. The Mediator, the former Ecuadorian President Galo Plaza, issued his report one year later wherein he appeared to endorse the position adopted by the government of Cyprus, now fully under Greek-Cypriot control after the withdrawal of Turkish Cypriots from all organs of the administration.

Both Turkey and Turkish Cypriots rejected the report of the UN mediator. This marked a significant shift in the United Nations peacemaking role on the island as mediation was then replaced with the Secretary-General's good offices mission (never mentioned specifically in the UN Charter but utilised often), effectively replacing active with passive mediation. It would be sometime before active mediatory intervention was again adopted on the Cyprus problem, principally in the aftermath of the events of 1974 and perhaps most poignantly in the prelude to the Annan Plan in 2004. In between those years numerous representatives of Secretaries-General produced plans of their own as a half-way between the two sides' positions but were always rebuffed by one or the other of the parties. Intercommunal negotiation, which was the main mechanism through which a solution was being sought, proved ineffective in finding an agreeable solution to this protracted problem. The failure reflected, to a degree, the inconsistency between the UN's diagnosis of the problem and the remedy it prescribed for it. Resolution 186 of the Security Council, noted above, did state in particular that a solution was to be found with the agreement of the Guarantor Powers (Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom), the government of Cyprus and the two Cypriot communities. In effect, therefore, two internal and external aspects were noted by the UN to be the integral part of the Cyprus problem and its settlement. Why else should a

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3   S.G. Xydis (1973) *Cyprus: The Reluctant Republic.* The Hague/Paris: Mouton.

solution have the agreement of parties inside and outside of the country as stipulated specifically by the resolution? But the mechanism of intercommunal negotiation, which has been the main means of searching for a solution, only deals with the internal element. Overlooking the external factor represented a serious flaw in efforts trying to bring about a Cyprus settlement. However, the inconsistency between diagnosis and remedy may not explain the unwillingness of the parties themselves at various stages to reach an agreement but it could possibly suggest the difficulty in getting all internal and external players to agree to a plan at any given time.

When the intervention of outside powers, including the Guarantor Powers, was ensured to weigh heavily in favour of a settlement thus bringing due pressure upon the internal factors, as was the case in the Annan Plan, a settlement still proved elusive due to the unwillingness of local parties, in this instance that of Greek Cypriots. International pressure, therefore, was shown not to be a sufficient condition for a Cyprus solution as had been thought by some. Both domestic and outside factors, each necessary but not sufficient in themselves, are to work in parallel if prospects for a settlement are to be enhanced.

Peacekeeping

Initially formed of contingents of seven countries (Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Sweden and the United Kingdom) and numbering about 6,114 in total the UN Force on the island has now shrunk to around 857 that represent Argentina, Austria, Canada, Hungary, Peru, Slovakia and the United Kingdom. After much chagrin in the 1990s over the expenses of the force the Cyprus government accepted to bear a substantial part of the cost. Dubbed as one of the more successful cases of traditional peacekeeping by the United Nations, UNFICYP has managed to fulfil all items in its mandate but one, which relates to restoring normal conditions on the island. In that regard a brief analysis of the relationship between UNFICYP in its peacekeeping function and the diplomatic efforts of the UN may be useful.

Three possible and unintended side-effects – removal of urgency, arrival of complacency and untying the hands of belligerent parties – may have been adverse effects of UNFICYP on diplomatic efforts to reach a settlement. In the first instance the automatic stationing of a neutral force in between the warring factions eased off tension and reduced the risk of an escalation into a Greco-Turkish war. As the UN force appeared more and more able in fulfilling its function (without the obvious exceptions of 1967, 1974 and 1997, where the force still played a part in protecting non-combatants and de-escalation but failed to prevent the recurrence of hostilities) the Cyprus problem ceased to be a priority issue on the world's conflict agenda. After all, when guns fell silent and people were not killed attention was axiomatically shifted to more urgent and pressing cases, where lives were being lost. In consequence of the removal of urgency a state of complacency may have arrived to prevail upon the world misleading global leaders to believe that there was really not much danger in the *status quo*. Only periodic tragic incidents such as the Dherinia incident in 1997 suddenly shocked the international community back to the reality of

the situation. Thirdly the space provided by the UNFICYP may have at times tempted the local parties not to be too eager on diplomatic efforts to reach a settlement if the suggested plan fell short of their ideal solution. As the parties may feel immune to the consequence of their own intransigence, due to the presence of UNFICYP, a misguided belief that time is on their side might have come to prevail upon them dissuading them from full cooperation with mediatory efforts until such time that they could achieve their desired solution. This, however, it should be noted, appears to have been more the case with the Turkish Cypriots particularly during the years of Mr. Denktash's leadership and, excepting the tenure of president Christofias, with the Greek Cypriots (the Government of Cyprus) after the EU accession in 2004.[4]

Notwithstanding the above, the valuable work of UNFICYP cannot be overstated. Even though some unintended consequences may have hampered the peacemaking function of the Organisation on the island, there can be little doubt that the withdrawal of the force would probably only worsen the situation, exposing the militarily weaker party to the demands of the stronger one.

Peacemaking

In spite of the very many initiatives including the one outside of the UN system (the American-British-Canadian plan known as the ABC plan in 1978), the most internationalised proposal, offered in 2004, was the Annan Plan, named after the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Many, however, believe that a large part of the plan was in fact written by others (Lord David Hannay is one name mentioned in particular in this regard) and only presented as a UN-drafted proposal. After many rounds of negotiations outside of the island leading to various drafts of the proposal, eventually both parties agreed to submit the plan to separate referenda in Cyprus.[5] The newly elected president of Cyprus at the time, Late Tassos Papadopoulos, was, however, unwilling to lend his support and in a televised address urged the Greek Cypriots to reject it. In the end an overwhelming majority of Greek Cypriots (around 75%) voted against the Plan whereas around 64% of Turkish Cypriots endorsed it. The result was a staggering blow to the mediatory efforts of the UN, whose frustration over the outcome was thinly-veiled in its report to the Security Council. After the initial shock and a lull in diplomatic activities, hopes began to surface after the election of President Christofias, whose campaign promised reinvigorating efforts towards the reunification of the island. With Christofias and Memet Ali Talat, the new Turkish Cypriot leader, and a conciliatory figure for a solution, it seemed that there might be a real chance, once again, to strike a deal. Despite previous records (where on many an occasion both Mr. Denktash, and less

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4   F. Mirbagheri (2006) 'Peacekeeping and Peacemaking: The Example of Cyprus', *Contemporary Review*, Vol. 288, No. 1680, pp. 37-46.

5   For a fuller account of developments regarding the Annan Plan and the internal and external parties' reaction to it see James Ker-Lindsay (2006) *EU Accession and UN Peacemaking in Cyprus*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

frequently Cypriot Presidents (Greek-Cypriot leaders) had managed to thwart international efforts) there now appeared a very rare instance when both leaders seemed genuinely keen for a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem.

Eager to fully exploit the situation, the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon, appointed the former Australian Foreign Minister, Mr. Alexander Downer, as his special envoy on the island. Mr. Downer's mandate is 'to assist the parties in the conduct of fully-fledged negotiations aimed at reaching a comprehensive settlement'.[6] That marks a shift from the previous peacemaking attempt carried out by Kofi Annan and his envoys, where the UN was an active mediator. During the current phase (era of passive mediation), some progress was achieved before the victory in Turkish–Cypriot elections in 2010 opened the way for Mr. Dervish Eroglu to assume the leadership of his community. The latter is known, not all that unjustifiably, for his hard-line and uncompromising policy on the Cyprus problem. It now remains to be seen whether or not his approach will herald a change from his record and in the direction of a solution.

The United Nations, being the world's diplomatic body, should in a sense always imbue optimism even when it may not appear wholly justified. That has been the trend thus far. The real substantive question for the UN, however, is its ability to engage and interact with the local as well as international actors on this issue. In 1965 the UN failed to win the support of all outsiders, namely Turkey, as well as the Turkish Cypriots and thus did not secure a settlement. Strangely enough the UN mediator had decided to hand in his report when there were no indications that all sides would agree. In 2004, the UN appeared to have won the endorsement of all international actors but the local factor led to the demise of its efforts. In between, initiatives such as the Gobbi Initiative or the Draft Framework Agreement of 1980s were unable to elicit the support of the two communities. Therefore, in view of the history of the problem for nearly half a century, one may be tempted to conclude that the heavier burden of the problem, at-least in the past decade or so, may have fallen on the internal players. Though there is a considerable influence of outside factors, there seems little doubt that in the final analysis the solution to the problem of Cyprus will in the main depend on Cypriots themselves.

The United Nations and the International Aspect of the Cyprus Problem

The UN, as an international organisation, consisting of states, cannot act in an independent manner that would defy the wishes of its members. In other words the UN is only as effective or as ineffective as its members, and particularly its stronger and richer members, wish it to be. It may decide, for instance, to apply the doctrine of collective security in the case of Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 but not in other similar cases in the Middle East or elsewhere. Much perceived strategic and political interests may well stand in the way of that. The question of the protracted

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6   Security Council Resolution S/RES/1847 (2008).

problem of Cyprus thus can only be considered and dealt with in the context of such international coordinates of power and interest. Any expectation that the UN can manipulate international actors on the Cyprus issue without the support of its key members may appear unrealistic.

Turkey with around 40,000 troops in Cyprus is a key international player on the Cyprus problem. Already a Guarantor Power Ankara significantly increased its military and political influence on the island after the 1974 invasion of the country. It has since used this leverage tactically in its international dealings and in particular with regard to its European ambitions. Though Greece can also be viewed as having exploited the situation in Cyprus, in terms of battering Turkey in international fora, Cyprus may have proved more of an asset to Ankara than Athens. As a strategic island and a focus of global rivalry during and after the Cold War Cyprus has in a sense been a victim of interplay of competing international forces. The problem of Cyprus can thus be viewed by some as a convenient barrier to Turkey's European aspirations. For others it may just be the opposite: the Cyprus problem delays Turkey's joining the European Union thus putting at risk Turkey's Western vocation in the long run.

The United Nations, with no tools to reward or to punish, is hardly in a position to influence the behaviour of international – or internal for that matter – players on the Cyprus problem. Nor can it wield any magic tool to alter their perceptions. Such shortcomings in reward and punishment are serious impediment to its peacemaking endeavours; but it can be used as the most legitimate vehicle to pursue international diplomatic efforts for a solution. The legitimacy of the UN and the unique multilateral context it affords for acknowledgement of rights and obligation of the states has been an effective tool for the Cyprus government to keep the problem alive in the context of the breach of its territorial integrity by the occupying Turkish forces. For instance, in 1974, in the aftermath of the Greek-staged coup and the subsequent Turkish military intervention and invasion, the General Assembly of the United Nations passed the resolution 3212 (XXIX) asking for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the island. Not wishing to be in the embarrassing position of minority of one against all other states Turkey also voted in favour of the resolution. That was an illustration of how the world organisation can bring into focus the principles of international life however inconsequential they may prove to be.

Therefore, the impact of the United Nations on states involved with the Cyprus problem, directly or indirectly, is very limited. There have been the obvious behind-closed-door meetings of the secretariat with interested parties, but that has been rather informational and procedural rather than effecting any real change in the approach of international players. Beyond that, the key players in the UN must be willing to turn the screws in a sufficiently powerful manner and in the right direction on the relevant countries to produce the kind of results that are sought by those interested in a Cyprus solution. And that may have to be adopted, if at all, at certain diplomatic and political cost, which may in itself prove a deterrent.

The United Nations and the Internal Aspect of the Cyprus Problem

Beyond the regular resolutions of the Security Council extending the six-monthly mandate of UNFICYP there have been the reports of the secretary-general that aim to describe the situation on the ground and the state of diplomatic efforts. These reports have at times hinted at one or the other of the two internal parties for their perceived lack of cooperation and their negative impact on peacemaking. In the 1960s, U Thant, then Secretary-General, reported that the Turkish Cypriot leadership had imposed a policy of self-isolation not allowing any interaction with Greek Cypriots. That rebuffed claims that Greek Cypriots were responsible for the isolation of Turkish Cypriots.[7] However, in the same report U Thant did acknowledge the suffering of the Turkish Cypriots stating that at times and in places some of them were in a state of starvation.[8] Three decades later, then UN secretary-general Boutros Ghali, indicated the negative impact of the Turkish Cypriot leadership's stand on the peacemaking process in Cyprus. That was in the aftermath of his proposed Set of Ideas and a suggested series of Confidence-Building Measures, which did not come to fruition. More recently, in the wake of the Annan Plan and the rejection it received from the Greek Cypriot leadership and the Greek Cypriots in general, the Secretary-General's report pointed the finger in the direction of the Cyprus government, which had successfully exhorted its people to decline the proposal.

The above goes to show that the behaviour of the internal parties in Cyprus is noted by the world and if deemed necessary the UN will attribute responsibility for negative developments on peacemaking as it sees fit. This rather open approach has never been adopted *vis-à-vis* outside powers and their impact upon peace efforts in Cyprus. In 1974 after the UN suffered tens of casualties, some of them fatal, Kurt Waldheim, then Secretary-General, had no hesitation in pointing out that Greek Cypriots had attracted the fire of the invading Turkish forces to the UN personnel by taking positions near them. Such accounts narrated by the world's top diplomat, against either of the two parties, can in the very least prove embarrassing and worse it can be consequential. For instance, viewed as less than constructive in the report of the UN (and by the US and European powers) the attitude of Greek Cypriots towards the Annan Plan,[9] there has since been some talk of opening direct trade between the European Union and the Turkish Cypriots in effect bypassing the government of the Republic. Vehemently opposed by the Cyprus

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7   S. Kyriakides (1968) *Cyprus: Constitutionalism and Crisis Government*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 115.

8   R.A. Patrick (1968) *Political Geography and the Cyprus Conflict, 1963-1971*. Waterloo, Ontario: Dept. of Geography, publication series no. 43, University of Waterloo, p. 108.

9   For instance, the oral reports of the UN representative in Cyprus Mr. de Soto, and Mr. Prendergast to the Security Council can be cited as examples. Also note the following: 'The Secretary General applauds the Turkish Cypriots, who approved the plan notwithstanding the significant sacrifices that it entailed for many of them'. (UN Under-Secretary General Prendergast's briefing to the UN Security Council on 28 April 2004).

government, such moves indicate the kind of possible consequences if the parties perceivably fall short of the expectations of the international community on peacemaking in their country. In this sense, the leverage of the UN is perhaps somewhat greater amongst Greek Cypriots than Turkish Cypriots as they, representing the state of Cyprus, may have more to defend, and more to lose, than their fellow Turkish Cypriots. The counter-argument that the Turkish Cypriots' suffering, due to the embargo and isolation, has made them eager for change also rendering them vulnerable to pressure by the UN should also be noted.

It is at times perceived by some that the views of the two communities have usually reflected the views of their 'motherlands' albeit to varying degrees.[10] Accordingly it is alleged that the Turkish and Greek Cypriot leadership each subscribe to the opinion of Athens and Ankara. It would perhaps appear more plausible to state that the Turkish Cypriot leadership has perhaps been the subject of such influence more than the Greek Cypriot one. To lend support to this one can cite the rejection of the Report of Galo Plaza in 1965 by Turkey before Turkish Cypriots (the latter, however, followed suit) and the almost identical lines of Mr. Denktash, during his long tenure as the leader of his community, with those of Turkey. Nevertheless this relationship was perhaps more dyadic than appreciated by many in that Mr. Denktash was at times able to convince Ankara to support his line on Cyprus. The Greek Cypriot leadership, however, appears to have openly defied Athens in various stages since 1960. First the 1963 constitutional proposals that Makarios submitted were against the advice of Greece; second, the constant chasm between Nicosia and Athens between 1967 and 1974 when the Greek military was in power led to an assassination attempt against the Cypriot president; and third the difference of opinion between the Greek leaders and Cypriot President on the Annan Plan in 2004 was also evident.[11]

Some Concluding Remarks

Throughout the past half a century or so, the United Nations has been trying to break the log jam and introduce a settlement to the Cyprus problem. Through its peacekeeping operation it has been reasonably successful in the maintenance of the ceasefire and containing the conflict. The solution has thus far proved evasive despite the variety of mechanisms employed by the world body. Starting by active mediation in 1964, moving on to the passive good-offices approach of the secretary-general, continuing with the presence of special representatives, who intermittently came up with different proposals of their own for a solution and culminating with an all-active internationally supported and comprehensive plan in 2004 there is now little that has not been

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10   F. Mirbagheri (1998) *Cyprus and International Peacemaking*. London: C. Hurst and Co. Ltd, p. 159.

11   N. Panagiotou (2006) *The Role of the Greek Press in Greek – Turkish Rapprochement: The Coverage of the 'Annan Plan' for the Settlement of the Cyprus Conflict*, RAMSES Working Paper 6/06, September 2006 European Studies Centre, University of Oxford, p. 9; see [http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/esc/ramses/panagiotou.pdf], accessed on 24 November 2010.

tried and tested in Cyprus by the United Nations. The willingness of the local parties together with the support of international players, principally Turkey in this instance, are the two necessary conditions for a settlement. In the absence of either of them prospects for a breakthrough appears dim and unrealistic.

However, as politics is full of surprises, the fast changing environment in international relations may produce an instance of such convenience when both internal and external conditions for a settlement would appear ripe. Many independent variables, however, as noted above, would have to come into play before such an outcome could be envisaged. Turkey's European aspirations as well as trends in its domestic politics together with other regional developments will undoubtedly have bearings on Cyprus. So will of course the political aspirations of Cypriots themselves as to their desired outcome on the *de facto* partition of their country. The United Nations can and will continue to facilitate a settlement but only in the context of such factors. It is not equipped to provide a new context of its own.

Naturally one is tempted to share the optimism of professional peacemakers on the island; particularly that the long history of failures together with the continuing cost of UNFICYP may gradually give weight to the cynical belief that there can be no solution in sight in the foreseeable future. Such an eventuality, however, would have far-reaching consequences beyond the shores of the island. At a time, when cultural polarisation is relatively more prominent than in recent history, permanent political separation of the two Cypriot communities may produce the wrong kind of message for a world that needs more than ever before to come together in order to meet challenges that threaten humanity as a whole.

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