

MAKING THE SAME MISTAKE TWICE?

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The Cyprus question is heading for another stalemate. The latest round of negotiations is slowly going into a meltdown. The gap between the positions of Greek and Turkish Cypriots does not seem bridgeable. Yet, with the benefit of the hindsight, there was not a good chance for a settlement. The effort to reach a breakthrough was actually primed to fail. Some progress may have been reached on nominal aspects of the problem, but the two parties held their original positions over the “big and important” issues. The UN was quite unsuccessful in facilitating the process. The Special Adviser of Mr. Ban Ki-Moon on Cyprus, Mr. Downer, made every effort to repeat the mistakes of his predecessor, Mr. de Soto, and thus fuel Greek Cypriots’ prevalent notion of mistrust toward the UN. His arrogance and unskillful mediation tarnished the good offices of the UN Secretary General.

The beginning, as the proverb goes, is the half of every action. In the case of the Cyprus question, the year 2008 was marked by euphoria and lofty expectations for an ultimate breakthrough in the Cyprus conflict. In September 2008, Greek Cypriot leader Dimitris Christofias and Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Talat launched direct talks. The optimists thought that those two individuals would make the ideal pair for negotiating a comprehensive settlement. *The Economist* proclaimed them likely candidates for the Nobel Prize. On a moment’s reflection, however, negotiations between Christofias and Talat did not produce something concrete. Their joint statements in March and May 2008 were saturated with ambiguities. The so-called basis of the negotiations (i.e. an agreement on a basic framework of a settlement) was always in limbo. The two parties maintained conflictual interpretations of the fundamentals. From time to time the UN announced that there is some convergence over issues of governance, internal security, economics and external affairs, but there was no comprehensive agreement on any single aspect of the problem.

The whole exercise was premised on pure idealism. The assumption that good will and benign intentions would help to overcome the problems was simply flawed. The realities of the Cyprus conflict are hardly suitable for the naïveté of idealists. A year after the beginning of direct talks, euphoria was succeeded by disappointment and in the first quarter of 2010 disappointment grew into resentment. Hence a mood of pessimism emerged and overshadowed the prospect of a positive outcome.

This round of negotiations (2008-2012) does not seem to take the two communities any further than the previous round of negotiations (1999-2004) took them. Some think that a new method of negotiation would make a difference. However, by shifting the process from a "Cypriot-owned and Cypriot-led framework" into a "multilateral conference" there will be no better chance for a comprehensive settlement. This was tried in 2004 and it did not yield a positive result. Why would such a method of negotiation be more successful today?

Making the same mistake twice is not a choice for the case of Cyprus. Those who are interested in a peaceful and viable settlement of the Cyprus conflict must take some time to reflect upon its basic elements afresh. On the other hand, those who contemplate on imposing a hegemonic solution or arbitrarily changing the status quo will just contribute to the perplexity of the problem.