ARI 6/2017
19 January 2017

Cyprus's elusive reunification: so near to a solution, yet so far

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Theme

UN-brokered talks to finally reunify Cyprus after 43 years offered hope, but obstacles remained and any deal would have to be approved in referendums on both sides. Greek Cypriots rejected the settlement put forward by the United Nations in 2004.

Summary

The reunification of Cyprus is one of the world's longest running and intractable international problems. The latest talks in Geneva in January 2017 between Nicos Anastasiades, the Greek-Cypriot President, and Mustafa Akıncı, his Turkish-Cypriot counterpart, after 20 months of negotiations, made significant progress. The issues of territorial adjustments and security and guarantees are the most sensitive and core issues yet to be resolved and ones that will determine whether a solution can be reached and approved in referendums on both sides.

Analysis

Background

The Mediterranean island has been divided since Turkey's invasion in 1974 in response to the Greek military junta's backing of a coup against President Makarios aimed at *enosis* (union with Greece).[1] Cyprus is the only divided country in Europe and its capital, Nicosia, is also split in two.

[1] Turkey invaded Cyprus on the basis of the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee, following the independence of Cyprus. This gave the UK, Turkey and Greece the right to intervene. To this day Ankara refuses to accept the word 'invasion', used elsewhere in the world for its action, and calls it an intervention.

Figure 1. Partitioned Cyprus

Source: BBC.

The consequences of the invasion include:

- Some 35,000 Turkish troops still occupy 36.2% of the territory of Cyprus.
- Around 160,000 Greek Cypriots were permanently displaced from the northern part of the island. About 43,000 Turkish Cypriots left the south and went north.
- Up to 200,000 settlers from Turkey are estimated to be living in the internationally-unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). They are altering the island's demographic structure.
- The TRNC (total population estimated at around 300,000 excluding Turkish troops) is an increasingly costly burden for Turkey. It is much poorer than the Greek-Cypriot side (population 848,000). The average per capita income of Turkish Cypriots is around half that of Greek Cypriots.

The leaders of the two communities agreed in 1977 to move towards a bi-communal, bi-zonal federation, with political equality. Negotiations culminated in a referendum in 2004 on both sides to approve a UN-arranged reunification plan under Kofi Annan, but it was rejected by 76% of Greek Cypriots (and approved by 65% of Turkish Cypriots). The plan stumbled on Greek-Cypriot concerns about the continuation of Turkish troops, among other things.

The Annan plan proposed the creation of the United Cyprus Republic covering the whole island except for the area of the British military bases. The country would consist of two constituent states joined by a minimal federal government apparatus incorporating the following elements:

- A collective Presidential Council, made up of six voting members, allocated according to population (per present levels, four Greek Cypriots and two Turkish Cypriots), and selected and voted in by parliament. An additional three non-voting members would be assigned 2:1.

- A President and Vice-president, chosen by the Presidential Council from among its members, one from each community, to alternate in their functions every 20 months during the council's five-year term of office.

- A bicameral legislature:

    - A Senate (upper house), with 48 members, divided 24:24 between the two communities.

    - A Chamber of Deputies (lower house), with 48 members, divided in proportion to the two communities' populations (with no fewer than 12 for the smaller community).

- A Supreme Court composed of equal numbers of Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot judges, plus three foreign judges; to be appointed by the Presidential Council.

- The plan included a federal constitution, constitutions for each constituent state, a string of constitutional and federal laws, and a proposal for a United Cyprus Republic flag and a national anthem. It also provided for a Reconciliation Commission to bring the two communities closer together and resolve outstanding disputes from the past.

A deal, which as in 2004 would have to be approved by both sides in referendums, could help revive Turkey's moribund bid to become a full EU member. As a result of reunification, Ankara would be expected to finally open its airports and ports to Greek-Cypriot traffic and recognise the Republic of Cyprus, an EU member since 2004 (the EU *acquis* do not apply in the internationally-unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in the north of the island).

Failure to do this led the European Commission in December 2006 to freeze eight of the 35 chapters (policy areas) in Turkey's EU accession process. A settlement would bring the TRNC into the EU's fold and would resonate beyond the tiny island, as it would open the door to new cooperation between NATO and the EU. Cyprus (not including the TRNC) is a member of the EU but not NATO; Turkey is a member of NATO but not the EU. Both countries have blocked effective cooperation between the institutions.

The protagonists involved in the current negotiations, Nicos Anastasiades, the Greek-Cypriot President, and Mustafa Akıncı, his Turkish-Cypriot counterpart, are the most pro-reunification set ever. They, rather than the UN, are driving the process, which would mean that a settlement would not be perceived as something imposed from outside. Anastasiades voted in favour of the reunification in the 2004 referendum, while Akıncı, a former Mayor of the Turkish-Cypriot part of Nicosia (1976-90) is more pragmatic than his predecessors.

The atmosphere between the two sides is generally good, though Turkey criticised the tenders announced last year by the Greek-Cypriot government for offshore hydrocarbon exploration at a time of intensified reunification negotiations. Ankara says part of the licence areas are within the continental shelf of Turkey.

The state of play following the breakdown of talks in Geneva

Hopes were high, unrealistically so, that a comprehensive, viable and lasting agreement would finally be struck at the talks in Geneva on 9-11 January between the Cypriot leaders after 20 months of intensive negotiations. The Foreign Ministers of Greece, Turkey and the UK, guarantor powers of Cyprus's independence from Britain since 1960, were also there to discuss the security parameters of any deal. The United Nations, whose peacekeeping troops have patrolled a buffer zone for decades known as the 'green line', said the 'moment of truth' had arrived to settle the ethnic division. Greek Cypriots joked that everybody was eager to maintain the good climate of negotiations except they forgot there was an intractable Cyprus issue.

Progress was made before the Geneva talks on substantial issues related to governance and power sharing, the economy, the EU and property. The constitutional provisions of a settlement were agreed, including:

- Union in whole or in part with any other country or any form of partition or secession or any other unilateral change to the state of affairs shall be prohibited.
- The two constituent states shall hold equal political status and will have defined administrative boundaries that they will autonomously govern.
- Effective participation in the Federal Government by the two communities, with specific clauses as regards decision-making so that neither side may claim authority or jurisdiction over the other.
- Prohibition of encroachment both by the federal government within the constituent states' areas of competence and by either constituent state to the other constituent state's area of competence.
- Each constituent state shall have the right to establish specific criteria as regards the acquisition of its internal citizenship status.
- Regulating the exercise of voting rights of those citizens of the State who choose a place of domicile or establish themselves and practice a trade or profession in the constituent state of which they do not hold internal citizenship status.
- Establishing effective deadlock-resolving mechanisms in order to both strengthen the functionality of the State and protect the rights of the constituent states and, by extension, of the communities.
- The Republic of Cyprus is and will remain a member-state of the EU after the settlement.

Both sides exchanged maps in Geneva for the first time ever outlining rival proposals for territorial boundaries. That was a historic development. Past peace negotiations reached a ballpark range of between 28.2% and 29.2% of Cypriot territory remaining under Turkish-Cypriot control (down from the current 36%).

The issues of territorial adjustments and security and guarantees are the most sensitive and core issues yet to be resolved and ones that will determine whether a solution can be reached. UN-brokered talks in November 2016 at Mont Pèlerin, Switzerland, on the criteria for territorial adjustment produced no results.

While the Greek Cypriots want the guarantor system dismantled as they believe it is obsolete because Cyprus is an EU and UN member-state and it would keep the island under the perpetual influence of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's President, ruled out a full withdrawal of its forces unless Greece also agreed to pull out its troops (estimated at around 1,000). Akıncı said one side demanding that the other remove its troops, although there are many more Turkish and Greek troops, would rule out a mutually acceptable solution.

Security is a key issue and one that boils down to a matter of trust. The Turkish-Cypriot minority has bitter memories of the intercommunal violence during the 1960s and 1970s and wants their security to be guaranteed, while Greek Cypriots see the Turkish troops as an occupying force. The question is who would act as guarantors of a deal. The EU, of which Cyprus is a member, the UK, which has two military bases on the island, or the same three countries as under the 1960 treaty (Greece, Turkey and the UK)?

'The source of many of the problems that we still face today has been the Treaty of Guarantee', said Anastasiades. 'Regrettably, as the historic events validate, the Treaty has failed to serve its purpose or positively contribute to the smooth functioning of the Republic'.

A working group met on 18 January in Mont Pèlerin to identify specific questions on security and guarantees and how to address them. Discussions at a political level will reconvene once there is progress on technical matters.

Decades of negotiations have not allayed the inherent mistrust and suspicion on both sides. Greek Cypriots are suspicious of Turkey's end-intentions and Turkish Cypriots mistrustful of the aims of the Greek-Cypriot community. In a bid to put these fears to rest, Anastasiades proposed a multinational police force should be established during a transition period to deter or address any threats to either community.

The better prospects for a settlement come at a time when Erdoğan has become increasingly authoritarian, following a failed coup last July to overthrow him and a savage cycle of attacks by ISIS and renewed violence by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In addition, relations with the EU are at an all-time low. The toll on the economy has been heavy (the lira fell by around 20% against the US dollar last year).

Erdoğan's most immediate domestic priority is to gain support for constitutional changes that would usher in an executive presidency, something he has long hankered after.

Turkey's parliament passed the final two sections of the 18-article new constitution earlier this month after the ruling Justice and Development Party obtained the necessary 330 or more votes –a three-fifths majority– required for changes and to send them to a referendum for final approval. The articles will now be debated one by one in a second reading. Erdoğan will not want to make any concessions over Cyprus that lose him the support of nationalists in parliament.

Mindful of the pitfalls of holding a referendum, as the former British and Italian Prime Ministers can attest, the two leaders are unlikely to sign anything they believe their voters will reject. Anastasiades is on record as saying that if he reached a deal and it was rejected by Greek Cypriots he would not stand for re-election in February 2018.

Conclusions

The progress made so far and the political will of the Cypriot leaders suggests that a settlement is within reach, but Cyprus has been here before and hopes have been dashed.

Appendix: timeline

1571-1878	Cyprus under Ottoman rule.
1878	Cyprus leased by the Ottoman Empire to the UK.
1914	Cyprus annexed by Britain following Turkey's alignment with Germany in World War I.
1923	Under the Treaty of Lausanne Turkey relinquishes all rights to Cyprus.
1925	Cyprus declared a British crown colony.
1931	First Greek Cypriot uprising against British rule.
1950	Makarios III elected archbishop of Cyprus. Plebiscite organised by him shows 96% support in favour of union with Greece.
1954	Greece brings the issue of self-determination for Cyprus to the UN General Assembly.
1955-59	Greek Cypriot armed struggle against colonial rule and for union with Greece led by the National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA).
1958	Turkish Resistance Organisation (TMT) kills left-wing Turkish Cypriots.
1960	Cyprus granted independence from the UK, guaranteed by the UK, Greece and Turkey.
1963	Constitutional order breaks down, and Turkish Cypriots withdraw from or are scared out of government, never to return. Greek-Cypriot attacks on Turkish Cypriots trigger intercommunal violence. Archbishop Makarios submits proposals for amendments to the constitution which are rejected by the Turkish side.
1964	UN deploys peacekeepers to head off the threat of a Turkish invasion after Dr Fazıl Küçük, the Vice-President, says he is in favour of partition. Turkish air attacks on Cyprus.
1965	Galo Plaza, UN mediator, publishes a report recommending ways of safeguarding Turkish-Cypriot minority rights and rejecting the idea of separation between ethnic groups. The Turkish government rejects mediation.
1967	Military coup in Greece.
1974	July: Makarios (re-elected President in 1968 and 1973) demands withdrawal of Greek officers from Cyprus. 15 July: coup against Makarios organised by the Greek junta. 20 July: Turkish troops invade and occupy the northern third of the island. More than 200,000 Greek Cypriots flee south; about 80,000

	Turkish Cypriots later move north. Europe and the US impose political and military sanctions against Turkey.
1975	Turkish Federated State of Cyprus declared in the area occupied by Turkish troops. Declaration condemned by the UN Security Council.
1977	First High-Level Agreement between Makarios and Turkish leader Rauf Denktaş lays out basis for bi-communal, bi-zonal and federal solution.
1983	September: collapse of peace effort by UN Secretary-General Pérez de Cuellar. November: Turkish Cypriots unilaterally declare independence as Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognised only by Turkey.
1998	Accession negotiations between Cyprus and the EU begin.
2001	November: Turkey threatens to annex the Turkish-occupied areas of Cyprus if the EU admits the Republic of Cyprus as a full member before a settlement is reached.
2003	Denktaş lifts a 28-year ban on travel by Cypriots to and from the north. February: Tassos Papadopoulos elected Greek-Cypriot President. December: after advances by pro-solution Turkish-Cypriot parties in election, Mehmet Ali Talat's Republican Turkish Party forms a new government and, with support of a pro-solution government in Turkey, becomes negotiator for a settlement.
2004	24 April: six years in the making, settlement plan sponsored by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan submitted to twin referendums. Accepted by 65% of Turkish Cypriots, rejected by 76% of Greek Cypriots. 1 May: the Republic of Cyprus enters EU as a divided island. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is excluded from the benefits of EU membership as the *acquis communautaire*, the body of legislation guiding EU policy, do not apply there.
2005	April: Talat elected Turkish-Cypriot President.
2006	Papadopoulos and Talat begin new UN-mediated contacts on a settlement, which soon stall. The EU summit in December suspended eight of the chapters Turkey was negotiating for its accession to the EU because of Ankara's failure to implement the 2005 Additional Protocol to the Customs Union committing it to open its ports and airports to Greek-Cypriot shipping and aviation.
2008	17 February: candidates promising compromise lead Greek-Cypriot presidential elections, won by Demetris Christofias of the nominally communist Akel party. 21 March: first meeting between Christofias and Talat inaugurates new peace talks.

	April: reunification of Ledra Street, divided since 1964, in Nicosia as part of a package of UN-backed confidence-building measures, allowing people to cross from one side to the other. 23 May: Christofias and Talat announce agreement that the reunified federation will have two constituent states and a single international identity. 3 September: Christofias and Talat start first round of negotiations, meet 40 times over 11 months.
2009	20 April: the pro-independent National Unity Party (UBP) defeats the pro-reunification Republican Turkish Party (CTP) in parliamentary elections, winning 26 seats against the CTP's 19. 10 September: second round of UN-facilitated negotiations starts. December: EU heads of state and government (European Council) review Turkey's failure to open its ports and airports to Greek-Cypriot shipping and aviation.
2010	Re-unification talks resume with a new hardliner representing the Turkish north.
2011	Cyprus begins exploratory drilling for oil and gas, prompting a diplomatic row with Turkey, which responds by sending an oil vessel to waters off northern Cyprus. Turkey's Turkish Petroleum Corporation begins drilling for oil and gas onshore in northern Cyprus despite protests from the Cypriot government that the action is illegal.
2012	Cyprus appeals to the EU for financial assistance to shore up its banks, which are heavily exposed to the stumbling Greek economy.
2013	Democratic Rally conservative candidate Nicos Anastasiades wins presidential election.
2014	Cyprus suspends peace talks with Turkish Cypriots in protest against what it calls efforts by Turkey to prevent it from exploring gas fields south of the island.
2015	Greek and Turkish Cypriot negotiators resume talks on reunification, holding 20 rounds of UN-sponsored in the course of the year.
2016	President Anastasiades and Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı make unprecedented joint New Year television address ahead of continuing round of reunification talks.
2017	Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders meet at UN in Geneva for direct talks on reunification under a federal arrangement.