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U.S. Relations with Cyprus: From NATO Protection to Status Quoist Perspective

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Abstract: Deeply rooted in historical, ethnic and geopolitical complexities, the Cyprus issue has long challenged regional stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. This article examines the evolution of the Cyprus issue, with particular emphasis on the role of the United States. Initially shaped by Cold War dynamics and the need to prevent conflict between NATO members Greece and Turkey, US intervention has evolved in response to changing geopolitical realities, including the growing influence of Russia in the region. The lifting of the US embargo on military sales to Cyprus is analyzed as a strategic maneuver aimed at countering the Russian presence and strengthening American interests. Despite these efforts, the path to a lasting solution remains challenging, as deep-rooted divisions between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and complex international interests continue to hinder progress. This article comprehensively examines the Cyprus issue, highlighting the interplay of historical grievances, ethnic divisions, and international diplomacy that shape the island's present and future.

Keywords: *Cyprus problem, Conflict, Middle East, NATO, US foreign policy.*

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Introduction

The Cyprus problem stands as a testament to the intricate interplay of geopolitics, historical grievances, and economic interests in shaping the dynamics of the Eastern Mediterranean. Spanning decades of conflict and diplomacy, the dispute over Cyprus has drawn the attention of global powers, with the United States emerging as a central mediator in efforts to forge a resolution (Vural, 2011). Against the backdrop of Cold War rivalries and shifting alliances, Washington has navigated a delicate balance between preventing a hot conflict between NATO members and countering Russian influence in the region. This essay delves into the complexities of the Cyprus problem, exploring the role of the United States as a mediator, the evolving geopolitical dynamics, and the challenges and opportunities inherent in pursuing stability amidst competing interests. It aims to answer how U.S. actions—particularly the lifting of the military sales embargo on Cyprus—reflect a broader strategy to counterbalance Russian influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. By examining these shifts, this essay will also analyze the extent to which the U.S. has been successful in navigating its dual role as both a mediator and a strategic actor in the region.

Furthermore, this analysis will highlight the implications of these geopolitical maneuvers for the future of Cyprus and the broader stability of the Eastern Mediterranean. By integrating historical context with current political realities, the paper offers insights into the prospects for resolving the Cyprus conflict and the broader implications for U.S. foreign policy in the region.

1. Historical Background

The beginning of the Cyprus problem has been associated by many academics with the initiation of EOKA (Cypriot National Struggle Organization / Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston) in 1955 (Kızılyürek, 2005). However, many experts working in the field argue that the beginning of the problem dates back to the 1800s (Michael, 2009). In some studies, the roots of the problem can be traced back to the Megali Idea map, which was drawn in 1791 and published for the first time in 1796, which placed Cyprus under the rule of the Hellenic Empire (Rappas, 2014). Some

authors, on the other hand, see the problem as parallel to the Greek revolt that started in 1821 due to the existence of an uprising plan prepared for the purpose of ENOSIS in Cyprus, and they emphasize that the problem should be addressed from this date on (İsmail, 2000).

Although today the problem is read through the Turkish-Cypriot-Greek-Cypriot conflict, including the island of Cyprus in the map of Megali Idea would certainly pave the way for the conflict of the two peoples living on the island one day (Souter, 1984). In terms of understanding the roots of the problem well, the period when the Megali Idea map emerged can be accepted as the beginning of the problem. Although there was no Greek-Turkish conflict that would attract attention during the Ottoman Empire, the first sparks of the problem began to emerge with the administration of the island to the British (Ker-Lindsay, 2011). After the British administration, the problem grew day by day and reached the present day. With the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus, the bi-communal republic fell victim to the conflict between the two ethnic groups (Yakinthou, 2009). After the island was divided into two, efforts for a bi-communal federal solution were inconclusive (Papadakis et al., 2006).

Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots are divided along linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious lines (Sakellaropoulos, 2022). Despite four centuries of coexistence and physical intertwining, the two communities remained separate and distinct ethnic groups. The barriers to living and coexistence of both societies under the same state mechanism can be listed as follows: Ethnicity, Religion, Language, Culture, Education, Tradition, Literature, Identity Problem (Kürkçügil, 2003).

Greek Cypriots predominantly identify with their Hellenic cultural and historical heritage, while Turkish Cypriots are closely associated with their Turkish national and cultural identity, reflecting the historical and sociopolitical ties of each community to their respective motherlands (Loizides, 2007). On the other hand the Greek Orthodox Church held a dominant position among Greek Cypriots to preserve their religious, ethnic, cultural, and political identity (Katsourides, 2017). For Greek Cypriots, the church became a symbol of political and ethnic unity. Greek Cypriots's political, social, cultural, and intellectual life was associated with

religious institutions. The majority of Turkish Cypriots belong to the Sunni sect of the Muslim religion. Both organized religions support the national policies of Greece and Turkey, respectively (Yeşilada, 2009). Besides, Greek Cypriots speak a different dialect of the Greek language on the island, while Turkish Cypriots speak Turkish with some differences from Turkey's Turkish. The national and cultural ties of the two Cypriot Ethnic groups with their homeland are further strengthened by the celebration of common national holidays and the use of common symbols (Loizides, 2007). Both communities are heavily influenced by the traditions and institutions of their homeland. Hellenism and Kemalism appear as two opposite views in Cyprus (Ulusoy, 2016). In addition The two communities had separate schools controlled by their respective religious institutions. The teachers were often people from the homelands. Both curricula have long emphasized religion, national heritage, ethnic consciousness and Greek-Turkish rivalry, suspicion, mistrust and hostility. Each community also celebrated national holidays, sang the national anthems of their homeland and used the flag of their homeland (Christou, 2006). Some practices were common, but both communities had their own traditions and the two communities were not sufficiently mixed. Each society has been influenced by books written with ultra-nationalistic characters. These were imported from Greece and Turkey and were also widely used in schools (Stroescu & Popa, 2012). The absence of the spirit of Cypriot patriotism has widened the gap between the two communities.

2. Cold War and The New Actor in Cyprus

In the early stages of the Cyprus conflict, the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities were the central actors, with Turkey, Greece, and the United Kingdom serving as the guarantor powers under the 1960 Constitution of Cyprus (Adams, 1966). However, the geopolitical dynamics of the conflict began to evolve significantly over time. The admission of the Republic of Cyprus to the European Union (EU) in 2004, which was predominantly governed by Greek Cypriots, marked a pivotal moment, changing the nature of the conflict and its international implications. This development effectively transformed the EU into a key actor in the Cyprus dispute, as it was tasked with managing the European dimension of the problem, particularly concerning the accession process and the question of Turkish

Cypriot participation. The situation in Cyprus became intertwined with broader geopolitical interests, and external actors beyond the guarantor powers began to play more prominent roles, most notably Russia, the United States, Egypt, and Israel (Ker-Lindsay, 2011). The discovery of significant oil reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean only intensified this involvement, leading to an increasingly complex web of regional and global interests that extended well beyond the island itself (Hannay, 2005).

Although the United States was not initially a primary actor in the Cyprus conflict, its role became crucial as the situation developed, especially during the Cold War (Vural, 2011). The U.S. sought to navigate a delicate balance between its NATO allies, Greece and Turkey, whose tense relations threatened to spark a broader regional conflict (Kalaitzaki, 2023). In this context, the U.S. policies towards Cyprus were shaped by a strategic imperative to prevent an armed confrontation between these two NATO members, which could have serious implications for the cohesion of the alliance and broader Western interests during the Cold War (Janigian, 2017). However, the early American approach to the Cyprus problem was primarily focused on preventing a direct military clash, often viewing the conflict through a simplistic bilateral lens, which overlooked the deeper ethnic and political divisions on the island. This limited understanding of the situation was emblematic of the broader U.S. policy stance, which failed to grasp the full complexity of the Cyprus issue and its implications for regional stability.

A notable example of the early American diplomatic missteps is the Johnson Letter, sent by President Lyndon B. Johnson to Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü in 1964 (Firat, 1997). The letter was intended to prevent Turkey from intervening in Cyprus militarily, a move that Washington feared could trigger an all-out war between NATO members Greece and Turkey. The letter's main concern was maintaining NATO cohesion and preventing Soviet intervention in the region, which would have placed the alliance under immense strain (Katsoulas, 2021). However, the letter's approach, which essentially framed the Cyprus issue as a bilateral dispute between Greece and Turkey, failed to account for the broader ethnic and political complexities that underpinned the conflict. Moreover, the letter revealed an underlying assumption that the situation could be resolved through discreet

diplomatic negotiations within NATO, rather than through the more inclusive and transparent mechanisms of the United Nations. This narrow view of the conflict reflected a superficial understanding of the deeper ethnic tensions and sovereignty issues at play.

The limitations of U.S. diplomacy during this period were further highlighted by the Acheson Plan, a proposal put forward by American diplomat Dean Acheson in the 1960s (Dodd, 2010). The plan, which suggested territorial adjustments and political arrangements on the island, failed to gain traction due to its lack of consideration for the Turkish Cypriot community's aspirations and the complexities of ethnic identity on the island (Brinkley, 1990). The plan was rejected by Greek Cypriot leader Archbishop Makarios, as well as by Greece, which highlighted the significant disconnect between American diplomatic proposals and the on-the-ground realities in Cyprus (Duckett, 2010). The Turkish Cypriots, who were excluded from the political structures of the Republic of Cyprus following intercommunal violence in the 1960s, felt marginalized by the Acheson Plan's assumptions. This led to the plan's ultimate failure and underscored the inadequacy of external mediation efforts that did not take into account the concerns of all communities on the island (Ker-Lindsay, 2009).

The United States' role as a side actor in the Cyprus conflict was further solidified by the broader geopolitical context of the Cold War, where American foreign policy was shaped by its need to secure regional alliances and prevent the spread of Soviet influence (Nicolet, 2002). However, the U.S. approach to the Cyprus issue was often more reactive than proactive, responding to immediate geopolitical concerns rather than engaging with the deeper political dynamics at play. While the U.S. acted to prevent military conflict between Greece and Turkey, its efforts at mediation often lacked the necessary sensitivity to the ethnic dimensions of the conflict, which left it unable to facilitate a lasting solution. As the Cyprus conflict progressed and external actors like the EU, Russia, Egypt, and Israel became more involved, the U.S. shifted its focus to the broader strategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially as oil reserves and energy security became critical concerns. The evolving role of the U.S. in this context highlights its ongoing significance as a side actor, influencing the conflict through its alliances, diplomatic

efforts, and broader regional strategy. Yet, despite its involvement, the U.S. has never been able to assume the role of a neutral mediator, largely due to its geopolitical interests and the complexities of its relationship with both Greece and Turkey. Thus, while the U.S. has played a key role in preventing outright conflict, its position as a side actor in the Cyprus problem has been characterized by a series of missteps, misunderstandings, and an often limited grasp of the island's internal dynamics.

3. US' New Approach to Cyprus

The The United States' decision to lift the embargo on "non-lethal" military sales to Cyprus marks a significant shift in its approach to the Cyprus issue, signaling a reorientation of its foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. This move, which permits Cyprus to access American military equipment, could potentially alter the regional balance of power and reframe geopolitical alliances. The lifting of defense trade restrictions, while initially aimed at addressing specific security concerns, also aligns with broader U.S. objectives in the region, particularly its efforts to counterbalance Russian influence (Price, 2022). This shift represents a new phase in American foreign policy towards Cyprus, one that is more proactive and strategically aligned with U.S. interests in limiting Russian expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean. Historically, Cyprus has maintained close economic ties with Russia, becoming a significant hub for Russian investment, tourism, and expatriate communities. Russian capital has played a vital role in boosting Cyprus' service sector, particularly in banking, real estate, and tourism (Kontos, 2020). The presence of Russian oligarchs and the widespread use of the island for financial transactions, including allegations of money laundering and the controversial Golden Visa program, have raised concerns among Western powers, especially the United States (Melakopides, 2020). With over 50,000 Russian nationals residing in South Cyprus, the island has developed substantial economic and cultural links to Russia, which has led to increasing apprehensions in Washington about Cyprus becoming a conduit for Russian influence and even illicit activities (Neocleous, 2015).

The decision to lift the embargo on arms sales to Cyprus can be seen as an attempt by the U.S. to recalibrate its position in the region and counteract Russia's growing presence. By enabling Cyprus to procure American military goods, the U.S. not only reinforces its strategic alliances with Greece and Cyprus but also strengthens its broader regional influence. This shift reflects a growing U.S. concern over the increasing geopolitical weight of Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is also in line with the broader U.S. foreign policy agenda of containing Russia's strategic reach, particularly as Moscow continues to expand its military and economic footprint in the region. The American move represents an effort to reduce Russia's influence and reassert NATO's dominance in an area that has become increasingly contested due to its energy resources and strategic location. However, the lifting of the embargo has not come without significant repercussions. The policy shift has been met with strong opposition from Turkey, which views the growing military cooperation between Cyprus, Greece, and the United States as a direct challenge to its own interests in the region (Τσουκαλά, 2021). Ankara perceives the militarization of Cyprus and the potential for an enhanced U.S.-Cyprus-Greece alliance as a threat to its regional influence and security concerns, particularly regarding the status of Northern Cyprus and the broader issue of territorial control (Price, 2022). Turkey's reaction underscores the delicate balancing act the U.S. must perform in its relationships with both Greece and Turkey, two NATO members with competing claims in the region. Ankara's concerns are compounded by its historical grievances regarding Cyprus and its long-standing opposition to any foreign military presence on the island that it perceives as unfavorable to Turkish interests.

This new U.S. approach reflects a more assertive stance in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment. While the United States has long been an actor in the Cyprus conflict, its shift towards military cooperation with Cyprus indicates a recognition of the island's growing importance in regional security and energy geopolitics. This approach, however, comes with risks, especially in terms of the potential escalation of tensions with Turkey, which remains a key NATO ally. The U.S. must carefully navigate these competing interests to avoid exacerbating tensions between NATO members and instead foster a more cooperative approach to regional stability. This move also raises questions about the long-term

implications for U.S. involvement in the Cyprus conflict, as it may lead to a more permanent presence in the region, potentially redefining the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean for years to come. Ultimately, while this policy shift provides the U.S. with new leverage, it also demands a nuanced strategy that can manage the various, often conflicting, interests at play in the region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the United States has consistently played a pivotal role in the Cyprus conflict, acting as a mediator with the overarching goal of preventing a direct military confrontation between NATO allies Greece and Turkey. Over the decades, Washington has engaged in diplomatic efforts, attempting to facilitate dialogue and negotiations aimed at resolving the complex political, ethnic, and territorial issues on the island. This mediation has been primarily motivated by a desire to maintain regional stability and uphold NATO cohesion, as the prospect of a conflict between two NATO members could have had severe consequences for the alliance's unity and strategic goals. While these efforts have been vital in maintaining a fragile peace, they have often struggled to address the deeper, underlying issues that have perpetuated the conflict.

The recent lifting of the U.S. embargo on military sales to Cyprus represents a significant shift in American foreign policy, signaling a strategic realignment aimed at counterbalancing Russian influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. By supporting Greece's claims and bolstering Cyprus' military capabilities, the United States seeks not only to strengthen its alliances in the region but also to prevent further Russian encroachment, which has been a growing concern for Western powers (Price, 2022). The presence of Russian economic and political influence in Cyprus, coupled with the island's growing ties to Moscow, has raised alarm bells in Washington, prompting a shift towards more direct involvement in the region's military and strategic affairs. This move, while aimed at securing U.S. interests, is also an attempt to ensure that Cyprus does not become a more entrenched pro-Russian state, which could shift the power balance in the Eastern Mediterranean in Russia's favor.

Nevertheless, the path to a lasting resolution in Cyprus remains fraught with challenges. The deep-rooted economic connections between Cyprus and Russia, including significant Russian investments and a large Russian expatriate community, complicate the ability of the U.S. to fully extricate Cyprus from Russian influence (Kontos, 2020; Neocleous, 2015). Moreover, the island's complex ethnic and political divisions between Greek and Turkish Cypriots continue to fuel tensions, making any comprehensive peace agreement difficult to achieve. While the United States has shown a preference for maintaining a "frozen conflict," where tensions are managed but not fully resolved, this approach aligns with its broader strategic goals of preventing escalation and preserving regional stability. However, this strategy of containment may only delay, rather than solve, the deeper issues at the heart of the Cyprus conflict.

Looking ahead, the U.S. is likely to remain a key player in shaping the future of the Cyprus conflict, particularly as the geopolitical landscape in the Eastern Mediterranean evolves. The shifting dynamics of energy resources, regional alliances, and the ongoing rivalry with Russia mean that Cyprus will continue to be a critical piece in the broader chessboard of international politics. Washington's efforts to prevent further Russian influence in Cyprus will remain a key priority, as it seeks to maintain its strategic interests and prevent the island from becoming a more significant Russian outpost in the Mediterranean. In doing so, the United States aims to secure its position as the dominant power in the region, while also safeguarding the broader objectives of NATO and Western influence in a geopolitically important area. While the path to a lasting peace in Cyprus is uncertain, the United States' role as a mediator and strategic actor will continue to be pivotal in determining the region's future.

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