

Cutting the Gordian Knot: The Necessary Spirit in the Eastern Mediterranean

Dr. Serkan Birgel



(Ministry of National Defense Turkey - Anadolu Agency)

"[...] when I commenced the oil and gas venture, I knew deep in my heart that a new dimension would be added to the Cyprus Problem." **Nicos Rolandis, Former Greek-Cypriot Minister.**

"Is it really tolerable to let this tangle of issues [the Cyprus problem] linger unresolved? [...] I do not even want to get into the confrontation brewing over exploration and exploitation of Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbons." **United Nations (UN) Special Adviser Álvaro de Soto (2012).**

"If this goal [settlement in Cyprus] is kept in mind, I don't see a reason for a crisis to be born. If used appropriately, this factor ['energy'] may positively help dynamics"

Rene van der Linden, Council of Europe Member (cited in Kıbrıs Gazetesi, 23 February 2007).

This policy paper takes leave from a publication in May 2020 by the [European Council of Foreign Relations](#). The report focussed on the manner in which various geopolitical tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean have emerged from the on-going political situation in Cyprus, together with the challenges created for the European Union (EU). The paper at hand expounds on the need to [focus on a resolution of the Cyprus Problem](#). It also argues for a greater commitment to the Turkish – EU accession process, and the need for urgent high-level diplomacy *incorporating all relevant parties to the dispute*. The author is driven by a commitment to replace controversy, chaos, and misunderstanding, with nuance, reflexivity, and temperance. The report can be read in conjunction with an [earlier publication](#) by the author that explored the logic of energy dependency, the nature of the peace process, and the long-standing hallmarks of the Cyprus settlement talks.

Three lines of discussion ensue: **(1)** [the centrality of what is known as the Cyprus Problem](#), **(2)** the leveraging of old geopolitical fault lines by emergent rivalries, **(3)** the necessary spirit to alleviate the growing assemblage of geopolitical discords. The paper argues that rather than dissonance, maximalism, and vindictiveness, the story of the latent tensions in the region must be driven by the will to negotiate now and in good faith. The more the melange of tit-for-tat tensions escalate and intertwine, the more pressing a resolution becomes. Whilst tensions of old are leveraged by the new, the status-quo becomes comfortable, where one-sided ‘catalysts for peace’ are sought, or where parties await ‘windows of opportunity’ to engage in diplomacy. There is a need for a very different approach, tone, and spirit, to that which triumphs today. How might this spirit be translated into effective policy recommendations, and what are the pitfalls of contemporary approaches to conflict resolution?

Gordian Knots and Catalysts for Peace

Unsurprisingly, given the long stasis of the peace process, there has emerged the impression that novel developments are necessary to settle the ‘Cyprus Problem’. Historically, the prospect of EU membership in the early 2000s and the natural gas development process of today, have been two most encapsulating demonstrations of how developments that have been expected to affect the course of the long-standing, intermittent, and thus-far unsuccessful settlement talks. EU accession for the Republic of Cyprus was of course [not made conditional](#) on a resolution of the decades-old Cyprus Problem. The EU then inherited the conflict, alongside a Greek-Cypriot administered Republic of Cyprus, but also now various other regional disputes. The Turkish-Cypriot community, who voted positively in the island-wide referendum known as

the Annan Plan in 2004, were distraught. Turkey was also disappointed, with its disappointment growing further as the Turkish-EU accession bid faltered, given both new-found Greek-Cypriot pressure but also vocal opposition to Turkish EU membership epitomised at the time in former French President Sarkozy. There is of course a very long and intricate history to Turkey’s EU accession process, one that cannot be discussed here in full, but one that is necessary for the reader to consult further. Still, Turkey had earnestly wanted the Cyprus Problem resolved as part of its push for EU membership, with the friction that emerged between then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Turkish-Cypriot President Rauf Raif Denktaş indicative of a dynamic often forgotten.

With the prospect of future natural gas wealth and the further diplomatic elevation to be ostensibly garnered by the Greek-Cypriots, there emerged the ‘natural gas as a catalyst for peace’ rhetoric. As part of doctoral work, the author has discussed the nature of the association between the peace process and natural gas development process fully [elsewhere](#). What became a way to ostracise Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriots to illicit change on the part of these actors vis-à-vis the Cyprus Problem has been instead very counter-productive to the peace process. It is strange to think that Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriots will not react. Perhaps such pressure is preferable to negotiation now in the eyes of some actors until more amenable times occur; the same sort of temporal displacement seen throughout this saga. All manner of regional geopolitical tensions have come to be incorporated into the dispute, adding an inordinate amount of complexity to an already difficult situation. Given the failures of the ‘catalyst for peace’ policy, the emergent heightened antagonism in the region has paradoxically been met with even further antagonism. As tensions metastasised, the wholesale cessation of the Turkish-EU accession bid (as [recently championed](#) recently by the Greek-Cypriot President), the call for sanctions again promoted by the Greek-Cypriot leadership, or the various calls to ostracise Turkey from other domains (such as NATO¹), have all emerged without much emphasis on the tit-for-tat nature of the dispute, or the centrality of the dissonance in Cyprus and a reflective appreciation of the reasons for said dissonance.

For over a decade now, natural gas exploration and exploitation efforts were imbued with heavy geopolitical expectations. The literature on natural resources and geopolitics is vast, contentious, but well-established, with only one possible critique being that the “academic and policy communities often insinuate connections between energy and foreign policy influence that may or may not exist in practice, or at the very least are difficult to measure²”. The natural gas issue in Cyprus has been much ado about potentiality, where the force of geopolitical expectation upon the peace process as imbued with natural re-

¹ Discussed further here by the [German Marshall Fund](#)

² <https://www.csis.org/analysis/energy-spheres-influence>

source development drives latent tensions. Still, for all the friction the natural gas issue has caused for the Cyprus Problem, there has been no commercial exploitation to speak of, which is a demonstration that the issue is driven by the geopolitical value generated by the mere prospect of future commercial exploitation, but also by the assortment of regional alliances that have emerged given tensions beyond the remit of the Cyprus Problem itself. The Greek-Cypriot side may aspire to become a pivotal player in terms of 'European energy security' and may then wish to continue to draw the EU against Turkey (amongst other actors), so as to ultimately extract concessions vis-à-vis the settlement talks. There is a logic of 'energy dependency' also at play, one that is explored further here. Disputes over maritime boundary delimitations are clearly also part and parcel of the natural gas development process, as discussed more specifically by the [International Crisis Group](#).

The appeal for catalysts is related to both the impasse between the Turkish-Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot communities, as well as the relatively [comfortable nature of the status-quo](#), despite the fact that the status-quo is regarded as unacceptable to both. There are of course a number of expanded reasons as to why a settlement of the Cyprus Problem has remained elusive, with a very expansive literature on the topic. Beyond the fact that the parties to the dispute do not see exactly eye to eye on all matters pertaining to power-sharing, territory security, property, EU relations, and of course now the 'natural gas issue' (though the latter does not, controversially, feature in the high-level negotiations between the two polities as the others do). One major flaw is the tendency to see peace as an all-in-one deal: an all-encompassing endpoint on the horizon. The journey to get to such an endpoint is guided by two central principles: "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed", and "solve the Cyprus Problem first, then cooperation can take place"; dispositions that have been unhelpful as they sound. There is a sense of 'playing for time', where, according to [Rusinow](#) (1981):

"[...] key individuals on each side appear to believe that developments on the other side or abroad will in time strengthen their own bargaining position"; a disposition strengthened further by "a subtle form of abdication of responsibility by all the parties".

A resolution of the Cyprus Problem [came close](#) back in 2017. Though the process ended in failure, that the stakeholders did make significant progress, which bolsters hope that a solution is in the realm of the possible. Before one considers the centrality of the Cyprus Problem to the rest of various regional disputes, be it in the Aegean Sea, Syria, Libya, or the relationship with the EU, it is necessary to remember that disputes which [once threatened to boil over](#) have a genealogy of events to them, and it is imperative to chart how these issues have arisen on their own accord.

What binds them all is the manner in which latent tensions are exploited and leveraged against each other. To see the resolution of the Cyprus Problem as yet another all-in-one package deal on the horizon that settles whatever series of disputes forever is perhaps not the most effective way forward; peace as a continuous process rather than an endpoint needs to be emphasised. Though "Cyprus is central to the eastern Mediterranean's rising tensions" in the eyes of the [ECFR](#), which of course is in many ways true, a resolution of the Cyprus Problem is probably best not seen as the first domino that, when falls, collapses a sleuth of regional tensions across the geopolitical chessboard. Much depends on the sheer will or desire to associate different conflicts together, to play developments off each other far beyond the domain formal settlement talks in Cyprus wherein which the Turkish-Cypriots in particular are disenfranchised. It is this inclination that must be assuaged or co-opted in a very different manner to the present predicament. The various conflicts related to the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean have their own unique drivers that, when associated with a resolution of the Cyprus Problem, may hinder the latter with undue or unfulfillable expectations, deferring peace further. Positive overlaps should be encouraged such as re-engagement with the Turkey-EU accession process as the kind of geostrategic investment without which parties may grow further apart.

The EU – Turkey Relationship: A Geostrategic Investment

Much is expected of the European Union. Much is also expected of Turkey, as well as the problems that will dissipate as a result of its accession process and membership. When expectations are not met, or when there is the perception that the gulf with reality is growing, frustration grows because of the very real desire on both sides for change. This is in part a driver of the unhelpful language that has prevailed as of late, as well as the reason perhaps as to why events in Turkey seem to reverberate in the EU more than other events elsewhere in the world. Turkey's accession bid, however, is as much of a reflection of the Union as it is of Turkey. To juggle the inevitable national interests for a collective outcome (especially in moments of crises that differentially affect Member States), and to judge between a dispute that predates the Union as it stands, involving but never limited to a Member State and a Candidate Country, will present difficulties. However, if enlargement reality is a ['geostrategic investment'](#), then would not the most rewarding investment³ of all be that of Turkey's accession? This would probably be the dominant Turkish viewpoint, subject to various perceptions within Europe itself given

³ See İçener (2018) for a Turkish perspective of the EU's role in the Cyprus conflict available [here](#), and [further work](#) with the author on the question of Turkey and EU enlargement.

the resistance shown to the Turkish accession process a decade or so ago which has gone on to shape the Turkish domestic political scene. Without a peace process in Cyprus and an EU accession process for Turkey, the Cyprus Problem is left to become 'Europeanised' (as desired by the Greek-Cypriot leadership), which in turn poisons relations between Turkey and the EU. A resolution of the Cyprus Problem would at least hinder the exploitation of the issue by Middle Eastern states, and there would be one less way in which tensions beyond the EU between say Turkey and the UAE, would then be imported into the Union. Without offering another all-in-one solution, would not at least a more constructive approach to the accession process, a more plausible and sincere path to accession create common goals for the parties to work towards? This would mean the incentives of old rather than the new-found penchant for sanctions. There is a long and intricate history of Turkey's accession bid (one that Greece in fact supports), deserved of further enquiry that highlights the various push and pull factors that inevitably operate across the negotiating table.

From the Turkish perspective, one may briefly approach the narrative in the following way: around a decade or so ago, around the same epoch when Turkey was conceived of as a 'model country' in the region, before the turbulence of the Arab Spring, the disaster of the Syrian Civil War (and the spill over into Turkey), as well as the Gezi Protests (that were of course legitimate but did spiral out of control), the French and German leaders of the time took a particularly critical stance against Turkey's accession bid. Former French President Nicholas Sarkozy was a particularly stalwart opponent, positing at one point that membership for Turkey was ['unthinkable'](#): part of a distinguishably fatalistic oeuvre demonstrated throughout his tenure on the matter, one couched in meta-narratives of 'civilisation'. The sheer scale and diversity of the issues that Turkey has since faced in its already-tumultuous neighbourhood are unlike many, if not all, of the issues faced by E.U. states, nor even NATO states for that matter. As such, there will be a deficiency of empathy, and one should wish that European continent may never face the same challenges and therefore accrue empathy for the sort of challenges Turkey faces. As such, there are certain issues that have persistently raised challenges for the country, and it is these challenges that narratives of authoritarianism or democratic deficiency should at the very least be attuned to.

What does not help is frozen or blocked negotiation chapters on the very walks of life that are of concern; this as much is quite clear. Lamentably, it does not bode well when the Turkish position becomes disillusioned to the extent that the EU is regarded as the [mouthpiece of the Greek-Cypriots](#), or the sheer dissonance highlighted when, say, the Greek Foreign Minister asserts that his country does not seek to create an ['anti-Turkish front'](#)⁴.

but the exact opposite is perceived in Ankara. This path, almost of least resistance, is not bearing fruit. Turkey does feel [boxed-in](#), with cross-party support to defend its interests against a new 'Enosis' in the Eastern Mediterranean, or a ['second Sèvres'](#), against which the [Blue Homeland doctrine](#) is the sword that cuts through the Gordian Knot. The Blue Homeland doctrine has been expressly [described by its founder](#) as a "manifestation against the enlarging bloc against Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean". Such developments aside, to focus on the 'spirit of negotiations', what does not help is when a litany of transgressions is drawn-up against the country without due consideration for the Turkish perspective, bolstered with inaccurate analyses that reduce it all into the person of the Turkish President; a tendency that those critical of Mr. Erdoğan [do themselves acknowledge](#), especially when combined with the [equally unhelpful notion of 'neo-Ottomanism'](#). As a further example, for all the claims made by those who espouse realpolitik on the Syrian Civil War, the reality that the emboldening of the YPG/PKK across the Turkish border would precipitate a Turkish response seemed to have gone amiss. In the series of actions and reactions that have occurred of which have placed the Turkey-EU relationship under pressure, what in effect nullifies the prospect of a solution is the failure to see or simply dismiss the other side's long-established sensitivities on issues such as the [YPG/PKK](#).

The influence of the migrant deal will undoubtedly be at play here, with Greece imagined as the new iron curtain against a possible influx of refugees, the source and generator of which remains unaddressed. One understands that the Republic of Cyprus is a member of the EU, and solidarity is valued. But solidarity without reflexivity, without critical assessment, may solidify a destructive status-quo. Finally, much has been made of the somewhat crude idea reluctantly reproduced here that Turkey is 'pulling away from the West'. What is again entirely and surprisingly amiss is an honest reconciliation of both the push and pull factors that may influence relations. Consider Turkey's efforts to become a member of what was then known as the European Community (EC) in the 1980's. Friction within this process meant that pan-Turkism/Turanism, pan-Islam, or pan-Ottoman sensibilities (definitions of which must be discussed further), may have found further accentuation, albeit of course within the context of the end of the Cold War and the Turkish domestic political scene (especially as it concerned the various military coups). On Turkey's part, reforms might need be implemented in order to build momentum irrespective of any *quid pro quos* in return from the EU. This would help build up the necessary affective atmosphere and momentum for any negotiations to bear fruit. At the same time, the exact nature of the unique threats that Turkey faces should be afforded greater sympathy such that Turkey need not resort to unilateral action.

⁴ 'What have we gained as a country from Ankara being upset and how will we actually benefit from these 'coordinated initiatives'?: an opinion writer argues in the [Cyprus Mail](#).

Policy Recommendations:

■ Urgent resumption of settlement talks. The longer the political situation continues, the more ingrained and complex it becomes, the more controversies are generated to the detriment of a compromise-based solution. The continuous wait for circumstances favourable to one party will continue to delay peace indefinitely.

- Negotiations under UN supervision are still preferable. The five-party model as per the last Crans-Montana / Mont Pèlerin talks remain applicable, observed as before by EU representatives.

■ However, to avoid tensions from matters related to natural gas development and maritime boundaries, concurrent high-level pro-active diplomacy spearheaded by the EU is pivotal. Otherwise, posturing outside the domain of the settlement talks will continue to haunt the peace process. The more Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriots are engaged here, the less unilateral inclinations will be seen.

- Friction will emerge from some Member States owing to latent geopolitical tensions across the region. However, the strategic prize of Turkish-EU Membership, the resolution of the Cyprus Problem, and the assuagement of tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, must be borne in mind.

- EU diplomacy is needed in a way that is not weaponised by any given Member State to over-power another. Negotiations should be seen as that between Member States and potential Member States / candidate entities.

■ At least some movement in EU-Turkey accession negotiations should begin to occur. The deferral of decision-making until more favourable circumstances will delay progress here too. Momentum is needed such that public opinion, trust, and mutual understanding are fostered, as per the run-up to the Annan Plan before the failed referendum. The Turkey-EU Customs Union is a good place to foster initial engagement and momentum.

■ Finally, an honest and transparent statement of the apprehensions and fears for the future that affect policymaking today, be this the fear of 'Turkification', the elimination of the Turkish-Cypriot community / Hellenism, or the ostracisation of Turkey from the Eastern Mediterranean. This is part of the necessity to prepare both communities for a federal future, as highlighted years ago by the late U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan.



Turkish Energy and Natural Resources Minister Fatih Donmez (R), Prime Minister of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Ersin Tatar (C) and Minister of Economy and Energy of the TRNC, Hasan Tacyoy (L) pose for a photo on board of Turkey's drillship 'Yavuz', operating in the Mediterranean Sea, on August 07, 2019. (Celal Güneş - Anadolu Agency)