

Exploring Second-Best Solutions for Cyprus

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in response

Can conflict in Cyprus be prevented? Elizabeth H. Prodromou is right to argue that the progressive militarisation of the island has made the status quo increasingly unsustainable. The exchange of threats and counter-threats during

summer 1998 around the deployment of Russian S-300 missiles on the Republic of Cyprus is the latest and most volatile expression of the escalation risks inherent in the changing conditions surrounding this conflict. The question for those who share this diagnosis is what strategy ought to be adopted given this shifting status quo, in particular on the part of the West.

One view, articulated brilliantly by Prodromou, is that reintegrating the island under a bizonal, bicomunal, federal (BBF) framework remains the most desirable solution. Since this requires a fundamental shift in Turkey's policies, the West – the US and the EU – needs to adopt a 'new approach' towards their ally, using incentives and rewards to pressure it into a deal on a united Cyprus.

I do not fundamentally disagree with the specific building blocks in this argument. What I take issue with is the overall mode of analysis, which consists in considering only extreme options and recommending policies that are supposed to bring about the preferred one. In fact, the choice in Cyprus is not simply between 'partition' and 'reintegration'. Choices are not black and white, and possible scenarios may combine elements of the different options Prodromou presents. Analysts need to determine whether a considered option is within the zone of possible agreements determined by all parties with veto powers. In short, foreign policy is about negotiations: clarifying mutual perceptions; distinguishing between posturing and underlying interests; bargaining over the fine print; discovering least costly concessions on all sides; and mutual accommodation of interests. Under such analytical premises, Prodromou's argument makes 'the best' the enemy of 'the good'. It contains three broad weaknesses.

What Kind of Reintegration?

On principled grounds, I share the view that reintegration under the BBF framework is still the most desirable option. Reconciliation through power-

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sharing is preferable to ethnic separation, which would set a poor precedent by sanctioning the use of force in resolving ethnic conflicts. In practice, however, the pros and cons of partition versus integration in Cyprus depend on what kind of partition and integration are available. Indeed, it is not too difficult to imagine 'partition' scenarios that would seem more in the Greek Cypriot interest than any realistic version of 'reintegration'.

What, for example, if a negotiated partition meant the Greek Cypriots getting back 72% or even 75% of the territory (more than the most extreme options considered under the BBF framework), including such valuable prizes as Varosha and Morphou, both of which could be settled by some of the Greek Cypriots who lost land in the north in 1974? Have Greek Cypriots fully comprehended the real costs of integration – the financial transfers to a much poorer North and the political constraints involved with power-sharing? What if power-sharing meant a Turkish Cypriot veto on Cyprus' accession to the EU, a veto Turkish Cypriots might link to EU policy towards Turkey? How does the fact that Turkish settlers now constitute half of the North's population affect this equation? What if the cross-island freedoms (movement of people, freedom of establishment and freedom to buy property) were subject to fewer constraints and shorter transition periods under a negotiated partition than under a BBF framework? What if – contrary to Prodromou's prediction – formal partition was accompanied by quasi-total demilitarisation of the island guaranteed by NATO?

In short, we need to consider all possible outcomes. A negotiated partition might not 'aggravate regional conflicts'; it might actually reduce them. And a federal framework could turn out to be a version of post-Dayton Bosnia, enshrining *de facto* territorial separation between communities while exacerbating intercommunal tensions. Without the urgency in Cyprus as in Bosnia to put an end to war, it is worth asking whether there exist better solutions for all sides.

An increasing number of Greeks and Greek Cypriots privately acknowledge that a divided Cyprus may be the least undesirable solution, provided that there are sufficient territorial and security concessions on the Turkish side. Especially if, in the long run, and contrary to Prodromou's vision, reintegration was attainable by other means. The context of EU membership may well provide a long-term model compatible with the integration ideal, but the kind of 'soft' integration explored in the EU rather than that involved with consolidating nation-states. Once the Republic of Cyprus becomes an EU member, the prospect of independent Turkish Cypriot membership – even if in one or two decades – could provide such a vision. Turkish Cypriot membership in the EU would only be possible if based on the freedoms of movement for people, goods and capital that apply throughout the EU, and while limited derogations may be possible – such as those provided for the purchase of property in Austria, Denmark and Finland's Åland islands – the prospect of EU membership could eventually be a means of breaking down barriers between the two Cypriot states. Moreover, mutual recognition in Cyprus could make

possible the sort of voluntary, joint-institutional bodies that, albeit under very different circumstances, have been agreed among the parties to the Northern Ireland dispute. There, it is widely assumed that the joint bodies that will soon help to link North and South might eventually provide a credible alternative to full-blown unification. Are alternatives of this sort not worth exploring in the Cyprus context?

The Likelihood and Cost of the Status Quo

It may still be the case that, for Greek Cypriots, the best alternative remains a united Cyprus entering the EU. But what if this outcome is not possible while there is still a window of opportunity for EU accession? The uncompromising advocacy of the reintegration option as outlined by Prodromou implicitly rests on three assumptions that may be proven wrong:

- that the BBF option is still alive;
- that if not, EU accession of a divided island is a possible scenario that is in any case better than negotiated partition; and
- that Greece's influence in the EU is sufficient to bring this outcome about.

If these assumptions are wrong, the Republic of Cyprus could lose on all fronts – reintegration on the island and Cyprus' accession to the EU. By underestimating the likelihood and cost of having to live with the status quo, and failing to rank alternative options, parties often miss their second-best option and end up with the worst of all worlds.

Prodromou may be right that Turkish Cypriots, if polled, would prefer to be in the EU than to be part of Turkey. But is that on any terms? With the start of EU accession talks, Turkish Cypriots seem to have decreased rather than increased incentives to agree on the BBF framework. They have grown accustomed to the security guarantees and economic subsidies provided by Turkey, and the prospect of a return to minority status has grown less and less palatable with time. Many younger Turkish Cypriots have never been to the southern side of the island or met a Greek Cypriot. Even the prospect of entering the EU and of better living conditions is insufficient to persuade them to accept a return to the conditions that led to their desire for separate security and independence in the first place. In this respect, the alternative to the partition of Cyprus may not be a harmonious reintegration, but the increasingly unstable status quo. Is it plausible to believe that, in case of continued stalemate, the EU will accept to take in a divided island, under the German 'Lander' approach whereby the Turkish territory could eventually be absorbed as an extra part of the Republic of Cyprus rather than an independent state? And that EU accession by the South will not be followed by integration of the North into Turkey?

It is also worth asking whether Greece really would proceed with its threatened veto of EU enlargement to Central Europe if the Union backs away from its pledge to Cyprus. It might, and, given the same domestic political

dynamics that have led to the crisis over the Cypriot missile deal, no one can exclude such a scenario. But the costs to Athens of doing so would be high: vetoing enlargement would mean alienating up to five Central European states; angering a US that has long pushed the EU to widen; and risking the wrath of Greece's European partners at the time when Greece will be seeking to fulfil its priority goal of joining European monetary union by 2002. Even if Greece were willing to risk all this by vetoing enlargement (or throwing some other spanner into the EU works) it is still not clear that this would lead to the accession of a divided Cyprus. Taking all of Cyprus into the EU without a solution on the island would mean the importation into the Union of an unresolved and militarised ethnic conflict, territory that the EU did not effectively control and, not least, some 30,000 Turkish troops. Taking in just southern Cyprus (the territory effectively controlled by the Republic of Cyprus) without an agreement on the island would mean effectively accepting partition, but a militarised partition along a disputed border with what would most likely become part of Turkey. Neither of these seems to be a solution that Greece's EU partners can reasonably accept, notwithstanding the legality of the Republic of Cyprus' internationally recognised claim to represent the whole island. Greeks need to consider seriously the cost and likelihood of this scenario.

Strategic Thinking in the West

Is Western policy towards Turkey the key to a solution in Cyprus? In theory, Prodromou may be right that it is: if the US and the EU used all the positive and negative inducements at their disposal to pressure Turkey into conceding a united Cyprus, they may get it. But Greek policy-makers need to consider the harsher possibility that neither the EU nor the US is ready to subordinate their relationship with Turkey to the Cyprus question. While it is true that the Cyprus stalemate is the major stumbling block to improving Greek-Turkish relations and dealing with disputes over the Aegean Sea, it is unfortunately implausible that its removal could exact the price suggested on the part of the EU or the US. A reintegrated Cyprus would no doubt 'encourage improved relations between Turkey and the EU', but Prodromou misreads EU politics by assuming that Ankara's willingness 'to reach a comprehensive Cyprus solution based on the BBF formula' is likely to be linked to 'the possibility of full EU membership'. There is a strong case for Turkey's membership in the long run; but while a solution for Cyprus is a prerequisite, Europeans know that it would be a dangerous game to present it as more than that. While there is no agreement in Europe as to whether other factors – Turkey's human-rights record, its structural economic and demographic characteristics or even its culture – preclude membership for the foreseeable future or simply make it a remote prospect, Cyprus does not figure highly in this fundamental equation.

Contrary to Prodromou's contention, inviting Turkey to be part of a 'European Conference' of associated countries is not a sign of an inconsistent EU policy of appeasement but the beginning of an attempt to design a partnership freed of the constant symbolic rejection-inclusion game inherent in

overplaying the membership card as an incentive mechanism. It is precisely because the EU has refused to adopt 'a policy of appeasement for Ankara's militarism at home and destabilising behaviour abroad' that the institutional form of Turkey's association with the EU has become so contentious.

Similarly, it is not surprising that US policy towards Turkey is consistent with the latter's greater preoccupation with its eastern than its western front. The Turkish General Staff's special relationship with Washington continues to be anchored in NATO's strategic requirements in the Middle East and Caucasus and will probably not be held hostage to Cyprus. It is symptomatic that the only hard instrument that Prodromou suggests as an incentive is 'the rewards of a formalised European designation', a policy instrument that is not at Washington's disposal.

In the end, encouraging Turkey's democratisation process should certainly be at the core of Western long-term strategy in the region. In the shorter term, however, the Turkish Armed Forces are still the best guarantee for delivering a solution on Cyprus. Prodromou cannot dwell on Turkey's 'crisis of governability' or 'foreign-policy unpredictability' while reading into actions like the Imia crisis 'Turkey's willingness' to achieve specific policy goals. Accidents, uncontrolled provocation, bad will and populism are still the most likely drivers of foreign policy in the region.

After a spell of populist Turkish foreign policy in the last two years, there may now be a window of opportunity. Cyprus is only part of a broader equation where bilateral Greek-Turkish relations should figure more prominently than multilateral strategies. Certainly, the US has a role to play in persuading Turkey that respecting international law in the Aegean is the least expected of a NATO ally. Full and good-faith implementation of the confidence-building measures agreed at NATO in June 1998 would be a good start. This in turn should lead the Greek and Turkish governments to talk again. The West can help in designing and sponsoring a process linking dialogue and legal recourse with adequate sequencing between the issues. At the same time, if played right, the EU accession talks with the Republic of Cyprus can be transformed into a catalyst for resolving the Cyprus problem. The key is to use the incentives of EU membership and the freedoms and guarantees that go with it to entice the local parties to accept a solution that everyone can live with. For the Greeks, exploring second-best solutions for Cyprus alongside the BBF framework is justified both because such solutions may have virtues in their own right and because they might come to be the best on offer. We can hope with Prodromou that reintegration is still possible. If not, a negotiated partition under the EU umbrella may come to look much better than the status quo.