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# **The Cyprus Divide: Challenges for Peace, Security, and International Relations**

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# Introduction

This issue brief looks into the Cyprus Dispute that continues to be one of the most complex and unresolved conflicts of the modern world. It has currently been sidelined because of other highly intensive conflicts in the Middle East and Caucasus Regions. It has always affected the volatile Eastern Mediterranean region’s peace, stability, and security, and it continues to do the same in the present.

## Geopolitical location of Cyprus



The Republic of Cyprus is an island nation-state located in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Even though the nation geographically lies in West Asia, it is culturally closer to Southeast Europe. Cyprus is the third-most populated island in the Mediterranean. It is located to the north of Egypt, east of the Levant, northwest of Israel, south of Türkiye, and southeast of Greece. Nicosia is the country’s capital and its largest city as well. Cyprus also has land borders with Akrotiri and Dhekelia, which are British-dependent territories. The northeastern part of the island is under de

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<sup>1</sup> Taygun, A. (2024, September 11). *Why is Nicosia the last divided capital of Europe?* TheCollector. <https://www.thecollector.com/why-is-nicosia-the-last-divided-capital-of-cyprus/>

facto control by the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974.

Since the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, the island has been split between the internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus in the south and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in the north, formed in 1983 and recognised only by Turkey. This partition of a small island like Cyprus has led to the formation of a buffer zone that is patrolled by the UN, characterised by complex geopolitical tensions. Negotiations regarding this, between the two counterparts, have not progressed.

This divide of Cyprus is globally one of the most significant disputed areas and has been in the view of geopolitical happenings, like hydrocarbons found in the eastern Mediterranean, and the historical tension between Greece and Turkey. However, much effort remains in bilateral terms as efforts continue, such as the new agreements with respect to good relations recently established. The situation's complexity portrays the need for thorough dialogue and cooperation between the local actors and international stakeholders in forming a sustainable peace, addressing the diverse challenges the divide poses.<sup>2</sup>

## Brief History

The 1960s London-Zurich Accords resulted in the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus. Three guarantor states- the UK, Greece, and Türkiye signed a treaty to guarantee the national unity of Cyprus and establish a quasi-federal Republic of Cyprus. This treaty also guaranteed military intervention by the guarantors if the conditions of the treaty were threatened.<sup>3</sup>

Although the accord, aimed at establishing a peaceful solution based on bi-national independence, administrative partnership, and political unity, sounds good on paper, it was never implemented

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<sup>2</sup> *Cyprus: 20 years of membership of the European Union, between singularities and a theatre of geopolitical oppositions.* (n.d.). <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/759-cyprus-20-years-of-membership-of-the-european-union-between-singularities-and-a-theatre-of-geopolitical-oppositions>

<sup>3</sup> *Treaty provisions and basic documents with regard to the EU membership of Cyprus / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs.* (n.d.). Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/treaty-provisions-and-basic-documents-with-regard-to-the-eu-membership-of-cyprus.en.mfa>

on-ground. Therefore, Cyprus experienced a troublesome independence movement launched by the nationalist Greek Cypriots, culminating in intense clashes between both communities.

Political tension further worsened with the Greek military coup on July 15, 1974, with the motive of uniting Cyprus with Greece. Turkey responded to this by invading the island on July 20, 1974, which was based on its being a guarantor under the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee.<sup>4</sup>

## Timeline

Cyprus's past can be divided into five phases-

- Phase 1: Internationalisation of the Issue

It started during the Second World War when the idea of Enosis (unification with Greece) created a tough relationship between Türkiye and Greece. Between 1945 and 1952, Türkiye adopted a low level of engagement in the matters, as, according to Türkiye, the USSR was perceived as the main national threat, not Greece or Cyprus.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, Türkiye followed a passive policy on the continuous Greek initiatives. This was due to a lack of political will and a belief that the Cyprus issue was an internal matter of the British Empire. At the London Conference on 30 June 1955, Türkiye became the signatory party to protect the rights of the ethnic Turk Cypriots on the island, following which the Greeks raised this issue with the UN and the European Union Human Rights Commission.<sup>6</sup>

- Phase 2: European Community Membership (1981)

Greece entered the European Community (EC) in 1981. This strengthened historical tensions with Turkey, especially in the Aegean Sea and Cyprus. The membership was not accompanied by any resolution to the key issues, leading to an uneven relationship, which complicated diplomacy.

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<sup>4</sup> NO. 5475. TREATY OF GUARANTEE. SIGNED AT NICOSIA ON 16 AUGUST 1960. (n.d.). [https://www.mfa.gr/images/docs/kypriako/treaty\\_of\\_guarantee.pdf](https://www.mfa.gr/images/docs/kypriako/treaty_of_guarantee.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Uzer, U. (2011). Identity and Turkish foreign policy: the Kemalist influence in Cyprus and the Caucasus. *Choice Reviews Online*, 48(12), 48–7181.

<sup>6</sup> Richmond, O.; Ker-Lindsay, J. (19 April 2001). *The Work of the UN in Cyprus: Promoting Peace and Development*. Springer. p. 9. ISBN 978-0-230-28739-6.

- Phase 3: Europeanization of the issue (1980-2004)

From 1980 to 2004, the Cyprus problem evolved from a strictly bilateral issue between Turkey and Greece to one involving the EU, affecting Turkey's accession to the organisation. This period has been characterised as the Europeanisation of Cyprus, with Greece and Greek Cypriots trying to cast the issue in both the EU and international contexts.

- Phase 4: Cyprus joins the European Union

The Republic of Cyprus officially entered the EU on May 1, 2004. Even so, Greek Cypriots had rejected the UN's Annan Plan on reunification. The latter stage witnessed Greece and Greek Cypriots raising efforts to settle the Cyprus problem under the auspices of EU forums while negotiating the EEZ with other states on its Eastern Mediterranean seaboard.<sup>7</sup>

- Phase 5: Hybrid Period

In this final stage, South Cyprus sought all-round support from the EU and international actors, using its EU membership to strengthen its hand in negotiations. In these stages, the Cyprus problem played a significant role in Turkish foreign policy, demonstrating how it served as a domestic political instrument in Turkey.<sup>8</sup>

## Role of International Actors

International actors have contributed to exacerbating as well as easing tensions on the island. The European Union, for example, has remained a staunch advocate for reunification and supported the peace-building process based on United Nations resolutions. European institutions have maintained that there is a need for dialogue but have condemned any acts that would make reunification impossible.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> EUR-LEX - 12003T/PRO/10 - EN - EUR-LEX. (n.d.). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A12003T%2FPRO%2F10>

<sup>8</sup> BBC News. (2022, October 17). Cyprus profile - Timeline. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17219505>

<sup>9</sup> Dayeh, A. (2023, November 12). Cyprus at a crossroads: reunification or further division? The Oxford Blue. <https://theoxfordblue.co.uk/cyprus-at-a-crossroads/>

The presence of UN peacekeeping forces since 1964 makes this mission one of the longest-standing efforts in the world, demonstrating international commitment to resolving the question.<sup>10</sup>

However, the atmosphere remains tense, since the Cypriot leaders prefer to maintain the status quo rather than make unpopular political decisions that would result in a breakthrough in negotiations.<sup>11</sup>

## Security Challenges

The continued division in Cyprus has presented many security issues that involve not just the local people but broader international relations as well. These come as the aftermath of the Turkish invasion in 1974, where the island faced raised tensions and conflicts, despite multiple peace efforts. The division of the island has brought out disparate needs and threats on the aspect of security for both the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities, complicating the peace process and stability in the region.

## Cybersecurity Challenges

Along with the classical defence and military security concerns, a new critical threat to national security in Cyprus is the rise of cyber threats. The increasing reliance on technology for infrastructure and governance has made the island vulnerable to cyberattacks. Malicious actors could potentially harm human safety, the environment, and the economy. They pose critical risks to federal agencies and infrastructure systems such as energy, transportation, and financial services. Protecting these systems in terms of their confidentiality, integrity, and availability cannot be understated, as the vulnerability of cyberspace would only amplify existing tensions between the two communities.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stamouli, N. (2022, June 11). Cyprus has gas for Europe. A decades-old conflict is keeping it untouched. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/article/cyprus-gas-europe-decade-old-conflict-untouched/> Turkish invasion of Cyprus - New World Encyclopedia. (n.d.). [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Turkish\\_invasion\\_of\\_Cyprus](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Turkish_invasion_of_Cyprus)

<sup>11</sup> Yiangou, A. (2020). Decolonization in the Eastern Mediterranean: Britain and the Cyprus Question, 1945-1960. *Cahiers Du Centre D Etudes Chypristes*, 50, 45–63. <https://doi.org/10.4000/cchyp.494>

<sup>12</sup> EU-NATO cooperation on the Cyprus conflict. (n.d.). Global Affairs and Strategic Studies. <https://www.unav.edu/en/web/global-affairs/eu-nato-cooperation-on-the-cyprus-conflict>

## Societal Problems

The Cyprus conflict poses numerous social challenges, further complicated in attempts toward reconciliation and sustainable peace. The two most central concerns for both communities on the island are the long-lasting impacts of violence, displacement, and destruction of cultural heritage.<sup>13</sup>

The continued division has severe social and economic implications. The north of Cyprus functions under an administration that is not recognised internationally, hampering its economic development and excluding it from global markets. The strategic control of the country's key resources and tourism sectors by Turkish forces has furthered economic imbalances between the two regions. Changes in demographics, including Turkish settlers entering Northern Cyprus from Turkey, have also changed the fabric of the society, generating friction between both communities. Deeply seated problems of identity and perception arose because of the conflict between the two sides. Both groups had historical narratives that defined the two communities, and their respective perception of the "other" would hinder any efforts at reconciliation.<sup>14</sup>

Grassroots initiatives aimed at encouraging community dialogue have always struggled against historical animosities and mistrust, emphasising the necessity for grassroots efforts to supplement political solutions.

## Impact of Past Violence

The trauma of the invasion of 1974 still haunts Cypriots. The older generation who witnessed the wrath still suffer from anxiety and PTSD. Acknowledgement of the historic context of violence in society is central to the healing of the wounds and scars caused by it. Some of these incidents, for instance, disappearances and similar forms of past violence, must be treated with urgency to restore the dignity of the victims and their families while affecting the collective memories and identity

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<sup>13</sup> Warner, J., Lovell, D. W., & Kontos, M. (Eds.). (2016, August). *Contemporary social and political aspects of the Cyprus problem* - Cambridge Scholars Publishing. <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-4438-8819-6>

<sup>14</sup> Boltuc, S. (2024, July 19). Geopolitics of Cyprus: Economy and International affairs. SpecialEurasia. <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2024/07/19/the-geopolitics-of-cyprus/>



of the communities. Incentives and efforts towards redemption can trigger cooperation between the two parties.<sup>15</sup>

## Energy Dynamics

Evolving energy dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly because of recently discovered significant natural gas resources around Cyprus, Turkey, and Greece, are reconfiguring the region's geopolitics and energy approaches. The rivalry between these countries is increasing because of the tremendous potential of these resources, while the EU also increasingly interests itself in diversification from Russian gas.

The European Union is highly interested in using Eastern Mediterranean gas as part of its energy diversification policy to, among other reasons, rely less on Russian supplies. The European Commission has emphasised the role of Cypriot gas exports, in addition to those from Israel and Egypt, in strengthening energy security for the EU's member states. This objective is, however, challenging to achieve because of the political conflicts and the large investment in infrastructure required to export gas.<sup>16</sup>

The discovery of natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean is an economic silver lining for Cyprus, Turkey, and Greece and a renewed catalyst of geopolitical tensions at the same time. Strategic energy resources reorder the national interests of all regional players, making cooperation not only more important but also more elusive due to historical grievances and competing claims. The future for energy production and export outside the Eastern Mediterranean is unclear as nations navigate these stormy seas but is also crucial to regional stability and the EU's efforts to diversify energy resources.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> University of Central Arkansas | UCA. (n.d.). <https://uca.edu/politicalscience/home/research-projects/dadm-project/europerussiacentral-asia-region/cyprus-1960-present/>

<sup>16</sup> Stamouli, N. (2022, June 11). Cyprus has gas for Europe. A decades-old conflict is keeping it untouched. *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/cyprus-gas-europe-decade-old-conflict-untouched/> *Turkish invasion of Cyprus* - *New World Encyclopedia*. (n.d.). [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Turkish\\_invasion\\_of\\_Cyprus](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Turkish_invasion_of_Cyprus)

<sup>17</sup> Ziomecki, M. (2023, October 12). Will Cyprus' neighbors let it produce and export natural gas? – GIS Reports. *GIS Reports*. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/gas-2/>

## Is Turkey's EU Membership in Danger?

Its role in Cyprus has had significant ramifications for Turkey's chances of joining the EU and being involved in it. The fact that one EU member state—in this case, Cyprus—retains the ability to reject any talks about Turkey's EU membership presents another major obstacle. This implies that Turkey's possible EU membership will be contingent upon her resolving the protracted impasse over Cyprus.<sup>18</sup>

The Cypriot government has time and again maintained that rapprochement between Turkey and the EU will be conditional on the readiness and willingness of the former to work toward a solution to the island's division meaningfully.

Furthermore, through its action in Cyprus, Turkey has given reasons for concern for human rights and respect for the rule of law upon which the foundation of the European Union is built. Indeed, such has been the view on Turkish troop presence and Turkey's failure to recognise Cyprus as a republic. Therefore, such steps do not only thwart the bargaining of Turkey but also create a broader impression to the people in Europe that Turkey is not on the same standard as the EU.<sup>19</sup>

This issue further complicates Turkey's aspirations to join the EU. Only Turkey recognises the TRNC, creating a special legal and political challenge. Turkish Cypriots are technically EU citizens, but they do not have many rights because their government is not recognised by the EU, which sees Northern Cyprus as a part of the Republic of Cyprus. This paradox highlights Turkey's difficulties: it wants to join an organisation whose law considers part of its territory as belonging to another sovereign state.

The EU has also launched several aid programs to alleviate the economic isolation of Turkish Cypriots and promote reconciliation between communities on both sides of the divide. Greek Cypriots have opposed such proposals that often seem to present options for the legitimisation of

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<sup>18</sup> *EU 'attaches particular importance' to Cyprus problem for Turkey relations.* (2024, October 30). Cyprus Mail. <https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/10/30/eu-attaches-particular-importance-to-cyprus-problem-for-turkey-relations/>

<sup>19</sup> *Cyprus problem included in Council conclusions on Turkey's accession process.* (2024, December 17). Cyprus Mail. <https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/12/17/cyprus-problem-included-in-council-conclusions-on-turkeys-accession-process>

the TRNC on many occasions. Until a resolution to the Cyprus crisis arises, such proposals will have difficulty fully integrating Northern Cyprus into the overall framework of the EU.

The failure of previous efforts at peace, such as the Annan Plan of 2004, also sums up the intricacies and complexities involved. Turkish Cypriots accepted it as a reunification plan for Cyprus, but Greek Cypriots rejected this plan in a referendum conducted in Cyprus. This rejection cemented further division and reflected an uphill task for Turkey in terms of foreign policies and EU membership.<sup>20</sup>

## Future Prospects for Peace

Several factors will determine the political landscape and the prospects for peace in Cyprus' future. The critical element in overcoming past grievances and building trust across communities is international support by global actors coupled with grassroots movements aimed towards reconciliation. Bicomunal committees have been set up in education, cultural heritage, and environmental protection, all dealing with practical issues, to promote mutual understanding. There exist measures that aim at building confidence between the two communities by opening border crossings and participating in joint cultural events, among others.<sup>21</sup>

## Potential for Reunification

Although the challenge of division is strong, there is much potential for economic growth if Cyprus reunifies. Research studies by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) point to the fact that an increase in GDP would reach nearly €5 billion in the first five years and, shockingly, €17.4 billion within 20 years. The maritime industry alone annually adds over €1 billion to the economy. This shows the immense economic potential locked in such collaborations and a uniform approach.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kakouris, Y. (2024, August). The Cyprus issue the most important that affects EU-Turkey relations, says Borrell. *KYIIE*. <https://www.cna.org.cy/en/politics/article/7214504/the-cyprus-issue-the-most-important-that-affects-eu-turkey-relations-says-borrell>

<sup>21</sup> *Why is Cyprus Divided? Exploring the History and Impact*. (2024, September 18). <https://cyprus-magazine.com/why-is-cyprus-divided-exploring-the-history-and-impact/>

<sup>22</sup> *Cyprus: 20 years of membership of the European Union, between singularities and a theatre of geopolitical oppositions*. (n.d.). <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/759-cyprus-20-years-of-membership-of-the-european-union-between-singularities-and-a-theatre-of-geopolitical-oppositions>