

It's now or never in Cyprus

A negotiated settlement is back on the cards. If Turkish Cypriots are left out in the cold again, the world will be a less secure place

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Cyprus is back on the international agenda, with leaders of the island's rival Greek and Turkish communities engaged in intense negotiations to resolve the divided country's status. But, although talks are under way, the international community is, not surprisingly, tired of dealing with the issue. After all, the Cyprus conflict has dragged on since 1974, wearing out UN secretary generals and special representatives of all sorts, as well as bringing down governments in both Greece and Cyprus.

In 2004, the EU, the US, and a good part of the international community invested considerable energy in trying to resolve the conflict once and for all. Then UN secretary general Kofi Annan and his team drafted a plan, which Turkey's government took very significant political risks in supporting. The government convinced the Turkish Cypriots to make a leap of faith and vote in favour of the Annan plan in order to reunite the island.

Regrettably, the Greek Cypriot leadership at that time actively campaigned against the UN plan. Consequently, whereas 65% of Turkish Cypriots voted in favour of the plan when it was put to a vote on the island, 76% of Greek Cypriots rejected it. Worse yet, Greek Cyprus joined the EU just days after it spurned the will of the international community, while the EU reneged on its promises to end the Turkish community's isolation if it supported Annan's plan.

Today, many people might think that all of this is water under the bridge but the fate of the Annan plan remains very much a part of Turkish thinking on the Cyprus issue.

In 2008, the UN started a new negotiation process for Cyprus. Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has given his full blessing to a negotiated settlement, and, similarly to 2004, Turkey supports the Turkish Cypriots' willingness to find a viable solution to the division of Cyprus under the UN umbrella.

But it should be clear that the current talks are the last chance for a negotiated settlement on the island. So it is imperative that the transatlantic community recognises that the current talks constitute a historic opportunity. No one – not the US, the EU, Turkey, Greece, or the two Cypriot communities – can afford to waste it. Either the island will reunite under a UN plan accepted by both sides or the status quo will need to change by some other means. The isolation of the Turkish Cypriots, who opted in favour of an internationally acceptable solution, cannot be sustained any longer.

The talks between Turkish Cypriot president Mehmet Ali Talat and Greek Cypriot president Dimitris Christofias are now entering a critical phase. Both leaders need the full support of the transatlantic community.

The US is particularly well situated to contribute to the process in a positive manner, and its engagement will be needed in the coming months. The US-Turkish partnership, badly strained by the war in Iraq, was reinvigorated by President Obama's visit to Turkey in June. American participation in resolving the Cyprus conflict would ensure that the relationship remains on a sound footing.

Contrary to previous rounds of Cyprus negotiations, this time the issue is not confined to the island alone but embraces the wider region. The outcome of the ongoing talks, for example, will have a big impact on how Turkey assesses its relations with the EU. Should the talks fail, the side that behaves in an uncompromising manner will bear full responsibility for dividing the island forever.

Moreover, failure to resolve the Cyprus issue would deadlock already strained security co-operation between Nato and the EU. The recent visit to Ankara by the new Nato secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, highlighted how urgent a Cyprus settlement really is. Failure might also have security implications in the Balkans, the Black Sea, and the eastern Mediterranean – all areas where the US and the EU have vital interests.

It is for these reasons that the transatlantic community should invest its time and energy in the ongoing UN-sponsored talks. Neither the US nor the EU can afford another failure in Cyprus. There is simply too much at stake.

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