

Cyprus reunification talks seek to curb Russian influence in Mediterranean

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Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades and his Turkish Cypriot counterpart Mustafa Akinci began formal talks in Geneva last week aimed at reunifying the island. Also present were United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson.

A request to attend by Russia, which has strong economic links to Cyprus and naval access to its ports, was not taken up.

Cyprus is located in the Eastern Mediterranean to the south of Turkey and is home to about 800,000 Greek Cypriots and 220,000 Turkish Cypriots. It has been split along ethnic lines since 1974 after Turkey invaded in response to a coup instigated by the Greek military junta, which sought political union with Cyprus (enosis).

Since the end of hostilities and the forced displacement that took place, a 180 kilometre-long ceasefire “Green Line” buffer has divided the island into a northern area inhabited by Turkish Cypriots and patrolled by 30,000 Turkish troops while Greek Cypriots live in the south alongside 1,000 Greek troops.

The Greek Cypriot state is recognised internationally but the Turkish Cypriot state only has formal diplomatic ties with Turkey. Greece, Turkey and the UK, as the former colonial power, comprise the so-called “guarantor powers” of Cyprus. The UK still maintains its geo-strategic military bases in Akrotiri and Dhekelia, which have been key staging posts in the US-UK-led bombing campaigns in Iraq and Syria.

The current talks are taking place a decade after a previous UN-brokered settlement plan to coincide with Cyprus’s accession to the EU in 2004 failed, following a “no” vote in a referendum by the Greek Cypriot

south.

A key stumbling block has always been the issue of security. According to UN special adviser on Cyprus, Espen Barth Eide, who chaired the talks, “The Greek side maintains that they would prefer an end to the system of guarantees and an end to foreign troops in Cyprus, whereas the Turkish position has always been that a system of guarantees should be continued at least in order to see that this new federal structure works because they feel a certain responsibility for the Turkish-Cypriot community.”

Another obstacle is the extent of territory that the Turkish Cypriot side would have to cede as part of the settlement in order to allow displaced Greek Cypriots to return to their former homes. Both sides have exchanged territorial maps outlining their proposals, but as yet there is no agreement. Johnson said that the UK is prepared to cede up to half of the territory occupied by its two bases—around 3 percent of the island—in order to ease negotiations.

The first round of talks ended in stalemate last Thursday after Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias demanded the fast and full withdrawal of Turkish troops, declaring, “A just solution [to division] means, first of all, eliminating what caused it, namely the occupation and presence of occupation forces.”

In response, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, “It is out of the question for Turkish soldiers to pull out completely. ... If something like this is being considered, then both sides should pull their troops out of there.” Erdogan added, “We have told Cyprus and Greece clearly that they should not expect a solution without Turkey as guarantor. We are going to be there forever.”

However, Eide warned that “Larger political developments in the neighbourhood remind us that one

should not lose any time”—a reference to Russia’s increasing influence in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, which is cutting across US plans to dominate the region. This is most pronounced in the recent Russian-brokered ceasefire in Syria, which undermined US-led plans to oust Syrian President Bashar Al Assad. Eide’s statement was a warning of the implications of Russia’s increased economic presence.

At the end of last year, Russian state-owned energy company Rosneft signed a deal with Italian energy giant Eni to buy a 30 percent stake in the Zohr natural gas field off the Egyptian coast for \$1.6 billion. Egypt’s Zohr field contains 30 trillion cubic feet of natural gas—the largest in the eastern Mediterranean, almost double the size of Israel’s Leviathan field and around three times the size of Cyprus’s Aphrodite field.

Russia also has built up a huge commercial relationship with Cyprus. In 2012, it offered to help the country with a multibillion-euro bank bailout, leading to the German daily *Die Welt* accusing Cyprus of playing a “double game with Russia and the EU.”

Today, the island, which has the lowest non-offshore taxes in the European Union (EU) and the lowest non-offshore corporate taxes in the world, has become the top destination for direct investment out of Russia and the largest source of foreign investment into Russia. In 2015, the two countries signed a military cooperation agreement which allows Russian naval ships to dock in Cypriot ports in emergencies—a move strongly criticised by the US and EU.

In this context, a settlement to the Cyprus problem to the advantage of the US and EU is seen in Western ruling circles as a decisive counterweight to Russian influence in the region. Washington has been pushing hard for a settlement, with the State Department’s Victoria Nuland visiting the island last year. According to one report, Nuland’s visit was preceded by “hints from senior Cyprus officials that the US has been pressuring Anastasiades to accept Turkish military occupation of northern Cyprus under a NATO flag.”

Geopolitical tensions over Cyprus erupted this week when Russia’s Ambassador to the EU, Vladimir Chizhov, reacted angrily to a Politico.eu article that blamed Russia for the ongoing stalemate.

The article cited a source “close to” Anastasiades,

who said, “The government is aware of Russian activities and monitoring the situation.” Continuing its anti-Russian agenda, the article declared, “The concern comes amid reports of the Kremlin intervening in US and European elections with cyber-attacks, ‘fake news’ propaganda and support for populist and anti-establishment movements.”

Addressing what is at stake for the EU and US in reaching a settlement, the article stated there is “the possibility that a united Cyprus could be pressured into joining NATO, the potential for Turkey and maybe the EU to import new gas supplies along a [currently stalled] pipeline from Cyprus and Israel, and the diplomatic success reunification would deliver to both the EU and the US. As long as Cyprus remains divided by a UN buffer zone, Turkey and the Anastasiades government don’t recognize each other. As a result, Turkey hampers NATO efforts to cooperate with the EU, Greek and Turkish relations in NATO remain tense, and Turkey remains reliant on gas deliveries from Russia’s Gazprom. The EU and Turkey are Gazprom’s top two customers.”

Chizhov responded, “Anti-Russian hysteria is becoming contagious. Overzealous fighters of the (dis)information front are working day and night trying to implicate Russia in all sorts of problems, including those that are the direct result of short-sighted and arrogant policies of others.”

There can be no viable solution to the division of Cyprus under capitalism. Any settlement reached as a result of the Cyprus talks will not lessen tensions in the region but heighten them by providing another potential flashpoint in the US-led drive to war against Russia. A peaceful solution can only be achieved based on the island’s working people overcoming all religious and ethnic barriers in the struggle for a socialist Cyprus as part of the United Socialist States of Europe.



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