

THE ROAD THROUGH BRUSSELS: CYPRUS ON THE US-TURKEY AGENDA

Historically, US-Turkish relations have been deeply affected by events in Cyprus ever since the 1963 crisis, and especially the 1974 coup and invasion. Since the Greek Cypriot rejection of the Annan Plan in April 2004, decades of vigorous diplomatic efforts by the US State Department to resolve the Cyprus problem have ground to a near halt. Turkish and Turkish Cypriot support for the Annan Plan, which was strongly endorsed by the European Union, have also diminished the impact of Cyprus developments on US-Turkish relations. Separately, however, the relationship is in a state of severe disrepair in the wake of Turkish misconceptions about US aims and actions in Iraq and the broader Middle East, as well as the profound mutual mistrust that has only hardened since the March 1, 2003 Turkish parliamentary vote rejecting a Turkish role in the Iraq invasion. At this point, even a historic and welcome solution to the Cyprus problem will have little positive influence on US-Turkey relations, which may have entered a transformational phase with uncertain outcomes.

John Sitalides*

* John Sitalides is Chairman of the Board of Advisors of the Wilson Center Southeast Europe Project, established after the December 2004 merger of the Western Policy Center with the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Views expressed are solely those of the author, and are not intended to reflect any official position of the Wilson Center.

Within the framework of Turkey's current strategic environment, shaped by Wahhabist and other radical Islamist terror threats, Iraqi democratization and reconstruction, Iraqi Kurd prosperity and autonomy, burgeoning Russian influence, and potential Iranian nuclear weapons capability, the US-Turkey relationship is naturally less affected by developments on the historic issue of Cyprus - especially after the April 2004 collapse of the UN-led effort to reunite the divided country.

Mistrust between Washington and Ankara has been growing since late 2002, when plans to topple Saddam Hussein's regime gathered force at the same time that Turkey's political landscape was dramatically redrawn. Many Turkish officials and citizens no longer trust the US to support their country's position on a range of challenges, domestic and foreign, despite the many and expensive costs that Washington has paid among domestic constituents and international allies, partners, and institutions in defense of its ally.

Ironically, even as the European Union's insistence that Turkey recognize Cyprus raises the reddest of Kemalist flags, it is Turkey's concentration on EU accession, rather than an active American diplomatic engagement, that may best advance a long-sought solution to the Cyprus problem.

In Washington, Cyprus had always been a priority on the US-Turkey agenda. After the 1974 Greek coup and Turkish invasion that divided Cyprus, the US Congress slapped an arms embargo on Turkey that was lifted in 1978, when the strategic capacity of the NATO alliance to deter Soviet designs on southeastern Europe began to deteriorate.

Afterwards, the guiding principle of US policy on Cyprus was the prevention of a Greek-Turkish war that could have ruptured the NATO alliance – since the founding treaty contains no provision for intra-alliance conflict – during a period of sustained Moscow-inspired global tensions.

After the defeat of Soviet totalitarianism, the US watched warily as Greek-Turkish tensions remained difficult throughout the 1990s, especially during the Imia/Kardak Crisis of 1996 and the 1997-1998 periods when Turkey threatened to prevent Cyprus' deployment of Russian missiles capable of striking the Turkish mainland.

With the substantive, and potentially lasting, improvement in relations between Greece and Turkey since 1999, Cyprus receded as a US security issue, even as diplomatic energy continued to be exerted in pursuit of a solution.

From 1999 to 2004, Turkey's EU candidacy and its ambition to launch accession negotiations, coupled with Cyprus' scheduled accession with or without a settlement, were viewed in Washington as opportunities to resolve the Cyprus problem. Over time, the EU – through the leadership efforts of members Great Britain and Greece, two of Cyprus' three guarantor powers, along with Turkey – has been increasingly viewed as the unifying institutional catalyst for overcoming long-held fears and misperceptions in the

eastern Mediterranean and establishing a new political and social framework for all Cypriots.

This was especially necessary in light of the inability of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities to seriously define the “bizonal, bicomunal federation” laid out by the UN as the basis for a lasting and democratic solution. Alvaro de Soto, UN special envoy for Cyprus, did it for them in stark fashion the “Annan Plan.”

Built upon the underpinnings of decades of UN and other international efforts to resolve the Cyprus issue, the Annan Plan was exhaustively constructed by the UN, the US, and the EU. President Bush encouraged the prime ministers of both Turkey and Greece to support the plan and secure the endorsements of the respective Cypriot communities.

The ultimate Greek Cypriot rejection did not adversely affect US-Greece relations, despite Greek Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis’ unmotivated support for the UN plan. Washington was far more focused on cooperation with Athens to ensure a secure and terror-free Summer Olympiad.

However, the Bush administration was strongly appreciative of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s energetic initiatives in moving the Cyprus issue forward. He sought to lift the Cyprus albatross from Turkey’s shoulders, a burden borne for decades in Washington and major European capitals by Turkish diplomats seeking to engage in strategic discussions on issues such as Cold War containment, Iraqi regional ambitions, direct foreign investment, regional energy and freshwater grids, and - most recently - EU accession.

Erdoğan surprised his constituents, and international diplomats, when he spoke in favor of a Cyprus settlement right after his Justice and Development Party won parliamentary elections in November 2002. He was quickly constrained by powerful elements of the Turkish military and hardliners in the Turkish Foreign Ministry still invested in Rauf Denktaş’s quixotic, longstanding opposition to anything but TRNC (Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus) sovereignty and independence.

Erdoğan’s ability to eventually overcome domestic opposition helped transform Turkey’s international image from frustrating Cyprus spoiler to constructive Cyprus negotiator. As a result, Washington’s Cyprus policy has shifted since the Greek Cypriot rejection of the Annan Plan. It is focused more on helping develop the Turkish Cypriot economy and building democratic institutions than on restarting negotiations it feels will be fruitless unless Greek Cypriots are clear about their desired changes to the Annan Plan.

In February 2005, US Ambassador to Cyprus Michael Klosson explained that the Bush administration’s policy, “in parallel with our colleagues in the European Union, is to encourage growth in the Turkish Cypriot economy. Our 30.5 million USD assistance program - the Cyprus Partnership for Economic Growth - is straightforward.”

“By encouraging growth in the Turkish Cypriot economy, our program will: contribute to beneficial Turkish Cypriot interaction with Greek Cypriot, American and other businesses; better enable the Turkish Cypriot economy to shoulder its share of the future economic costs of a settlement; advance the adoption and implementation of European Union and international standards and practices across the island. In sum, we aim to devise practical solutions to problems that hamper economic growth and that will improve the bottom line of Turkish Cypriot businesses.”

Similarly, US Ambassador to Greece Charles Ries stated in March 2005 that Washington is waiting “for Nicosia to respond to the UN Secretary General’s request that the Greek-Cypriots articulate their specific concerns about the (Annan) Plan. At the same time and together with the EU, we are looking for ways to ease the isolation of the Turkish-Cypriots who supported the Annan Plan last year. ...It is not in anyone’s interest to allow the disparity in the quality of life between Greek and Turkish Cypriots to grow unchecked.”

And former US Special Cyprus Coordinator Thomas Weston explained to a Turkish journalist in February 2005 that “Greek Cypriots should take action to benefit from the (Annan) Plan. They have to transmit their points of objection to the Secretary General.” He stressed that “the ball is in the Greek Cypriot court now.”

Therefore, the Cyprus government is expected to formally submit its specific concerns over the Annan Plan, to illuminate the areas where genuine progress can be transparently addressed and resolved. Until then, the Bush administration can be expected to publicly wait out, even as it privately encourages, any initiative on bicomunal diplomacy.

Against this backdrop, Erdoğan’s successful efforts to promote the Annan plan to reunite Cyprus remain a rare high point in the stressed US-Turkish relationship of recent years. That relationship has been historically based on common perceptions of regional and international threats and interests that often muted US criticism of Turkey’s democratic failings. Today, there is concern in Washington that reckless elements of Turkey’s political, social, and intellectual leadership are actively derailing bilateral relations.

Crazed comments comparing President Bush to Adolf Hitler, US military operations in Iraq to genocide, and the American strategy to promote liberty and reform in the Muslim world as the latest manifestation of Jewish regional designs meet with little or no official condemnation. Such silence heightens the Bush administration’s concerns that Turkish officials either fear popular backlash or actually sympathize with such statements.

US-Turkish relations should instead be focused on the strategic dimension of regional and functional interests of great importance to both countries. The effort to democratize and rebuild Iraq must succeed if there is to be a lasting peace in the Middle East and a diminished threat to Western and global security. The core constituent base of the AKP party, rooted in traditional Sunni Islam, should understand that US military operations in Saddam Hussein’s former stronghold have not been directed at Sunni Iraqis but at

Wahhabist and other Jihadists from Saudi Arabia, Syria and elsewhere, as well as from the extremist Kurdish group *Ansar al Islam*.

It was their violent fanaticism that prevented the majority of Sunnis from participating in the historic January 2005 elections – yet it is the United States that continues to urge the Iraqi leadership, Shia and Kurd alike, to engage the Sunni community and the Turcoman minority to ensure their maximum participation in governing the new Iraq.

Similarly, the US has repeatedly assured Turkey that it seeks to preserve the territorial integrity of Iraq, rather than allow its dismemberment and the establishment of a sovereign Kurdish nation-state. Still, many Turks wonder why President Bush's assertive policy against international terrorism does not seem applicable in apprehending or arresting PKK leaders in northern Iraq, or their political supporters in western European countries.

Turkish mistrust of the US has caused confusion and dismay in Washington, which views itself as Turkey's strongest defender over the years on these and other issues. Even worse, the mistrust is misplaced.

US-Turkey trade has increased steadily in the past three years, from 6.2 billion USD in 2002 to more than 8.6 billion USD in 2004, a strong signal that there has been no effort by the US to punish Turkey for sitting out the Iraq War, as demagogues without comprehension of American foreign policy formulation have ranted.

For two years, Washington has offered 1 billion USD in loan guarantees, linked to Turkey's support in Iraq, and only withdrew the offer in February 2005, after Ankara made clear it no longer sought the aid.

President Bush has continued former President Clinton's strong support for Turkey's EU accession, raising the issue in his public statements and in private discussions with EU leaders who contend with vocal opponents of Turkish accession in their media and among domestic constituencies.

And on Cyprus, still considered a "national issue" by many Turks, it is Washington alone that has actually taken concrete steps to ease the isolation of Turkish Cypriots, whose dream of EU membership remains suspended indefinitely.

The Bush administration requested 30.5 million USD in direct assistance to the Turkish Cypriot community, while the EU's promised assistance of 259 million euros remains blocked by disagreement between the Cyprus government and the Turkish Cypriot administration over disbursement mechanisms and the ability of Turkish Cypriots to trade directly with EU countries.

Washington may even decide to handoff the Cyprus problem to the EU as the lead UN partner, and assume more of a background role. Most Greek Cypriots already view the US as strongly pro-Turkish, at their painful expense. The Bush administration may feel it

can subtly and more effectively work with Prime Minister Tony Blair when Great Britain assumes the EU presidency in July and paves the way for Turkey's formal accession negotiations to begin on October 3, 2005.

This will include quelling possible opposition from Cyprus President Tassos Papadopoulos, who has made clear that Turkish recognition of Cyprus is a firm condition of Cyprus' support for accession talks. As one EU official after another has emphasized, Turkey promised to tacitly recognize Cyprus during the December 2004 EU summit in Copenhagen as a condition for formally launching accession talks.

The US will also look to Greek Prime Minister Karamanlis for stronger involvement in any future round of Cyprus diplomacy than in the brief period leading up to the referendum, when he had just recently assumed the prime ministership and was focused on forming his new government. Meetings between Karamanlis and Erdoğan to discuss the Cyprus issue will signal that essential regional leadership in both Athens and Ankara is encouraging bicomunal diplomacy.

The United States is committed for years, perhaps decades, to engaging the most profound strategic issues of our time, such as defeating Islamist terrorism, rebuilding Iraq, preventing nuclear proliferation, encouraging Middle East democratization, managing the global emergence of China and India, and strengthening Russia's reformers against its authoritarians.

For the US to re-engage the quest for a Cyprus solution against this daunting agenda, both Cypriot communities must be simultaneously prepared to take difficult steps, and political risks, to reunite their country under the aegis of the European Union. Otherwise, Washington is unlikely to view Nicosia through any prism beyond routine bilateral relations. As for Brussels, Alvaro de Soto predicted in February 2005 that "clearly the European Union will accept a divided island if it does not reach a solution in the years to come."

To be sure, the Bush administration will continue to urge Prime Minister Erdoğan to recognize Cyprus and take all necessary steps to move forward with EU accession negotiations, part of America's long-term strategy for encouraging reform, transparency, and fuller free market democracy in Turkey.

But in their bilateral relations, Washington can be expected to focus on moving Turkey away from reflexive, counterproductive policies that bring little advantage to Turkey, and support visionary leaders in government, business, civil society, and the military in Turkey to think, pronounce, and act in accordance with Turkey's interests, founded upon a common strategic and democratic agenda with the United States.

Ideally, that agenda includes a democratic, secure, and reunified Cyprus in the European Union in the near term, and a democratic, secure, and self-confident Turkey as soon as it earns full accession.