The European Union as a New Context and Challenge for the Triangle of Greece, Cyprus and Turkey

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This paper deals with Greek–Turkish relations and the Cyprus problem in the context of EU interests and concerns in the region. It argues that today, more than ever before, the EU can play a catalytic role in finding a long overdue settlement on Cyprus and improving Greek–Turkish relations. Following the development of a spirit of rapprochement across the Aegean in the late 1990s, the accession of Cyprus to the EU in 2004, and the commencement of accession negotiations between Turkey and the EU in October 2005, the political setting in the region is changing. It is also argued that a settlement on Cyprus in the context of European integration has the potential to produce only winners, benefiting all parties involved in the island or concerned over peace and security in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Triangle of Greece, Turkey and Cyprus

The triangle of relations among Greece, Turkey and Cyprus has been a complex and, occasionally, a distorted one. This is not surprising as we talk about a triad of states the relations and policies of which, historically, have been shaped and dominated primarily by antagonism and problems, some of which go back for centuries. As a configuration of interstate relations, this triangle has been formed and affected by contending views and claims, mutually exclusive interests and goals, ethnic rivalry and a long history of confrontation on the battlefield and elsewhere. It is a peculiar triangle that presents a challenge to the student of Greek–Turkish relations and regional political geometry. Following the development of a spirit of rapprochement across the Aegean in the late 1990s, the accession of Cyprus to the EU in 2004, and the commencement of accession negotiations between Turkey and the EU in October 2005, the political setting in the region is changing. It remains, however, to be seen to what extent the relations and dynamics of the Greek–Turkish–Cypriot triangle will be affected by the new setting.¹

¹ The websites of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Greece, Cyprus and Turkey provide updated
Cyprus has been caught in the middle of Greek–Turkish antagonism, but the Cyprus problem itself is not primarily a dispute between Greece and Turkey. Although it affects and it is affected by Greek–Turkish relations, today the Cyprus problem is basically one of de facto division and foreign control of part of the island. At the same time, however, there is an issue of state-building (which goes back to the 1960s) and a need for a political settlement that will reunite the island and its people in a European context where old divisions are replaced by deepening and widening integration.

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The Cyprus problem in a nutshell

In recent decades, Cyprus has been a flashpoint on the world scene attracting considerable attention. Since May 2004, when the de facto divided Mediterranean island became a member of the EU, the Cyprus problem is also increasingly becoming a source of concern in Brussels. At the same time, however, expectations for positive developments are growing as more and more views are converging that the time has come for a long overdue settlement. It is time to have a fresh look at the problem from a European perspective. But before looking at the efforts and prospects for a settlement, let us have a quick look at the nature of the problem.

What is the Cyprus problem and why has it become such a protracted and difficult to solve conflict? In broad terms, the post-colonial problem of Cyprus can be divided into two phases. The first one covers the period from 1960 to 1974, and the second one the period from 1974 to the present. During the first phase, from the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960 (especially after the 1963 flare-up) until 1974, the problem was basically an internal dispute between the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots in which external powers became involved. Difficulties, which could lead to a domestic ethnopolitical dispute, were, to some extent, inherent in the state-building process and the bicommunal character of the Cypriot society. These difficulties turned into insurmountable problems when the dispute turned violent and the island became a place of armed confrontation.

The two communities by failing to build a working state — a task next to impossible under the 1960 settlement of the colonial problem and given the adversarial attitudes and antagonistic loyalties to Greece and Turkey — fell into the trap of and extensive presentations of their positions on bilateral and other issues. For Greece, see http://www.mfa.gr/english/foreign_policy/europe_southeastern/turkey/. For Cyprus, see http://www.mfa.gov.cy/mfa/mfa.nsf/MFA?OpenForm. For Turkey, see http://www.mfa.gov.tr/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Regions/EuropeanCountries/EUCountries/Greece/Turkeys_Political_Relations_with_Greece.htm
confrontational tactics and mutual blame casting. All the rest, including fighting, gradual segregation, further complications and external involvement followed almost naturally. The sequence of events was neither pleasant nor justified. It was as vicious as it was unjustified.

It could be argued that, for decades, confrontation between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus was part of the problem. Britain, the former colonial power, which still has two sizeable military bases on the island, has also been following closely developments on the island. Furthermore, it cannot go unnoticed that during the Cold War, superpower involvement was another source of complication. It put the island on the list of peripheral points of superpower friction. As it turned out, the local ethnic dispute over state-building became entangled in the web of regional, ideological, political and military considerations of external powers. Things could not be worse for the newborn Republic of Cyprus. By 1974, the problem was in a state of stagnation, basically consisting of the clashing claims and concerns of the two local communities, the two “motherlands”, the former colonial power and the two superpowers.

Since 1974, the problem has entered a new phase that led to the present status quo. Following the coup d’ état which was staged against President Makarios by the Greek military regime in July 1974 and the subsequent Turkish invasion, drastic changes took place on the island including the de facto division and a painful demographic surgery that led to the displacement of about one third of the population. The forced movement and exchange of population, which led to ethnic segregation, have been widening the gap between the two communities and undermining efforts for reunification. Besides the division of the island, the presence of a sizeable Turkish army in the north and a shared feeling of insecurity among the two communities have been some of the striking features of the problem ever since.

The search for a settlement and the failure of the Annan Plan

Several efforts for a solution made so far by the UN, or in the name of the UN, have failed. The most recent one, which lasted four years, culminated in the submission of a comprehensive plan for a settlement, known as the Annan Plan. It ended in failure just a week before the island became a member of the EU. The Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, along with Greece and Turkey, played a role in this effort. But the United Nations in close cooperation with the European Union, the United States and Britain also played a prominent role and made a significant contribution in shaping the Annan Plan. The Plan was finalised by the UN Secretary

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2 For an extensive account of the developments which led to the shaping of the Annan Plan and its failure, see the “Report of the Secretary General on his Mission of Good Offices in Cyprus”, UN doc. S/2004/437 of 28 May 2004.
General during a hasty conference in Switzerland, in March 2004, and presented to the leaders of Greece, Turkey, the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots. In finalising his Plan, the UN Secretary General used his discretion “to fill in the blanks” and complete the text on issues on which the two sides failed to reach an agreement. In a way the Plan was not exactly and fully the result of negotiation, but rather a compromise on major issues reflecting an urgency to overcome long-standing deadlocks and settle the problem a few days before Cyprus's accession to the EU.

On 24 April 2004, the two Cypriot communities held separate, simultaneous referenda on the Annan Plan which provided for the establishment of a new state of affairs on the island based on a bizonal bicommunal federal political system. It was a huge text comprising a federal constitution of about 250 pages, two constitutions for the constituent states, and about nine thousand pages of laws for the new United Republic of Cyprus.\(^3\)

At the referenda the voters in the two communities were asked to answer yes or no to the following question: “Do you approve the Foundation Agreement with all its Annexes, as well as the constitution of the Greek Cypriot/Turkish Cypriot State and the provisions as to the laws to be in force, to bring into being a new state of affairs in which Cyprus joins the European Union united?”.\(^4\)

The majority of the Greek Cypriots (75.83%) voted no and the majority of the Turkish Cypriots (64.91%) voted yes. The Greek–Cypriot rejection of the Annan Plan disappointed the international community, especially the UN and the EU. As the UN Secretary General put it, it was “another missed opportunity to resolve the Cyprus problem”.\(^5\) Apparently the majority of the Greek Cypriots believed that the Plan was neither fair nor functional. In particular the provisions on security, the Turkish settlers, the gradual withdrawal of the Turkish army, the exchange of properties, and the return of refugees made the Greek Cypriot voters especially unhappy. There were also serious questions about the implementation and viability of the Plan which created feelings of uncertainty and insecurity among the Greek Cypriots.\(^6\)

The results of the referenda and the accession of Cyprus to the EU a week later created a new political setting. The Greek Cypriots joined the EU, but lost some of the international support they enjoyed for decades. The Turkish Cypriots and

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\(^3\) The Annan Plan was submitted in five versions during the period from November 2002 to April 2004. As indicated by its official title, it aimed at “The Comprehensive Settlement of the Cyprus Problem”.

\(^4\) The question was included in the Annan Plan, Annex IX: Coming into being of the New State of Affairs, article 1.


\(^6\) An elaborate account of the Greek Cypriot positions on the weaknesses and rejection of the Annan Plan was presented in a long letter by the President of the Republic of Cyprus to the UN Secretary General dated 7 June 2004.
Turkey, on the other hand, gained some political benefits from the Greek Cypriot no. Turkey is now in a better position to pursue its European aspirations. At the same time, a new momentum is emerging for yet another initiative on Cyprus.

The EU can play a role

The EU, in cooperation with the United Nations, is now in a unique position to play a role on Cyprus and in the region. The parties involved or concerned are either part of, or have special relations with the EU and can, therefore, appreciate and support a European contribution or initiative on Cyprus. Greece is a member state while Turkey is as close to the EU as a non member state can be following the decision for the commencement of accession negotiations in October 2005. Britain, a major partner in the EU and a guarantor power of the independence and unity of Cyprus under the 1960 settlement of the colonial issue, is in a privileged position to play a constructive role within and outside the EU context. The United States is also concerned over Cyprus because the Eastern Mediterranean is a region of vital geopolitical importance, Turkey is an “important strategic partner” and Greece is an “old good friend”.

But above all, it is the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots who are faced with a unique challenge and a golden opportunity to resolve their differences, reunite their island, and take advantage of the European integration process that can offer them the security and stability they have been longing for.

A European future for a reunited Cyprus

The EU favours a settlement that will reunite the island and its people under a bizonal bicomunal federation. Such a solution will, of course, guarantee the civil, political, economic and cultural rights of all Cypriots without any restriction or discrimination. The security of all Cypriots in each and every respect — and not only in military terms — must also be guaranteed through institutionalised arrangements that go beyond Cyprus and beyond Greece and Turkey. The European context appears to be a promising one in that respect.

The institutions, legal order, principles and policies of the EU — the *acquis communautaire* — can provide a conducive framework (and more) in the search for a much needed solution on Cyprus. A settlement based on the law, policies and practices of the EU can provide a sound basis for peaceful coexistence and prosperity for all Cypriots. European integration has, for half a century, been good in bringing states and peoples together under conditions of interdependence and peaceful co-existence. The dynamics of the Single Market and the Economic and Monetary Union have taken over in strengthening the conditions for peace. With the free movement of people, goods, services and capital, old-fashioned conflicts and flare-ups are becoming unthinkable in Europe. Now it is time for Cyprus also to benefit from the peace dividend of the new integrated and peaceful Eastern European order.
A solution of bizonal bicommunal federation

Under the circumstances, a settlement based on a bizonal and bicommunal form of federation seems to be reasonable, feasible and viable — assuming of course that all citizens will enjoy universally accepted rights and opportunities all over the island. Given the realities of Cyprus — geography, economy, size, distribution of natural resources, demography, and the political failures of the past — a federal solution seems to be the only pragmatic way out of the stalemate.

Such a solution will be more promising and viable if the Cypriots themselves realise that a remedy to their problems can be sought through nonviolent means, evolutionary peaceful change, political and administrative adjustments, renovation of political thinking and the cultivation of conciliatory attitudes. Certainly, the entire population will be better off if the island ceases to be a place of arms and confrontation and the present status quo is replaced by a meaningful political order that will allow the two communities to coexist under conditions of peace and security embedded in interdependence.

Turkey and the EU

Let us now turn to EU-Turkish relations which have a long history of ups and downs that goes back to 1963 when the Association Agreement was signed. The opening of accession negotiations in October 2005 and the possibility of Turkish accession present a challenge to both the EU and Turkey itself. The case of Turkey will be different from and more challenging than previous accessions for a number of reasons. Some of them are briefly discussed below.

Turkey is a large country in terms of population and geographic area. With a population of 71 million today, it is projected that it will be the largest member state at the time of accession. As a Moslem secular country, Turkey will also add a new demographic and religious dimension to the EU. At the same time, the presence of a large number of Turkish immigrants in European countries raises the issue of additional migration as a natural consequence of accession. The labour market and demography of small EU member states might be greatly affected. The social repercussions of such a development can pose serious challenges with political ramifications.

The geographical position of Turkey presents a unique challenge to the EU’s external role and policies. Turkish accession will bring closer to the EU the instability and tensions of a strategically vital region with strong conflicting energy-related interests. The unstable neighbourhoods of the Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia will become the immediate neighbourhood of the EU and its member states. The creation of new long external borders will present a major challenge to the EU.

Turkey’s participation in the European Common Foreign and Security Policy is not expected to be a smooth one. Its large military force of 800,000 personnel will make it the largest military power in the EU. Turkey has already shown that on
several issues of vital national interest it is not willing to compromise and align its policy with the EU positions. The willingness and ability of Turkey to meet European expectations on issues of security and defence are also largely determined by domestic factors such as civil-military relations and secular-religious dichotomies.

It cannot go unnoticed that Turkey has uneasy bilateral relations with some of its neighbours and has been characterised a “reluctant neighbor”. For example, relations with Syria have been bad in recent decades for various reasons, including water resources and Kurdish connections. Iran’s Islamic political orientation and nuclear ambitions are sources of concern for Turkey. Turkey’s policy of expanding its influence in the Turkic states of the Caucasus and Central Asia has alarmed Russia. Armenia and its people have never had good relations with Turkey since the Armenian genocide of 1915–16.

Turkey has a level of economic development well below that of the EU average and its accession will have a considerable budgetary impact on the EU. Among the economic consequences that Turkish accession will have for the EU is the creation of a regional economic disparity and a considerable financial burden for other member states. On the basis of current regulations and practices, Turkey will be receiving considerable support from the cohesion and structural funds at the expense of other member states which will no longer be eligible for these funds. The prospect of such a development presents another challenge with political, economic and social aspects. Along the same lines, Turkey’s huge agricultural sector deserves special attention since it will be eligible for EU support.

The participation of Turkey in the EU institutions will affect dramatically the allocation of power and influence in decision-making, policy formulation and the broader European political arena. As a large country, Turkey will have a powerful voice in the parliament and the Council when decisions are made by a qualified majority. This shift of power from the western Christian capitals to the eastern Moslem frontier is already causing scepticism and negative reactions in some countries.

Besides the above reasons, there are issues and aspects specific to the EU itself and its ability to absorb a new member state like Turkey. Structural, political and economic developments in the EU during the next decade may affect the deepening and widening of the EU in a way that can make the accession of Turkey difficult to handle. Already the negative results of the French and Dutch referenda on the European Constitution are sending alarming signals about the future of European integration that may affect the timing of Turkey’s accession.

Oriental past versus Western future

As the debate over Turkey’s European prospects heats up, a variety of opinions, arguments and conflicting positions have been put forward. Europe’s confusion

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and ambivalence about Turkey is not a new phenomenon. A few years ago, the
fears of many Europeans about Turkish accession were expressed and stirred up
by former French President and head of the EU’s Constitutional Convention,
Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, who in a blunt and provocative manner declared that
Turkey is “not a European country” and its inclusion in the EU “would be the end
of Europe”.

On the other hand, there are strong voices arguing that Turkey can play the role
of “a cultural and physical bridge between the East and West [... and] become one
of Europe’s most prized additions”. Across the Atlantic, the United States has a
clear pro-Turkish position that cannot be ignored. In June 2004, during the NATO
summit in Istanbul, the American President, George W. Bush, underlined that posi-
tion and called on Europe to prove that it “is not the exclusive club of a single reli-
gion” and that “as a European power, Turkey belongs in the EU”.

The debate over EU-Turkish relations will continue to intensify, especially after
the commencement of accession negotiations in October 2005. A basic question
will be at what pace the negotiations will proceed and how a parallel political and
cultural dialogue can bring people together and enhance mutual understanding.
This can be a polarised discussion over Turkey’s position and role in Europe. The
debate will be a protracted one and may even outlast the period of accession talks
during which not only negotiations on the *acquis* chapters will be conducted,
but also a lot of diplomatic manoeuvring and political twisting will take place.
Throughout this period, the Christian and Islamic worlds will have a chance to
prove whether they can accommodate each other and prove false Samuel Hunt-
ington’s argument about “the clash of civilizations” and the reconfiguration of the
political world “along cultural lines” (Huntington, 1996:20). Both Europe and Tur-
key will find out what they expect from each other and whether they can share a
common future that will reconcile their different pasts. The real question will be
whether the internal sociopolitical dynamics and external orientations of Turkey
can be compatible with the changing dynamics of the European integration “proc-
ess of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe”.

The EU context and its catalytic effect in the
Eastern Mediterranean

Going back to the impact that European integration may have on the triangle of
Greece, Cyprus and Turkey, it could be argued that the EU provides a new context

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8 Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, “Pour ou contre l’adhésion de la Turquie à l’Union Européenne”, inter-
view with Le Monde, 9 November 2002.


11 Treaty on the European Union (consolidated version), article 1.
within which the relations of the three countries can improve. In recent years, Greek–Turkish relations have improved considerably and Greece’s policy towards Turkish accession is a positive one, but this cannot always be taken for granted as it depends on the political barometer in Europe as well as over the Aegean and Cyprus. The fact that Turkey does not recognise the Republic of Cyprus — a full member of the EU — can lead to political complications. How can a candidate country conduct accession negotiations and sign an international treaty (like the accession treaty) with a country it does not recognise?

With regard to the Cyprus problem, the EU can serve as a “neutral” context for the search for a political settlement in which the concerns of all Cypriots can be better understood, addressed and resolved. Especially the “re-entry” of the Turkish Cypriots into a common Cypriot state and their entry into the EU will break their isolation and provide new prospects for prosperity, political stability, and security. This European prospect and context of unification and integrative dynamics can be good and promising for all Cypriots as it has been for the member states and peoples of the EU.

As for Greece and Turkey, they will also benefit greatly from a settlement on Cyprus. Turkey, in particular, with a solution on Cyprus and the withdrawal of its army from the island, will improve its European stature and be in a better position to talk with and be understood by the Europeans. By getting rid of the Cyprus problem, Turkey can expect major political benefits from Europe.

It can also be argued that a settlement on Cyprus can have a catalytic effect on Greek–Turkish relations and generate a momentum for addressing other bilateral issues. Moreover, it cannot go unnoticed that Cyprus is not only a source of Greek–Turkish tension, but also a major economic burden for the two countries which traditionally included the island in their defence doctrines and strategies. For Turkey the burden is much higher because it maintains a sizeable army on the island (about 35,000) and also provides extensive financial support to the Turkish Cypriots.

For the above reasons, one could argue that a settlement on Cyprus is as urgent as it can be beneficial. An open mind, a positive predisposition and a genuine devotion to the consensual politics of accommodation can be a good starting point. It is high time for the Cypriots, as well as for Greece and Turkey, to take advantage of the continuing constructive support that third parties can offer.

In conclusion, a settlement on Cyprus in the context of European integration has the potential of producing only winners and benefiting all parties involved in the island or concerned over peace and security in the Eastern Mediterranean. The failure of the Annan Plan, the accession of Cyprus, and the commencement of accession negotiations with Turkey, created a new reality, additional urgency and a promising prospect. A new momentum is also emerging for the reunification of the island, which is too small to remain divided but big enough to accommodate all its people as a reunited EU member state.
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