

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF CYPRUS AND THE STAKES FOR NATURAL GAS

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The strategic and geopolitical added value of Cyprus over time has been the cause of repeated and successive conquests of the island by foreign powers. It has also been the cause of deep and repeated political complications in its modern history. However, it has also been the source of great many benefits for the country and may continue to be that way in the future.

The beginning of explorations for the detection of natural gas reserves in Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) by the government last September is an important development in terms of policy-making, geopolitics, and also in relation to the economy. The various reactions to these developments, confirm the importance of the task. Turkey is issuing threats and creating tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean as it considers that this would impinge its strategic plans, associated with its aspiration to dominate the area. It believes that it can fulfil these aspirations through the strategic control of Cyprus, in what resembles a hostage taking situation, using the Turkish Cypriots as a means to this end. The policies pursued by Turkey in achieving this goal, have been consistent and unchanged even before the independence of Cyprus in 1960. For Ankara, holding a dominant position in the broader area of the Eastern Mediterranean has been a priority. For both Prime Minister Erdogan and Foreign Minister Davutoglu this is now the central pillar of their agenda.

On the other hand, many countries have expressed their support for the explorations carried out by the Republic of Cyprus and have invested in this endeavour, as it would help mitigate considerable difficulties in the energy field. It is perhaps the first time that the US have supported Cyprus' claim to exercise its sovereign rights.

Nonetheless, these issues cannot be addressed unilaterally, nor should they be detached from the broader political and strategic environment within which decisions are taken.

The geopolitics of Cyprus, particularly after the 1974 Turkish invasion, has been part of the "management rationale" of the Cyprus problem adopted by various mediators. It is clear that the negotiations for a solution to the problem as well as proposals submitted by third parties are based on the geopolitical importance of the island. More specifically, the form and content of a solution, as hitherto promoted by the proposals and plans submitted, would largely determine which power(s) will exercise strategic control of the island. However, the ideas for a solution of Turkey and Britain and of the US (to a lesser extent), are problematic; most likely a "new state" along these pillars would have an expiry date.

Thus, in order to increase the potential benefits from the extraction of natural gas, the government's strategy should be revised, both in terms of alliances made and sought, but also as regards the Cyprus problem.

As such, the various interests of several powers in relation to the region must be assessed and should be exploited to maximise efforts for a solution to the Cyprus problem. These interests can be summarized as followed:

- The British have bases on the island, which are used by the US and NATO.
- The US is supplied with all facilities requested from Nicosia, without anything in exchange.
- The US sometimes consider Cyprus as part of their planning for Turkey, and never deal with it separately.
- The Europeans, not only the EU as a whole but also individual countries (France, Germany), seek a channel of opportunity to exercise a political role in the Eastern Mediterranean. For example, there was a military agreement with France concerning the "Andreas Papandreou" military base in Paphos.
- The extraction of natural gas provides alternative energy options for the EU and other powers.

The strategic importance of Cyprus should, therefore, be used both for the benefit of the country and its citizens, as well as for the benefit of the EU. Indeed, Cyprus can utilize the energy option in ways serving broader interests. Pursuing this approach and utilizing its strategic advantages, the solution of the Cyprus Problem will not make the country a protectorate of any third power, the state will not be dysfunctional, and its people will not live with restricted rights.