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Shifting Alignments:
The External Orientations of Cyprus since Independence

JAMES KER-LINDSAY

Abstract

Just as the domestic political environment in Cyprus has changed dramatically over the past fifty years, so too has its relationship with the wider world. When the island achieved statehood, the European empires were in decline and the Cold War was at its height. In this geo-political climate, the Republic of Cyprus opted to join the Non-Aligned Movement. Today, it is a member of the European Union. This has undoubtedly given it a degree of political security. However, questions remain as to whether the EU can really deliver on expectations. Thus the question of whether Cyprus should pursue closer relations with NATO is increasingly gathering attention. But behind this examination of how Cyprus has aligned itself on the world stage since independence lies a far more significant story of growing autonomy for the people of Cyprus. Having been a colony of one or other of the countless empires that had dominated the Eastern Mediterranean, independence has given Cyprus a degree of freedom to choose its orientation that has never been known before. That the Republic of Cyprus could effectively choose whether to join NATO or the Non-Aligned Movement, and that it has been able to accede to the European Union, highlights the degree to which it has been able to develop its own place in the world over the past fifty years.

Keywords: Cyprus, decolonisation, foreign policy, Cold War, European Union, geopolitics, Non-Alignment

When Cyprus became independent in 1960 it rapidly sought to establish its presence within the international community of sovereign states. Within months it had become a member of the United Nations. Likewise, it also joined the Commonwealth, thus retaining a link to the United Kingdom and the other former colonies of the British Empire.[1] Still, with the Cold War at its peak, the island was also faced with a choice about its fundamental strategic orientation and its overall political-military alignment on the world stage. The eventual decision to reject membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and pursue Non-Alignment would shape the

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1   As Makarios stated on his first visit to London after independence, 'in spite of the differences and bitterness of the past, our relations with the United Kingdom are now very good. We shall do our utmost, in a spirit of goodwill, further to strengthen our relations with the UK as well as other participants in the Commonwealth ... The past is forgotten'. *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, 18-25 March 1961, p. 17987.

island's ties with the rest of the world for the next three decades. This changed in 2004 when the Republic of Cyprus joined the European Union and was required to leave the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Interestingly, though, although the Cypriot Government insisted that it wished to retain close ties with the NAM, EU membership has in fact reignited the debate on the island's relationship with NATO.

NATO Rejected

The first key strategic choice facing the new state was whether or not to join NATO. In many ways, the option of joining the alliance, and thereby become a full part of the West, perhaps seemed to be the most obvious direction for the new republic to take. After all, Britain, Greece and Turkey − the three Guarantor Powers vested with responsibility for ensuring the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the new state − were all members of the Organisation. Nonetheless, this did not happen. The idea of joining the Western alliance was strongly opposed from various quarters. For a start, within the Greek Cypriot community there was deep concern about the implications of such a move. As far as Archbishop Makarios and other leading political figures were concerned, Cyprus would necessarily be of secondary importance to Turkey. In the event of any confrontation between Cyprus and Turkey, or between Greece and Turkey, NATO would always be inclined to take Ankara's side by virtue of its strategic significance as the only non-arctic route into the Soviet Union. [2]

Interestingly, the Turkish Government was also opposed to the prospect of the island's membership of NATO. In Ankara the prevailing view was that if Cyprus were to join NATO then its own ability to intervene, even though this right was enshrined in a legally binding treaty, would be limited. The idea of one NATO member invading another, and the consequences of this on alliance unity at the height of the Cold War, would almost certainly ensure that the United States and other NATO members would step in to prevent full scale hostilities from occurring. To this end, Ankara saw a tactical advantage to keeping Cyprus outside of the organisation.[3] Therefore, and albeit for very different reasons, opposition to NATO membership was one of the few issues of agreement between the Greek Cypriot leadership and the Turkish Government in the early years of independence.

The Non-Aligned Path

Rather than NATO membership, Makarios instead chose to follow a path of non-alignment. As with the question of NATO membership, his decision was opposed by vice-president Kuchuk.[4]

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2   G. Clerides (1989) *Cyprus: My Deposition*, Vol. 1, Nicosia: Alithia Press, pp. 124-126.
3   *Ibid.*
4   Dr N. Ertekun, interview with the author, September 1996.

But, once again, he was persuaded not to use his veto over the matter by the Turkish Government.[5] In many ways, this actually marked a far more logical and natural direction for the island; marking as it did a continuation of an orientation that had evolved over the previous few years of the anti-colonial struggle. Throughout the 1950s, as the political and then military campaign to end British rule in Cyprus grew, Makarios managed to form close relations with the leaders of a number of developing countries and post-colonial states around the world. Indeed, in 1955, he had even attended the Bandung Conference, which set out an agenda for Afro-Asian co-operation in the face of Western imperialism – either of the capitalist right and communist left.

Given the opposition to NATO membership, and in view of the fact that alignment with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact was out of the question, it hardly seemed surprising that this sense of cohesion with the Third World, most of which was made up of former colonial possessions like Cyprus, should therefore continue after independence. In 1961, Makarios was one of the leaders of twenty-five states that attended the summit of leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), in Belgrade; thus becoming a founder member of the Movement.[6] In the years that followed, membership of the Non-Aligned Movement served the Government of Cyprus well on a number of occasions. For example, in 1964, albeit with a strong intervention by the Soviet Union, it prevented attempts by Britain and the United States to establish a NATO-based peacekeeping force following the first outbreak of inter-communal violence.[7] More recently, following the invasion and division of the island, the Movement, which includes many Muslim states amongst its members, played a vital part in Greek Cypriot efforts to prevent the recognition of the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus'. To this extent, active participation in the Non-Aligned Movement has been extremely beneficial for the Cypriot Government.

Nevertheless, the end of the Cold War at the start of the 1990s naturally raised questions about the continuing relevance of the Non-Aligned Movement, both in a general sense and in relation to Cyprus. At an international level, the very idea of non-alignment appeared to be redundant with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Instead, the Movement appeared to become more focused on development issues relating to the Global South. This shift in focus made Cypriot participation appear particularly incongruous. Meanwhile, although the Cypriot government still cultivated good ties with its partners in the Movement, even in the late-1980s it was becoming increasingly obvious that its ties were now shifting increasingly northwards and westwards in focus – towards Europe and away from Africa and Asia. In the early 1990s this trend accelerated as the post-Cold War project to unify the European continent gathered pace. As Greek Cypriot officials emphasised, accession to the Union now

5   Clerides, *Cyprus*, Vol. 1, p. 124.
6   'The the Non-Aligned Movement and the Cyprus Question', Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Cyprus.
7   These events are covered in J. Ker-Lindsay (2004) *Britain and the Cyprus Crisis, 1963-1964*, Mannheim/Möhnesee: Bibliopolis.

became the 'prime foreign policy objective' of the Cypriot Government.[8] In the end, Cyprus in fact had to leave the Non-Aligned Movement as a requirement of its accession to the European Union. Membership of the NAM was considered to be incompatible with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).[9]

A European Direction

While EU membership may now be seen as an obvious outcome for the island, it was not always the case. As already noted, when Cyprus became independent its political orientation was clearly focused away from Europe and the West more generally. Significantly, though, it was Britain's decision to apply for membership of the EU that promoted the Cypriot Government to apply for an association agreement with the Union. Fearful that this could see Cyprus lose its main trading partner, it felt it had no option but to follow suit. But when the United Kingdom's application was vetoed by the French Government, the Republic of Cyprus withdrew its request.[10] Likewise, with Britain's accession to the EU in the early 1970s, Nicosia once again reactivated its own links. This resulted in the signing of an association agreement that envisaged the creation of a customs union by 1982. Such plans were, however, short-lived. The Turkish invasion of the island in 1974 necessarily delayed the implementation of the agreement until 1987. Three years later, the Republic of Cyprus officially applied to join the Union – despite the strong opposition of the Turkish Government and the Turkish Cypriot leadership. This request was officially accepted in 1994, despite some serious misgivings about the impact of accepting a divided island into the Union. Ten years later, in May 2004, and after further unsuccessful efforts to reunify the island and with the strong support of the Greek government, it became a full member of the Union.[11]

As had eventually been the case with membership of the Non-Aligned Movement, membership of the European Union came to be seen as a way of pursuing a narrow set of policy objectives. Accession seemed to be less about validating a European identity for Cyprus than about offering security and furthering the cause of reunification. Indeed, on both fronts EU membership was deemed to be particularly advantageous. Given the stand that Cyprus had joined as a united

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8   'The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cyprus Question', Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Cyprus.
9   Nevertheless, Cyprus has retained a status within the movement as a Special Observer, and has said that it will try to act as a bridge between the European Union and the Non-Aligned Movement. Whether this will be the case has yet to be seen.
10   See A. Sepos (2008) *The Europeanization of Cyprus: Polity Policies and Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
11   For an account of the accession process and efforts to resolve the division of the island, see J. Ker-Lindsay (2005) *EU Accession and UN Peacemaking in Cyprus*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; and, N. Tocci (2004) *EU Accession Dynamics and Conflict Resolution: Catalysing Peace or Consolidating Partition in Cyprus?*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

entity, and that the TRNC[12] was deemed illegal under Security Council resolutions, the EU was – legally and, at least, officially – entirely on the side of the Cypriot Government in terms of its attempts to repudiate the 1983 unilateral declaration of independence by the Turkish Cypriot leadership. Notwithstanding perceived pressures from certain EU members to push for reunification on terms more favourable to the Turkish Cypriots, Nicosia's view was that its position would nevertheless in fact be significantly strengthened by membership. It seems highly unlikely that a third party country would recognise the north if this could incur possible sanctions from the Union or, at the very least, find that elements of its relations with the European Union would be obstructed by the Cypriot Government. At the same time, the prevailing view amongst Greek Cypriots was that EU membership would give the Republic of Cyprus an unparalleled degree of security in the face of a perceived threat from Turkey.

NATO Reconsidered

Interestingly, Cypriot membership of the European Union has reopened the question of whether or not the Republic should pursue closer relations with NATO. Although the Cold War is long since over, it remains an extremely contentious issue. Despite leaving the Non-Aligned Movement, the Cypriot Government has nevertheless maintained its clear distance from NATO. And while membership of NATO is not a requirement for EU membership, most EU members are part of the alliance. Indeed, Cyprus and Malta were the only two entrants in 2004 that were not members of the organisation.[13] Notably, even those EU members that officially maintained a policy of neutrality in their external relations have opted to join Partnership for Peace (PfP), a programme designed to promote co-operation with third countries.[14]

In contrast, Cyprus chose not to do so. In large part, this reflected the long-standing mistrust of NATO in Cyprus. However, this position is now being increasingly questioned by parties across the political spectrum. DISY, the main opposition party, as well as DIKO and EDEK, all favour PfP membership.[15] The lone exception is AKEL, which refuses to countenance any move that would bring Cyprus closer to an organisation it fundamentally mistrusts.[16] But even if

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12   Although the northern part of the island is referred to as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in this essay, it is acknowledged that the TRNC is not recognised by the international community except Turkey.

13   The only countries that were not members of NATO were Austria, Finland, Ireland and Sweden. For more on relations between NATO and the EU see 'NATO's relations with the European Union', NATO: available at [http://www.nato.int/issues/nato-eu/index.html].

14   For more see 'The Partnership for Peace', NATO: available at [http://www.nato.int/issues/pfp/index.html].

15   'DISY pushes for Partnership for Peace entry', *Cyprus Mail*, 28 January 2009; 'Parliament calls on government to join PfP', *Cyprus Mail*, 3 April 2009.

16   In explaining its opposition, Aristos Damianou, a member of AKEL's Central Committee, stated, in the context of the new talks between the two communities, which were launched in 2008, 'We would therefore be giving the wrong messages to the international community if at the same time we start negotiating entry into a military

Nicosia were to change its mind, any decision to move closer to NATO would also require Turkish acceptance. This is unlikely for as long as the Cyprus Issue continues. Indeed, as has been seen, Turkey's opposition to possible Cypriot participation in EU peacekeeping missions has already held up an important agreement allowing the EU to draw on NATO assets.[17]

Conclusion

Just as the domestic political environment in the Republic of Cyprus has changed dramatically over the past fifty years, so too has its relationship with the wider world. When the island achieved statehood, the European empires were in decline and the Cold War was at its height. In this geo-political climate, the Cypriot government opted to join the Non-Aligned Movement. Today, European imperialism amounts to a few vestigial holdings here and there and the ideological confrontation between East and West is all but a memory. Instead, new world powers are emerging. In this context, the Republic of Cyprus joined the European Union. This has undoubtedly given the Greek Cypriots a degree of political security that they so craved. It has certainly made it more difficult for the TRNC to gain international recognition as any decision would undoubtedly have an impact of the recognising state's relations with the EU, which regards the whole of the island as a member – even if the effective control of the Cypriot Government over its entire territory is limited.

Questions, however, remain as to whether the EU can really deliver on expectations in terms of regional security. Is it really in a position to provide the protection that Greek Cypriots have long believed it could? Also, there seems to be a growing perception amongst many Greek Cypriots that Cyprus needs to anchor itself more firmly within western political structures. To this end, the question of whether Cyprus should join NATO has re-emerged. Whether it chooses to pursue closer relations with the Western alliance is a question that will have to be addressed in the years ahead. But it will also be dependent on how the current phase of talks progress. Without a solution, it seems that any discussion will remain in the realms of the hypothetical. Turkey will remain in a position to block such a development.

Moreover, there is also the possibility that any failure in the talks will also run the risk of bringing about an unpleasant and unwelcome shift in the security and support offered by the EU. The European Union's patience with Cyprus may start to wane if a solution is not found. If the Greek Cypriots are held responsible for any failure to reach a solution, key players within the EU may start to push more seriously for steps to end the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots. There is also

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organisation. Second, we should also analyse international political developments, our capabilities as a small state and what role we could play in such an organisation. This body functions as a gateway to NATO, where Turkey plays a significant role. Thirdly, we should not forget the role which NATO played in Cyprus, in the events of 1974', 'DISY pushes for Partnership for Peace entry', *Cyprus Mail*, 28 January 2009.

17   For a discussion of this see D. Hannay (2005) *Cyprus: The Search for a Solution,* London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 116-118.

the possibility, especially after Kosovo, that any decision by a third party state to recognise the TRNC would not elicit the same degree of opposition from the EU as a whole as in the past. Certainly, the Cypriot Government could make things difficult in terms of relations between that state and the EU, but after the Lisbon Treaty, Nicosia's scope to block actions may well be more limited than in the past. Meanwhile, as a member of the EU, the Cypriot Government will have little chance to appeal to its old allies in the Non-Aligned Movement for help. Any dispute will undoubtedly be seen by the outside world as an EU issue. No one will want to intervene in a family dispute – especially when that dispute involves a family that is becoming ever more significant in world affairs. To this extent, EU accession may have strengthened the Republic of Cyprus in the short term, and while the Greek Cypriots are seen to be co-operative in terms of reaching a solution. Despite this, one can certainly see the ways in which membership may undermine its position in the future.

Be that as it may, for the moment the situation should be viewed in positive terms. Behind this examination of how Cyprus has aligned itself on the world stage since independence lies a far more significant story of growing autonomy for the Republic of Cyprus. Having been a colony of one or other of the countless empires that had dominated the Eastern Mediterranean, independence has given the government a degree of freedom to choose the island's orientation that has never been known before. The fact that the Republic could effectively choose whether to join NATO or the Non-Aligned Movement and that it has been able to accede to the European Union highlights the degree to which the Republic of Cyprus has – despite the constitutional limitations imposed on it at independence and the subsequent division of the island – nevertheless managed to forge its own individual sovereign identity over the past fifty years.

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