

THE CYPRUS PROBLEM IN THE BROADER GRECO-TURKISH RIVALRY: IMPLICATIONS FOR STABILITY IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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Abstract

This article provides ample confirmation that focusing on the intercommunal aspect of the Cyprus problem, as is often the case, is inadequate in understanding and addressing the issue. The author places the Cyprus problem within the context of the post-Cold War regional and international environment and also deals with the historical background of the issue, tracing the policies of Greece and Turkey over Cyprus in the post-1974 period. Furthermore, he addresses recent events and developments and suggests that the content of the solution of the Cyprus problem will critically affect security and cooperation in the island, the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond.

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to assess the implications of the Cyprus problem in the context of the broader Greco-Turkish rivalry and to examine particular developments that seem to be emerging. The Cyprus problem has serious implications for stability and security in the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader area. Given that "with the end of the Cold War, the Mediterranean, which had often been considered Europe's strategic backwater, is now a region where the [N.A.T.O.] Alliance may be most likely to face new challenges,"¹ as some analysts have agreed, addressing the Cyprus question in a conclusive manner and in a way that contributes to wider stability and security is essential.

The Cyprus problem, which is basically an international issue, constitutes perhaps the most important current focus of Greco-Turkish antagonism. But more than Cyprus is at stake. Greco-Turkish rivalry has deep historical roots and over time has gone through several stages. Currently, Turkey seeks to revise the status quo in the Aegean Sea, while Greek policy focuses on preserving the *status quo*. In this

respect, Greek foreign policy during the past few years has been clearly expressed by the statement "we do not claim anything-but we are not prepared to give up anything."

Adopting a historical perspective in connection with the Cyprus problem and the Turkish claims in the Aegean, S. Victor Papacosma notes that "when one also takes into consideration the Turkish maneuverings among the Moslem minority in Western Thrace and Turkey's general success in reducing the number of Greeks in Istanbul, Imbros and Tenedos, the multi-pronged threat to Greek and Greek Cypriot interests is broadened. Accordingly, Turkey's long-term, patiently executed, revisionist policy should be evaluated as the sum of several critical parts."²

In the next section an attempt is made to outline the context within which the Cyprus problem and Greco-Turkish relations should be placed. This is followed by a brief historical background on the policies of Greece and Turkey on Cyprus since 1974. This is very instructive as it may be indicative of the policies pursued by the two countries in their broader relations. In section IV some developments affecting the Cyprus problem and the relations between Greece and Turkey are assessed. Finally in section V some conclusions are put forward.

The Context

A critical development is that the end of the Cold War also marked the end of bipolarity. In the new multipolar world in which the U.S.A. is the dominant power, the possibility of regional conflicts is much higher. Furthermore, in the new emerging international environment, the new meaning of security has not been adequately addressed so far.

Three senior analysts of the Rand Corporation, Ian Lesser, F. Stephen Larrabee and Ronald P. Asmus argue that in post-Cold War Europe it is of critical importance that western strategy be reassessed and that particular attention should be paid to the broader Mediterranean region. More specifically they stress that "... the Mediterranean could emerge as Europe's new front line as the West confronts the strategic challenges of the post-Cold War era. It is here that many of the most likely candidates for future European security crises may be located. At the same time, traditional distinctions and barriers across the Mediterranean are breaking down and being reshaped by a wide and diverse set of demographic, political and economic forces. European, North African and Middle Eastern security are intersecting in new ways, blurring old strategic distinctions that have guided past policy and creating new challenges for Western policy"³

Oil and pipeline economic and political interests involved in Central Asia constitute another major factor influencing developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, as Fiona Hill has pointed out, "since 1991 the most important strategic issue in the triangle (formed by the Caspian, the Black Sea and the Eastern

Mediterranean,) has been oil in the Caspian and the competition between the littoral states of these three seas over its exploitation and transportation to markets in Europe."⁴

Both American and European analysts increasingly underline potential sources of conflict and factors that may undermine stability and security in this strategic region. Nationalism, the search for a new identity and a new direction, the economic gap existing between the rich and poor countries of the Mediterranean, unfulfilled expectations and frustration could indeed lead to undesirable developments.

The broader Mediterranean area is perceived to extend from Gibraltar to the Black Sea. It has been noted that "when senior US policy-makers think of the Mediterranean, they think first and foremost of the Eastern Mediterranean, above all Greece and Turkey as well as the Black Sea region. They also see the Mediterranean as the stepping stone to both the Middle East and the Persian Gulf."⁵ Consequently, according to Asmus, Larrabee and Lesser "the emerging geopolitics of energy supply illustrate how the Middle Eastern and European environments are increasingly interwoven"⁶ Indeed, "[e]nergy security gives Europe, especially Southern Europe, a tangible economic stake in stability across the Mediterranean...".⁷ They also underline that "[p]erhaps the most difficult political problem that must be addressed, however, is the Greek-Turkish dispute. Thus a new effort to resolve Greek-Turkish tensions is essential. This should begin with a new initiative to try to resolve the Cyprus issue. Progress on this issue is a key to a broader settlement of Greek-Turkish differences over the Aegean. The two problems are, in fact, closely linked: without progress on Cyprus there is likely to be little movement on the Aegean. At the same time, movement on Cyprus could create a better psychological climate for the resolution of outstanding bilateral differences over the Aegean."⁸

Historical Background

It is essential for the purposes of this analysis to assess briefly the policies of Greece and Turkey on Cyprus in the post-1974 period. In this way, it will be possible to grasp the current state of affairs in Cyprus as well as overall Greco-Turkish relations and perspectives.

On July 20, 1974, following a *coup d'état* instigated by the then military regime of Athens against President Makarios, Turkey found the pretext it had been seeking to invade Cyprus. Turkey invoked two reasons for its action:

- (1) To re-establish the constitutional order in Cyprus and to uphold the independence of this island-state in accordance with the 1960 agreements establishing the Republic of Cyprus.
- (2) To protect the Turkish-Cypriot community.

Retrospectively, it is obvious that Turkey has *de facto* partitioned Cyprus and has ever since been consistently pursuing its maximum objective, which is the strategic control of the island. By the term strategic control we imply an unchallenged ability to use Cyprus as a lever to advance its interests regionally and internationally. We should also keep in mind that the minimum objective of Ankara in Cyprus has traditionally been to thwart the strategic control of Cyprus or part of it by Greece and/or the creation of a second Greek state in the island.

Turkey invaded Cyprus not only to prevent *enosis* but moreover because it saw a window of opportunity. In the immediate aftermath Turkey had the opportunity to impose a solution favorable to the Turkish-Cypriots and its own interests. What has prevented a solution since 1974 is basically the pursuit by Turkey of its maximum objectives. Indeed, Turkey's victory in the war of 1974 led to a shift in Turkish objectives: from the minimum objective of trying to prevent *enosis* or the creation of a second Greek state in Cyprus to the maximum position which aims at the strategic control of Cyprus.

From 1974 to 1993 there was relative calm in Cyprus since the Turkish strategic control of the island was not challenged. At the same time, Turkey claimed that it had brought peace to Cyprus. Nevertheless, what Turkey describes as "peace" has proved very fragile. Indeed, the assassination of four Greek-Cypriots in the latter part of 1996 and the resultant heightened tensions have shown that peace and security on the island and in the broader region are at stake.

Prior to 1993, the Turkish occupation troops "tolerated" crossings of the cease-fire line by Greek-Cypriots while in recent months they have been ruthless, exercising "disproportionately greater violence" as the U.S. State Department has stated and indeed brutally killing Greek-Cypriots. A major factor is that the policies of both Greece and the Republic of Cyprus have changed. More specifically, following 1974 Cyprus has virtually been held hostage to Turkey; the Greek side has taken the decision to put an end to this situation. This has led to new developments.

More specifically it should be remembered that the prevailing policy of Greece and Cyprus in the immediate aftermath of the war in 1974 was expressed in the two following statements: (1) Cyprus decides and Greece provides its support.

(2) Cyprus is too far away from Greece.

These two statements summarize what has been known as the Karamanlis dogma. They reflected the inability of Greece to support Cyprus militarily. Consequently, the *casus belli* pronouncements put forward by successive Greek governments in case of a new Turkish advance in Cyprus lacked credibility.

Furthermore, the dogma "*Cyprus decides and Greece provides its support*" was a policy essentially lacking realism. Nicosia could not decide on its own about poli-

cies that would sooner or later entangle Athens. It was also a statement which aimed at overcoming tensions in the relations between Cyprus and Greece; one should not forget that prior to the invasion, relations between Athens and Nicosia were governed by the supremacy of "the national center", that is Athens. Yet when the actions of Athens provided the opportunity to Turkey to invade the island, Greece stood aside and watched Turkey occupy almost half of the island.

According to Arvanitopoulos "Greece has experienced a serious deficit in the credibility of its deterrence strategy due to its inaction in the face of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and its subsequent behavior in the Aegean where it let Turkish violations of Greek airspace become an ordinary phenomenon."⁹

Papandreou's visit to Cyprus in 1982-the first visit ever by a Greek Prime Minister-marked a turning point in the relations between the two states. It rekindled the hopes and the faith of Greek-Cypriots in Hellas and its perceived readiness to help Cyprus. Indeed, Papandreou proclaimed a new policy, a policy labelled "*symparataxi*"-which means lining up together in a common front. This was indeed a new approach. "The sun of Greece has risen over Cyprus again" was the headline of a major Greek-Cypriot daily, *Phileleftheros*, at the time. This new approach proved to have been the forerunner of even closer relations between Athens and Nicosia.

The stalemate in Cyprus which existed from 1974 eventually provoked (in 1993) an upgraded commitment by Greece to the defense of Cyprus, something Turkey did not want. The new policy, promoted by President Clerides and the late Prime Minister Papandreou and sustained by his successor, Prime Minister Simitis, has been described as the new defense dogma.

Arvanitopoulos suggests that this new defense arrangement "breaks new ground, in the sense that it departs from ... outdated modes of thought and action, and attempts to introduce the analytical tools of deterrence strategy into Greek defense realities."¹⁰ This change highlights a departure from the old practices of Greek foreign policy-which may be summed up as follows: "traditional in its conception and execution, reactive at its best and conciliatory in attitude at its worst."¹¹

Moreover, the March 6, 1995 decision of the European Union to embark on accession talks with Cyprus six months after the end of the Intergovernmental Conference constitutes one of the most important developments since 1974. Certainly, the European Union would prefer a solution to the Cyprus problem before membership. Nevertheless, even in the absence of a solution, Cyprus could still become a member.

Turkey has been experiencing changes as well. They account in part, for the hardening of its position. One can certainly detect a growing nationalism, as well as a drift away from Europe. Turkey has certainly embarked on a path for a new

Turkey. According to Steinbach, Turkey may be moving towards Neo-Ottomanism.¹²

Current Developments and Their Implications

Much less effort would have been spent on the Cyprus problem if it had not entailed dimensions which could seriously upset peace, stability and security in the broader area of the Eastern Mediterranean. In the context of the post-Cold War period the strategic position of Cyprus seems to have become more important. Besides being located at the juncture of three continents, the Eastern Mediterranean in which Cyprus is located, is at the apex of two geostrategic triangles the importance of which is immense and growing:

- (a) in the north with the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea
- (b) and in the south with the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.

The American and western diplomacy of complacency with the status quo in Cyprus since 1974 seems to have been shaken for several reasons. A major factor is that in the post-Cold War era the likelihood of regional conflicts is higher. Added to this, while in the past the status quo in Cyprus did not generate any threats to peace given the prevalence of the strategic control of Cyprus by Turkey, the new defense policy of Athens and Nicosia has altered this framework or is at least moving in that direction.¹³ This has wider strategic implications. According to Evriviades, the new defense policy has de facto brought Greece further into the Eastern Mediterranean and toward the underbelly of Turkey.¹⁴ Consequently, Turkey will sooner or later be faced with two options:

- (a) To alter its maximum approach in Cyprus and accept a compromise solution by which Cyprus should not be under the strategic control of either Turkey or Greece

or

- (b) consider the possibility of undertaking a preventive strike to eliminate any Greek military presence in Cyprus or a potentially viable Greek defense system.

Moreover, the March 6, 1995 decision of the European Union for accession talks with the Republic of Cyprus (six months after the end of the Intergovernmental Conference) has also provided a strong incentive to the member countries to work towards the resolution of the Cyprus problem. The European Union would not like to inherit the Cyprus problem by accepting Cyprus prior to a solution. On the other hand, it would be embarrassing for the Europeans if a non-member country, Turkey, determined the policy of the European Union.

Certainly, the new strategic realities around Cyprus and Greco-Turkish relations

require new approaches. Several analysts suggest that Greece is a *status quo* power while, on the contrary, Turkey is a revisionist power. If Turkey does not alter its revisionist policies and if Greece remains adamant in not giving in to Turkish demands, then inevitably these two countries will embark on a collision course. Indeed, the dangerous arms race between Greece and Turkey is indicative of the atmosphere of tension in the relations between the two countries. A similar state of affairs prevails in Cyprus.

Undoubtedly, from the perspective of the U.S.A. and the European Union there is an interest in a peaceful resolution of the problems between Greece and Turkey and of the Cyprus question. In relation to this, it should be noted that while the priority of the west is to see a peaceful resolution of Greco-Turkish differences and of the Cyprus problem, the contents of the package leading to a resolution are of secondary importance to it. This is hardly surprising. After all, traditionally, American and western policy in general towards Greco-Turkish relations was dominated by the primary objective of Soviet containment. The particular interests or objectives of Greece, Turkey and Cyprus were of secondary importance-and were therefore essentially ignored.¹⁵ In the post-Cold War period this practice has so far persisted out of inertia. But it can be changed.

The solution of the Cyprus problem and the improvement of Greco-Turkish relations would certainly be a positive development. Such an outcome though may presuppose the modernization and the further democratization of Turkey. Although not impossible, this seems to be a distant likelihood. On the contrary, according to several analysts-such as Professor Steinbach-Turkey has embarked on a path for a new Turkey. Professor Steinbach underlines that while in the past Turkey was considered as a stable power contributing to stability and security in the area, in the current context it may become a power which augments instability in the entire region.¹⁶

The Cyprus problem and the overall Greco-Turkish rivalry are further complicated by other developments currently taking place. It is important to focus on some of the challenges faced by Turkey. To begin with, the Kemalist establishment in Turkey faces severe problems, such as the search for a new identity, that challenge its existence. Furthermore, the Kurdish problem cannot be contained by the Kemalist regime. Had Turkey offered the Kurds a limited form of cultural autonomy in the past, there could have been expectations for a peaceful resolution. That has not happened. The continuing violence deepens the gap, thus increasing instability. Added to this, Turkey faces a serious socio-economic crisis as well as a democratic deficit. Given this state of affairs, it is hardly surprising that nationalism is growing while the Islamic movement has become a sizable force in Turkey. Several analysts indicate that Erbakan is not a passing phenomenon.

In addition to these domestic problems, Turkey has differences with most of its

neighbors. While for Greece and Cyprus Turkey constitutes the greatest threat to their national security, the reverse is not true: Greece and Cyprus are not at the top of the list of Turkish preoccupations. In spite of a great degree of economic interrelationship between Russia and Turkey, there is currently an antagonism between these two countries. Russians perceive Turkey to be playing an important role in efforts to destabilize or weaken post-Soviet Russia. If this is true, then we have a new dimension of the old Eastern Question. Turkey also has differences with Syria over water supply, the city of Hatay (that was annexed by Turkey in 1939), and the alleged support of the Kurds by Damascus. Furthermore, there is a debate in Turkey about whether or not Turkey should interfere in Northern Iraq and capture the area of Mosul. In this regard it is important to note that sometimes the population of 200.000 Turkmans in northern Iraq is inflated to 2.000.000 in the Turkish press.

Some Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the broader area of the Eastern Mediterranean – with its natural connections and interrelationships with the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea on the one hand and the Middle East and the Persian Gulf on the other – is quite volatile. A peaceful resolution of the Cyprus problem would remove a serious source of potential conflict. The basic question is what type of solution. Efforts aiming at marginally improving the current *status quo* amount to a process of legalizing the *status quo*, thus indirectly rewarding aggression. Such a scenario would not only undermine the interests of Cypriots but would also generate more instability. The real dilemma is whether Cyprus should be turned into the Switzerland or the Bosnia of the Eastern Mediterranean. This outcome will be largely determined by the active involvement or the lack of it by the U.S.A. and the European Union.

A united Cyprus could be a factor of stability, which would be to the interest of the European Union, the U.S.A. and the international community in general. It could also play a positive role in bringing about a rapprochement between Greece and Turkey. On the contrary, if the West makes the mistake of pressuring the Greek side into a solution that amounts to the legalization of the *status quo*, there will be adverse effects not only for Cyprus but also for Greece, Turkey, and the west. The first outcome of such a "solution" would be the official extension of the Greco-Turkish borders to Cyprus. This would dramatically increase instability in the area. The defense dogma, although in its infancy, has already demonstrated that. This realization should not tempt the west to suggest a return to the pre-dogma period: Cyprus cannot be held hostage to Turkey. Instead, a united Cyprus member of the European Union and of a broader western collective security organization would be a stabilizing factor in the relations between Greece and Turkey. Moreover, it would serve the objective of stability and cooperation in the Mediterranean and beyond.

Given the current circumstances in the island and the regional strategic bal-

ances, a truly federal arrangement may perhaps be the only available formula which would render Cyprus a unified state and thereafter pave the way for further integration. Such a solution, although not a precondition, would also facilitate Cyprus' membership of the European Union and lead into another period of economic growth and development, into a new economic miracle, the fruits of which would be shared by both Greek and Turkish Cypriots.

Indeed, the challenges lying ahead are great. While paying particular attention to its defense within the framework of military cooperation with Greece, the Republic of Cyprus must convey the message convincingly both to the Turkish Cypriots and to the international community that this policy aims at deterring further Turkish aggression while also contributing to a peaceful resolution of the problem. Moreover, it has to undertake several initiatives which would promote fundamental Cypriot objectives abroad. For example, it is of the utmost importance that Cyprus seeks membership in a collective security organization. Likewise it is essential to promote itself as a model state projecting ideas and values such as democracy, pluralism, human rights and a market economy in the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond. A series of measures and innovations also have to be undertaken domestically in order to achieve these objectives. Among other things, it is about time that policy making should be preceded by policy analysis and a careful examination of the effects of several options. Particular attention should also be paid to the promotion of policies leading to the most efficient utilization of its most important asset, its human capital.

Notes

1. See Asmus, Larrabee and Lesser (1996).
2. See Papacosmas (1996, p.6).
3. See Asmus, Larrabee and Lesser (1996, p.25).
4. See Hill (1997, p.179).
5. See Asmus, Larrabee and Lesser (1996, pp.28-29).
6. *Ibid.*, p.26.
7. *Ibid.*, p.26.
8. *Ibid.*, p.30.
9. See Arvanitopoulos (1997, p.156).
10. *Ibid.*, p.153.
11. *Ibid.*, p.153.
12. Udo Steinbach made this point while presenting the theme "The Islamic

Reorientation of Turkey and its International Implications" in Nicosia, within the framework of a seminar entitled *Contemporary Turkey*, organized by the Department of Turkish Studies of the University of Cyprus, and the Bureau for the Study of the Cyprus Problem of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on November 16, 1996.

13. An important development since this paper was presented has been the decision of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus to purchase S-300 anti-aircraft missiles from Russia. The deployment of such sophisticated weaponry on Cyprus would decrease the disadvantages of the Greek side on the island. This decision provoked Turkey's anger but, apart from that, it provided greater impetus and urgency for efforts on the part of the US and other western countries to resolve the Cyprus problem. This is because the S-300 missiles would not only increase tension and the possibility of conflict on the island (which would almost certainly escalate into a Greco-Turkish war) but would also give Russia a greater stake in developments over Cyprus.

14. See Marios L. Evriviades "Turkey's Role in American Strategy During the Cold War and Post-Cold War Period," a paper presented on October 29, 1996, within the framework of the symposium *"Contemporary Greece, Turkey and Cyprus - Greco-Turkish Relations and the International Environment,"* organized by the Research and Development Center - Intercollege.

15. See Stearns (1992).

16. See note 12.

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