

REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONDITIONS FOR A VIABLE SOLUTION TO THE-CYPRUS PROBLEM

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the geopolitical dimension of the Cyprus problem, focusing on the regional balance of power from the perspective of Greece and Turkey. Given that the Turkish military occupation of northern Cyprus entails Turkey's control, or at least paramount influence, over the Turkish-Cypriot community, and given that Greece is engaged in a defence alliance with the Republic of Cyprus, Ankara and Athens are crucial actors in the Cyprus problem. Their policies, therefore, constitute one of the decisive factors that will determine the success or failure of international efforts to solve the Cyprus problem.

In focusing on the geopolitical dimension, I do not mean to suggest that the constitutional questions that preoccupy the two communities in Cyprus are peripheral to the quest for a solution. The nature of a future Cypriot constitution, that would bring the two communities together again under one political system, is an issue of vital importance to the Cypriots. Nonetheless, I shall steer clear of the intricacies of the constitutional debates, in order to focus in greater depth upon the, at least equally important geopolitical impediments to a solution to the Cyprus problem.

The paper will begin by examining the geopolitical aspects of the Cyprus problem from the perspective of Turkey. It will then proceed to an examination of the Greek perspective. The priorities of the EU and NATO will be outlined next, in light of the analysis of the perspectives of Ankara and Athens. The paper will conclude with recommendations concerning the geopolitical conditions for a viable solution to the Cyprus problem.

The Perspective of Turkey

Turkey's perspective is one of the most central factors in the Cyprus problem, because Turkey has been, strategically, the dominant actor in Cyprus since 1974. Cyprus is very close to the south-eastern coast of Turkey, which means that the Turkish army on the island can easily be supported and reinforced by sea and air.

By way of contrast, Greece maintains a tiny force in Cyprus, with no more fire-power than a regiment. Moreover, the nearest Greek coasts are significantly further away than the Turkish coast. Given the greater difference in distances, Greece's ability to project strategic power in Cyprus is much more limited than Turkey's.

The most significant aspect of Turkish policy in Cyprus since 1974 is that Ankara is satisfied with the present situation. From the Turkish perspective, the Cyprus problem was solved in 1974. The perpetuation of the present situation is advantageous to Turkey for the following reasons:

a) The Turkish-Cypriot community is protected from the prospect of a geographic, political and economic marginalisation, such as it had experienced in the period 1964-74, when most Turkish-Cypriots had retreated to territorial pockets amounting to about 3% of Cyprus' territory. (According to the 1973 population census, the Turkish-Cypriot community came to 116, 000 people, which was 18.4% of the population of Cyprus). By way of contrast, since 1974 the Turkish army has secured 37% of the island's territory for the Turkish-Cypriot community, although the Turkish-Cypriots have had to share this territory with a growing population of settlers from Turkey who by 1997 seemed to have outnumbered the indigenous Turkish population of Cyprus (in part because of the emigration of some 25,000 Turkish-Cypriots, mainly to Britain and Germany).¹

b) Strategically, the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus averts the fall of the island under the control of Greece, a development which from the perspective of Turkish strategic planners would complete the naval encirclement of Turkey. Since Greece is strategically in a position to disrupt Turkish sea communications in the Aegean, thus isolating Turkey's Black Sea and Aegean ports, the southern coast of Asia Minor remains the only secure basis of sea communications in the last resort. Ever since Kemal Ataturk, therefore, Turkish policy has been to prevent the fall of Cyprus into the hands of a potentially hostile power, which might thereby threaten to complete the strategic encirclement of Turkey by sea.²

c) Turkey's dominant strategic position in Cyprus is a powerful instrument of pressure against Greece regarding the Greek-Turkish disputes in the Aegean. Holding Cyprus as a strategic hostage, Turkey implicitly threatens to attack the remaining territories under the control of the Republic of Cyprus in the event that Greece moves against Turkish interests in the Aegean. In the words of Sukru Elekdag, former Under-Secretary of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and former Turkish Ambassador to the United States, "Greeks are cognisant of the fact that in the event that they escalate the crisis in the Aegean to a hot conflict, this will force Turkey to take military measures in Cyprus. Greece is aware of her vulnerability in Cyprus. This assessment in turn leads Greece to be cautious in the Aegean."³

It should be noted, that Turkey's quest for a strategically superior position vis-à-

vis Greece is shaped by the fears of Turkish leaders, that they may be forced to face multi-front threats simultaneously. Turkey is currently engaged in a war against the Kurdish insurrection in South-East Asia Minor, which has been raging since 1985. This war ties down some 250,000 Turkish troops. In addition, Turkey faces a threat from Syria over the formerly Syrian province of Hatay, which Turkey annexed in the late 1930s (before Syria became an independent state). This dispute between Turkey and Syria is not confined to words. Syria actively supports the PKK, the leading organisation in the Kurdish insurrection. The PKK receives not only Syrian financial support, but also military training and safe havens.⁴

Since 1967, Syria has focused her military endeavours on her conflict with Israel, deeming the *recovery* of the Golan Heights more important than the *recovery* of Hatay. But the Arab-Israeli peace process raises the possibility that Syria will reach an agreement with Israel, which would allow her to redeploy her forces from the Golan Heights to her border with Turkey. Such a prospect alarms Turkish strategic planners, who fear that in the eventuality of a Turkish-Syrian war they might have to face, simultaneously, Greek moves in the Aegean; the extension of Greek territorial waters from 6 to 12 miles is *casus belli* to Turkey (since it would enhance the Greek strategic threat to Turkey's Aegean lines of communications).⁵

Turkey also faces a potential threat from Russia. Thus far, Russia has not posed an actual strategic threat to Turkey. Yet if the competition between these two states for influence in the Caucasus intensifies, Russia may well adopt a more menacing posture vis-a-vis Turkey. Evidence of Turkish paramilitary engagement on the side of the separatist Chechens during the Chechenya warfare shows the extent to which Russo-Turkish relations are becoming strained.⁶

It is in the light of Turkish fears concerning the eventuality of such multi-front threats, that the importance of the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus as an instrument of deterring Greek *moves* in the Aegean is to be assessed.

The combination of geopolitical benefits that accrue to Turkey from the occupation of northern Cyprus is so important to Turkish strategic thinking, that Turkey has extremely high incentives to maintain the present situation in the Cyprus problem. It is for this reason that Turkey is prepared to incur the opprobrium of Western public opinion in reaction to her occupation of northern Cyprus, which contributes to the impediments in Turkey's relations with the EU.

It would take a powerful combination of counter-incentives to lead Turkey to change her policy of perpetuating the present situation in Cyprus. Thus far, such counter-incentives have been rather weak. The political cost that Turkey has incurred on account of her Cyprus policy has been relatively limited. The reason is that Turkey's geopolitical role in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, as a regional agent of Western influence, guarantees Western support for Ankara. Neither the United States nor the leading powers in the EU are prepared to risk

Turkey's Western geopolitical orientation over the Cyprus problem. Whatever pressures they may exert on Turkey to move towards a mutually acceptable solution in Cyprus fall far short of anything that might seriously risk alienating Turkey from the West.

The Perspective of Greece

Greece is in the unenviable position of having to approach the Cyprus problem from a position of relative strategic weakness. The bilateral Greek-Turkish strategic balance in itself presents difficult problems for Greek strategic planners in the border regions of the Aegean and Thrace. When Cyprus is included in the calculation, the Greek strategic difficulties are seriously augmented.⁷

Greek policy in Cyprus is under the shadow of the 1974 disaster, which created a situation unacceptable to Greece. Yet Greek policy thus far has not met any success in its objective of undoing 1974. On the contrary, since 1974 Greece has had to face an ever worsening situation. First the Turkish army invaded northern Cyprus. Then a stream of settlers from Turkey began to change the demography of the Cypriot territories under Turkish occupation. In 1983 the Turkish-Cypriot leadership proclaimed an independent republic in northern Cyprus (recognised only by Turkey so far) which suggested a firm determination on the Turkish side to perpetuate indefinitely the situation created in 1974. A parallel escalation of Turkish pressure was experienced in the Aegean.

Greece has followed two directions of policy, in order to assist the Republic of Cyprus in the Cyprus problem and to secure the status quo in the Aegean:

a) Greece has extended to Cyprus a security guarantee against further attacks by the Turkish forces, declaring any renewed Turkish offensive in Cyprus as *casus belli*. The so-called "dogma of the unified defence area", agreed in 1995 by Greece and Cyprus, has led to increased defence cooperation between the two countries and is thus a step towards increasing the credibility of the Greek security guarantee. It should be noted, though, that this policy can only defend Cyprus from further invasion, by reducing her strategic vulnerability. A policy of reversing the situation of 1974 by military force is inconceivable, given the overall strategic balance, and is not advocated by any policy-maker or political force in either Greece or Cyprus.⁸

b) Greece has exploited her EU membership to put pressure on Turkey. The EU is the one arena where Athens enjoys an unambiguous bilateral advantage over Ankara. This advantage is particularly pertinent, since the Western-oriented leadership of Turkey strongly desires to accede to the EU in order to secure firmly Kemal's secular and westernising legacy. Greece has blocked EU-Turkish relations, including aid programmes, and has threatened to continue to do so unless Turkey acquiesces in a solution to the Cyprus problem on the basis of an end to the Turkish military occupation of the northern part of the island.⁹

In March 1995, Greek policy in the EU underwent a significant change, when Greece lifted her veto over the Customs Union of the EU and Turkey. In return, Greece obtained a commitment by the EU to initiate the procedure of the accession of Cyprus to the EU six months after the end of the Inter-Governmental Conference of 1996-7. In effect, Greece traded her veto on one major aspect of EU-Turkish relations for closer EU-Cypriot links. In Greek thinking, an accession of Cyprus to the EU would dramatically change the political balance between the Greek and the Turkish sides in the Cyprus problem in favour of the former. In addition, many Greeks hoped that Greek acquiescence in Turkey's Customs Union with the EU might have led to an improvement in overall Greek-Turkish relations.¹⁰

Unfortunately, this last hope was belied by the sharp rise in Greek-Turkish tension in 1996, both in the Aegean and in Cyprus. Concerning the Cyprus problem, the Turkish side has become alarmed at the prospect of Cyprus' accession to the EU, which would transform the situation from a Greek-Turkish to an EU-Turkish conflict. The Turkish objective is to prevent the accession of Cyprus prior to the accession of Turkey herself (which, in the foreseeable future, is unlikely for reasons unrelated to the Cyprus problem or other Greek-Turkish disputes). In the event that this objective proves unattainable, Turkey threatens, with the agreement of the Turkish-Cypriot leader Mr Denktash, to annex northern Cyprus the moment that the Republic of Cyprus enters the EU.

Tension in Cyprus increased in the summer of 1996, when two Greek-Cypriots were killed on the line that divided the island, in acts of murderous violence that the Turkish-Cypriot side justified as designed to impress on Greek minds the reality of the border between the Republic of Cyprus and the internationally unrecognised "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus". A further escalation of tension took place early in 1997, when Cyprus announced its agreement with Russia to acquire Russian S-300 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), as part of her effort to raise her defence capabilities and thereby to reduce her strategic vulnerability. When Turkey threatened to prevent the deployment of this weapons system in Cyprus, Russian officials indicated that Russia would resist, if necessary by force, any effort by any party to elbow them out of the international arms market.

The crisis over the S-300 missiles was defused, for the time being, when it became clear that for technical reasons their deployment in Cyprus would not be possible before mid-1998. Nonetheless, the S-300 missiles issue is a time bomb with an explosive mechanism timed for mid-1998. Cyprus has declared that she will proceed with the deployment as scheduled, and that she will not be intimidated to cancel the missile deal. Turkey has declared, that she will bombard the missile sites to eliminate what she perceives as a strategic threat to her air bases on the Turkish mainland opposite Cyprus. And Greece has declared, that any Turkish attack against Cyprus is *casus belli*. If the declared intentions of the governments of Cyprus, Turkey and Greece are to be taken at face value, then a war involving the three countries seems not unlikely in 1998.

* Editorial Note: Readers should bear in mind that this article was written prior to the postponement in deployment of the missiles.

The Perspective of the EU and NATO

The ever-present and apparently increasing possibility of war between Greece and Turkey presents a major and difficult problem for the major powers of the Western alliance. Their top priority in this matter is to keep the south-eastern flank of the alliance intact, by averting any armed conflict between Greece and Turkey.¹¹

Western governments find themselves in the tricky position of not wishing to take sides between their two allies in the dispute. They wish to see the Cyprus problem resolved in a manner that is acceptable to both sides, so as to avoid alienating either. In particular, they are not prepared to risk the alienation of Turkey from the West, regarding her as a strategic ally of great value in the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Thus, they are prepared to tolerate Turkish violations of international law and Western standards of behaviour, in spite of the occasional vocal pressure of public opinion in some Western countries in support of a tougher approach to Turkey on such matters.

Western preference of a mutually acceptable solution in Cyprus, by mutual concessions, provokes hostile reactions on both the Greek and the Turkish sides. The Greeks feel, that the even-handed Western approach in effect rewards Turkish aggression and allows Turkey to abuse her strategic superiority in defiance of international law and Western standards of behaviour. The Turks feel that the even-handedness of the West is unjust, since it requires Turkey to make equal concessions to the Greek side, in spite of Turkish victory in the conflict of 1974 which, they allege, the Greek side had started.

With the end of the Inter-Governmental Conference of 1996-7, the EU is pursuing a particularly fine balancing act, involving apparently contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, it seeks to give Cyprus the impression that her accession to the EU is unlikely prior to a mutually acceptable solution of the Cyprus problem. On the other hand, it seeks to give Turkey the impression that Ankara will not be permitted to veto Cyprus' accession through obstinacy in the Cyprus problem. Behind these apparently contradictory positions, one can discern the deep-felt desire of the EU, with United States backing, to convince both sides that they stand to lose more through intransigence than through mutual accommodation.

Western efforts to bridge the differences between the two sides in Cyprus have acquired greater urgency during 1997, because of the increased tension between Greece and Turkey since early 1996, which threatens to explode over the S-300 missiles issue. And yet, these Western endeavours are unlikely to succeed, unless they take into account the geopolitical dimension of the Cyprus problem, delineated in this paper, instead of focusing narrowly on the Constitutional dimension of the dispute.

The Geopolitical Conditions For a Viable Solution

From the geopolitical point of view, Turkey desires, as a condition for a solution, that there will be some guarantee that Cyprus will not in the future be transformed into a hostile base under Greek control, completing the strategic encirclement of the Turkish coasts by Greece. The unusually strong Turkish reaction to the prospect of the deployment of the S-300 in Cyprus can be taken as an indication of Turkish sensitivity on this matter. The missiles, as stated above, would be able to threaten Turkish aircraft flying over Turkish mainland bases opposite Cyprus.

Greece and Cyprus desire, as a condition for a solution, some firm guarantee that the island will be secure from any repetition of the 1974 Turkish invasion. The best guarantee would be a strongly fortified Cyprus with deterrent capabilities, e.g. an abundance of S-300 missiles to raise the cost of any Turkish air attacks.

Since these two positions tend, on the face of it, to be mutually exclusive, some creative way must be sought to square this particular circle. Perhaps the best approach would be to entrust the future security of a post-solution Cyprus to a NATO force. For the Greek side, NATO would be more credible than the UN as a guarantor of security. At the same time, the absence of a significant Cypriot defence capability might reassure Ankara, that the retreat of the Turkish army from northern Cyprus will not be followed by the transformation of the island into a Greek forward base.

A NATO commitment to the security of Cyprus may be perceived as a major material burden for the members of the Alliance, especially since the NATO troops on Cyprus would need to be, by the logic of the present suggestion, other than either Greek or Turkish. On the other hand, NATO's military presence on the island may have important strategic benefits for the Alliance, in terms of a capability to project strategic power in the Middle East. Moreover, the financial burden of a NATO force in Cyprus may be covered, at least in part, by Cyprus.

This suggested approach does not, of course, constitute a panacea for overcoming all geopolitical aspects of the Cyprus problem. For example, so long as the Greek-Turkish differences in the Aegean remain acute and entail the risk of war, Turkey may wish to continue to keep Cyprus as a strategic hostage to deter or strategically match Greek moves in the Aegean. Nonetheless, the suggested approach might remove some of the geopolitical impediments to a mutually acceptable and viable solution in Cyprus, thus making the prospects of the endeavours of Western mediators somewhat more hopeful than they have been thus far.

NOTES

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9. "Turkey Responds Angrily to EU Exclusion", *Wall Street Journal-Europe*, 15 December 1997.
10. For a critical appraisal of this line of Greek thinking, see Platias, A., (1997) 'Skepseis gia tin elliniki ipsilli stratigiki'. *Yearbook, Institute of International Relations*, Athens: Sideris, I. p. 29.
11. This is the main theme in Steams, L. (1992) *Entangled Allies: US Policy Toward Greece, Turkey and Cyprus* (Greek edition), Athens: Pontiki, Mr. Steams is a former US Ambassador in Athens.