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Changing Security Challenges for Cyprus

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Q&A Article

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About the Author

Neophytos Loizides is a Professor at the Department of Politics and International Studies (PAIS) at the University of Warwick. He has previously taught at the University of Kent, Queen's University Belfast and Princeton University and held fellowships at the University of Essex, the University of Pennsylvania (Solomon Asch Centre) and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Professor Loizides is the author of *The Politics of Majority Nationalism: Framing Peace, Stalemates, and Crises*, Stanford Press (2015), *Designing Peace: Cyprus and Institutional Innovations in Divided Societies*, University of Pennsylvania Press (2016), and *Mediating Power-Sharing*, Routledge (2018 with Feargal Cochrane and Thibaud Bodson). He has also authored more than fifty academic articles and book chapters in the areas of forced displacement, nationalism and conflict regulation in deeply divided societies including most recently work published in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *International Negotiation and Conflict Management* and *Peace Science*. Professor Loizides has served as a consultant to various governments and international organizations including the Council of Europe and has contributed commentaries to international media such as the *Guardian*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*. As part of his impact activities, he has developed an open-access Mediations and Negotiations Training Program (the Café Diplomático initiative) with the Department for the Promotion of Peace (Organisation of American States) and the Forum of Federations (Ottawa). Professor Loizides also leads the Inclusive Peace project funded by an Open Research Area (ORA7) in collaboration with the ESRC (UK), SSHRC (Canada), ANR (France/New Caledonia) and JSPS (Japan). He serves as member of the Greek-Turkish Forum and Senior Advisor to the Forum of Federations. He is also a member of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Studies for Politics and Democracy.

How do you present the security situation in Cyprus to someone who has never heard of it before?

We often start our discussions of any security issues by presenting the paradox: “there is a country in the world where a NATO country occupies an EU member state and where the UK polices the buffer zone subject to a Russian UN Security Council veto. This is Cyprus.” We have been in a perilous stalemate for too long, but it is unlikely for us to remain unaffected by changing geopolitics. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the recent Hamas actions are dismantling the regional order as we experienced it in the past decades. Just last month, two frozen conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Gaza have seen unprecedented escalations. We were taken by surprise and Cyprus could be next raising key dilemmas for the EU and NATO.

What is NATO’s role in the conflict?

NATO provides its member states with access to security guarantees, technology, and cutting-edge training to defend themselves. Turkey (a non-EU) country is a member of NATO while Cyprus (an EU country) is not part of NATO. In 1974 Turkey employed its then NATO equipped and trained troops to partition the island leading to massive numbers of Greek Cypriot displaced. When violence ended, Turkish Cypriots won more land in proportion to their community size but failed to gain recognition by any country other than Turkey. Greek Cypriots retained sole legal control of the Republic of Cyprus but likewise they failed to maintain any long-term sanctions against Turkey due to the latter’s importance for the alliance, thus today’s decades long stalemate.

Is there a question of NATO accountability?

NATO has been part of the problem but as the only major security provider in Europe could also be part of the solution. The history of the conflict and more recent escalations in the Cypriot maritime zone and against [UN personnel in the buffer zone](#) raise serious accountability issues for NATO itself, its officials and members alike. You can easily locate online information of Turkish military officials serving NATO (in highly celebrated positions) and then taking their next post in leading the (illegal) occupation of an EU country. This is the largest scandal in my view in the alliance’s history. But focusing only on the problem without seeking out solutions is counter-productive. NATO could make up for this by contributing to the peace settlement in Cyprus. In fact, our most recent simultaneous public opinion survey of Greek and Turkish Cypriots has shown that despite past suspicions the involvement of international organizations such as [NATO will catalyse](#)

[cross-community majority support for the UN Guterres framework](#) aiming for a federal arrangement. A peace settlement in Cyprus will also enable the transfer of Israeli and Cypriot natural gas to the EU markets. Following the recent Middle East and Caucasus crises the option of a pipeline via Cyprus or in the short-term the cheaper option of an electricity connector appear to be essential steps for continental and global energy security.

How would Cyprus be affected by the Hamas invasion of Israel?

The most likely scenario is the intensification of the refugee crisis from Gaza, Lebanon and Syria. Depending on the depth of the military confrontation these will add millions of people fleeing their homes (adding to those affected by natural disasters recently in Turkey, Syria, Afghanistan and Libya). Lebanon (Hezbollah) and Syria might enter into a war with Israel and this might see the west supporting militarily Israel through the bases in Cyprus and Crete. Greece is central for NATO's security planning through the two military bases in Alexandropolis and Suda serving western efforts in Ukraine and the Middle East respectively. At the same time, Hezbollah has developed massively its capacity in the past few years and could retaliate citing self-defence. New military advancements in the region allow now for longer range weapons and this in return will put Cyprus, Limassol in particular under risk. It could also re-open the question of SBA in the island and how Cyprus faces risks while failing (unlike Greece and other NATO members) to reap any security benefits.

Would Russia use Cyprus to distract attention from Ukraine?

Russia will do everything to distract western attention from Ukraine (this has been a classic strategy since Soviet times). For the UN and the UK to keep peacekeepers in Cyprus (UNFICYP), Russia's consent is required following [annual vote at the UN Security Council](#). In simple terms, Russia holds a ticking bomb for NATO, the EU and the UK something that the former had no problem using last month against a [historically Armenia in Nagorno Karabakh](#). It takes little effort to see the island as the hot button in the Eastern Mediterranean (**next vote at the UN is only four months away in January 2024**) paving the way for a convenient (for Russia) EU-NATO clash. It is questionable whether the various countries implicated understand the stakes in this complicated equation.

In Cyprus, what can be done now in terms of strategic thinking?

The Cypriot stalemate requires preventive out of the box thinking that refocuses attention to creating a new momentum for negotiations and a political settlement. As shown in the conflicts in Ukraine and Middle East the cost of a renewed confrontation is multiple times higher than any needs to support financially a peace settlement ([our own survey offers precise figures of how compensations could incentivise both users and owners of properties to reach mutually acceptable solutions](#)). As mentioned above it is also essential for NATO to play the central role in the island as part of a comprehensive peace settlement (no Turkish army or guarantees but instead involvement of countries from NATO that will also protect both communities and Cyprus as a whole from third country threats). Western countries could also exercise influence to all sides to implement confidence building measures parties themselves have committed to in the past. There is no need to negotiate some of those as they have been agreed already in past talks. Examples might include the Greek Cypriots lifting any remaining Turkish Cypriot isolation measures while Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots [permitting after 50 years the return of Greek Cypriot residents in Varosha](#). Any military benefits even (continuous) membership to NATO itself should be linked to such commitments.

**This Q&A Article has been formatted on the basis of an interview published in Cyprus Mail, 15 October 2023.*