A theoretical approach to the Cyprus Problem: Neoclassical Realism with Neoliberalism*

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Abstract

This paper, which covers the period of the 2004 Annan Plan and its rejection to date, places the Cyprus Problem in an International Relations theoretic framework. It searches for a “foreign policy outcome,” essentially a decision by the leaders of the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities, to politically reunite these two communities under the auspices of the UN. The paper provides a synthesis of the neo-liberal and the neoclassical realist paradigms, aiming to better interpret the existing experience and to shed light on the prospect of a future solution to the problem. The strategic environment for the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is ‘permissive’ because the message sent by the international system for reunification does not require the use of hard power. The leaders of the two communities play a key role, although the strategic political culture in small states such as the TRNC is not developed and state-society relations are underdeveloped. Also, the civil society at large can play a role in influencing the leaders’ images regarding the reunification opportunity.

Keywords: Cyprus, International Relations theories, Neo-classical Realism, Neoliberalism, Peace and Conflict Studies.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to place the Cyprus Problem in an International Relations (IR) framework. In its most recent form, the problem arose as a result of a forceful separation of the island’s Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities by the Turkish military invasion in the summer of 1974. Subsequently, the unilateral declaration of the Turkish-Cypriot canton in 1976 and an independent ‘state’ in 1983 in the Northern part of the island – known as the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (TRNC) has made the problem worse. Thus far,

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only Turkey has officially recognised that ‘state’ that remains internationally isolated. Cyprus is an example of a case where international institutions have failed to create a positive-sum game with the interests of external of power clashing over the geostrategic and geopolitical position of the island, effectively hindering unification of the two communities. So far, after so many years, the international actors professed by the *neoliberal* paradigm to IR have failed to respond effectively to this problem, a sign of continuing international ‘anarchy.’¹³ A solution to the problem requires the rapprochement of the two communities with the common goal of securing an amicable and collaborative environment in which to live together. The actors that must be taken into account are international organizations and powerful global powers, regional powers, local political elites and civil societies. An important issue is that of security, which must mean the same thing for both parties. Since the wake of the 21st century, the international community has been vowing to undertake robust efforts to tackle this problem under the auspices of the United Nations (UN).

To better understand the difficulties with a possible solution to the Cyprus Problem, the views of other scholars are invaluable. Several scholars hold the view that the real cause that perpetuates the problem are the opposing economic interests on both sides. While the Turkish-Cypriots appear keen to share the benefits of a new United Cyprus, the Greek-Cypriots are aware that they may have to shoulder the costs of reunification and tolerate the presence of the Turkish troops as forces guaranteeing peace and holding the right of intervention on their land, a European land.¹⁴ They argue that both sides have a deep sense of insecurity, with different priorities and concepts of leadership. Besides, the scholars of the time proposed different types of solutions for Cyprus, none of which has been successful even though there have been some steps towards reunification. For example, some propose a loose federal bicomunal, bizonal state. Some see no solution, claiming that the security issue is tied to Turkey, the motherland of TRNC and would be extremely difficult to solved. These proposals are based on assessments on the ground rather than a robust IR theory, or theories. Other scholars argue that the factors affecting the Cyprus problem are class, nationalism and geopolitics, and the action that must be taken is that the bi-communal and anti-nationalist movement needs to draw political strategies for a solution on the island. The security issue also needs an EU involvement. Of all these views, the hydrocarbon issue appears as an accelerator for further disagreements in the area, and both sides need to explore new and mutually compatible solutions due to the current geopolitical situation.

Emphasis has also been placed on the role of civil society - all those societal sections that are outside the government sector. It includes various associations, NGOs, not for profit organisations, advocacy and citizens’ groups, social mobilisations, as well as the factors that enable their emergence, i.e., cultures, norms and social values. Some scholars strongly propose that the citizens and civil society movements for peace-making can strongly influence the political elites to the extent of presenting a positive solution to the Cyprus

¹³ Meaning lack of an international government with the power to resolve conflicts.

¹⁴ See: Michael, M. S. The Cyprus peace talks; Turk, A. M. Rethinking the Cyprus Problem; Stavriniades, Z. The underlying assumptions, structure and prospects of the negotiating process for a Cyprus settlement; Heraclides, A. “The Cyprus Gordian Knot: An Intractable Ethnic Conflict, Saner, R. The Cyprus Conflict; Mazis, I. T. Geopolitical Realities in the Greece-Cyprus Dipole; Koktidis P. I. Negotiating Ethno-Federal Design in Cyprus; Trimikliniotis, N. The national question, partition and geopolitics in the 21st century; Larkou, L. THE DOUBLE FAILURE OF THE CYPRUS PROBLEM; Olgun, M. E. Hydrocarbons will determine the political future of Cyprus.

Problem.¹⁵ According to them, civil society leaders acknowledge the need to engage the wider society in peacebuilding processes in Cyprus. Possible failure to choose this way will mean that civil society's influence on the peace process of the island will remain minimal. It must be noted that security issue occupies the heart of the Cyprus Problem, because it has been 'institutionalised', meaning that the Greek-Cypriots have developed the habit of living with it.¹⁶ This implies that the members of the Greek-Cypriot society might want to take the matter into their own hands and wake up in terms of solving the problem. A milestone view to keep in mind is that partitocracy has reigned over the procedures of solving the problem.¹⁷ Political parties mobilise public debates but they also tend to exclude citizens from direct participation in the decision-making process. In other words, they tend to overlook the wider civil society and its organisations. In the remaining sections, the paper builds a theoretically informed framework and then provides its justification through a re-assessment of the rapprochement experiences since the failure of the 2004 Annan Plan, before concluding.

2. A modified Neoclassical-Realist model

As mentioned in the introduction, neoliberalism has failed to serve as an appropriate IR template for Cyprus. It also remains a "largely state-centered model. Although it reserves a decisive role for international political institutions and global powers in helping states collaborate away from 'anarchy', it does not explain how states aggregate societal preferences in the formulation of their foreign policy" (Lekakis, 2015). Moravcsik, a liberal theorist from Princeton, dismisses neoliberalism altogether, arguing for an approach where the fundamental set of actors in international politics is comprised of individuals and private groups, with governments and other political institutions merely functioning as a subset.¹⁸

Since the late 1990s, a new realist paradigm, *neoclassical realism*, has emerged and soon began to revitalise and become known for its attempt to overcome the shortcomings of mainstream theories, including neo-realism.¹⁹ Neoclassical realists seek to explain a state's foreign policy outcomes, while neo-realists try to explain recurrent patterns in international outcomes. Neo-realists ignore the importance of domestic differences between countries, arguing that pressures from the international system are so strong that they force similarly situated states to behave alike. In contrast, neoclassical realists pay significant attention to domestic – or 'unit-level' – variables. In the neoclassical realist model, the *independent variable* is the 'anarchic' international system. However, within that system, the strategic environment can be either *permissive* or *restrictive*, depending on how imminent and intense are the threats and opportunities that states face. In a permissive environment, threats and opportunities are more remote and less intense, compared to a restrictive environment. In restrictive environments, material factors determine the policy choices of regimes, as national security may be under imminent threat. In permissive environments, however, it is domestic political circumstances, ideology and ideas that have priority over material

¹⁵ Jarraud, N. *et al.*, The Cypriot Civil Society movement.

¹⁶ Adamides, C. A comfortable and routine conflict; Adamides, C. Cyprus: A Textbook Case of an Intractable Conflict.

¹⁷ Charalambous, G., & Christophorou, C. The Cypriot Communists between Protest and the Establishment.

¹⁸ Moravcsik, A. The new liberalism.

¹⁹ Ripsman, N. M., *et al.*, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*.

resources, with no imminent threat to national security. The ‘anarchic’ structure of the system may also be affected by various resources called “structural modifiers”, and include geography, technology and the offence-defence military balance. The *dependent* variable is the outcome of a state’s given foreign policy. Between the independent and the dependent variable are situated the model’s *intervening* variables, the most important one being *leader images*. Some neoclassical realists observe four more intervening variables that constrain leaders: *elite consensus*, *elite cohesion*, *social cohesion* and *regime vulnerability*.²⁰ Some others propose *strategic culture*, *state-society relations* and *domestic political institutions*. The leader is conceived as the ‘foreign policy executive’ (FPE) and includes the *president*, *prime minister*, *key cabinet members*, *ministers* and presidential and government *advisors* responsible for the conduct of foreign and defence policies.²¹ This conception stems from the neorealist belief that the perceptions of leaders on relative power must be analysed because the primary actors in IR are statesmen, not states. Leaders are held accountable for gauging systemic pressures, as well as preparing for and responding to threats and opportunities. A leader’s own “operational codes”, “stemming from beliefs about politics, how best strategies relate to one’s interests, as well as images of the enemy, may also affect the national foreign policy responses”. (N. Lekakis, D. Xenakis 2021). Leaders tend to be unwilling to accept losses in their state’s relative power, status or prestige, and often continue to invest in failed foreign policy initiatives. The other intervening variables can also shape a leader’s images. The second intervening variable, *strategic culture*, may refer to various things including a state’s organisational culture (e.g., bureaucracy) or a broader notion of culture, e.g., a society’s beliefs, expectations and worldviews. Strategic culture components that can affect a leader’s attitudes toward international affairs are *dominant ideologies* and *degrees of nationalism*. The degree of *state-sponsored nationalism* and the existence of a *statist* (or *anti-statist*) ideology could be important. A nationalist culture can aid a leader to mobilise resources in support of a national security policy. Often, leaders become trapped by strategic culture even when the strategic environment they face is permissive. The third intervening variable, *state-society relations*, concerns the interactions between state institutions and various social groups. These relations are critical regarding a leader’s ability to “extract, mobilise, and harness the nation’s power”.²² Lastly, *domestic political institutions* determine who can contribute to policy formation and can, therefore, have an important impact on a leader’s ability to respond to systemic pressures. The neoclassical realist mode can be very useful when visualizing a solution to the Cyprus Problem. Figure 1 presents a simplified version of the neoclassical realist model in which the independent variable is the ‘anarchic’ international system. However, in this paper, the model is slightly modified with the international system viewed through a neoliberal lens, that is, with international institutions mediating to avoid international ‘anarchy’. In the proposed model, the initiative is taken by the UN, an international institution that aims to bridge the political gap between the two communities.²³

²⁰ Schweller, R. L. The balance of power in world politics.

²¹ Ripsman, N. M., *et. al. ibid.*

²² Taliaferro J. W. Neoclassical Realism and Resource Extraction.

²³ Andreatta & Koenig-Archibugi. Which synthesis?

Figure 1: A Simplified Neoclassical Realist Model *

* Drafted by the author.

The dependent variable is the political reunification of the island as a result of "foreign policy" that requires the consent of the leaders of Cyprus. In the model of neoclassical realism, the range of the dependent variable can be extended across two dimensions: time (months, years) and the level of analysis (state (more than one state)). In this case, the timeline begins with rumors of an imminent UN Secretary-General's initiative for reunification talks, and ends with a final agreement or disagreement between the two leaders. The strategic environment for TRNC is *permissive* (non-restrictive) because the signal sent by the international system for reunification - a culture-cased affair - does not require a response with material resources. Given that *strategic culture* in a small state such as TRNC is undeveloped and *state-society relations* are mirrored in societal mobilisations, as recorded in the media, there are three intervening variables between the independent and the dependent ones: *leader images*, *political parties/ elites* and *civil society organisations*.²⁴ The *leader* – not an FPE – refers to TRNC's President and his spokesperson, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The FPE can call an event a security threat. *Political parties* and political elites include the major political parties in a 50-seat parliament and retired known political figures, while *civil society organisations* embrace trade unions and other private entities.

3. Reassessing the facts under the model

Looking at the Cyprus issue through the lens of a modified neoclassical realist approach, the two major events in the recent international political history of Cyprus help us understand the problem as a whole. These are the Annan Plan Referendum in 2004 and the Cras-Montana Community Talks in 2017. Between these two events, hydrocarbon reserves in RoC's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) were discovered, a finding which has added to existing hurdles. The developments around the Annan Plan constitute a key point of departure. At that time, both the Turkish-Cypriots and Turkey were in favour of the plan,

²⁴ The neoclassical realist approach underlines the opportunity of selecting appropriate dependent and intervening variables as well as identifying pertinent research questions.

but hardline Turkish-Cypriot leader Rauf Denktash had seen the mediation of the international system as an obstacle to his plans for an internationally recognised TRNC. However, the will of the Turkish-Cypriot civil society was so strong (as measured by the magnitude of the "yes" vote) that it was able to "force" him to accept the referendum and the accompanying solution it would bring with it. The Turkish-Cypriots were seeking economic security within the EU and ethnic protection by the Turkish forces that were to remain on the island. Within that equation, Turkey's support of the plan facilitated the permissive strategic environment. The will of the Greek-Cypriot society was even stronger (as seen in their grand rejection of the plan). They sought to safeguard their own economic security, and avoided shouldering the costs of reunification and their ethnic security as a state. The Greek-Cypriot Leader, Papadopoulos, had sensed this will and dashed to add his voice by asking his compatriots to vote against the plan. This outcome signifies the importance of the power civil society can exert on the rapprochement of the two communities. In the second milestone of reunification efforts in the 2010s, the progressive TRNC administration of the late 2000s was replaced by a hard-line nationalist one in the spring of 2010. Also, in early 2013, the Greek-Cypriots elected *Nicos Anastasiades* as their President, a strong Annan Plan supporter. The new President and his government undertook to deal with both the country's economic crisis and the reunification problem which had not been abandoned by the UN. Most importantly, the Greek-Cypriots had been struggling to ascertain their hydrocarbon rights in their EEZ. The vast natural gas reserves that were discovered within Cyprus's territorial boundaries constituted an incentive for reunification and wealth sharing among the two communities. Powerful external actors, including France, Italy and the US, are involved as oil and gas extraction companies serving the interests of these countries have been licensed to perform the discovery operations. These actors recognise the legal right of the Greek-Cypriots to extract energy resources from their maritime territories, and the fact that they should be shared with the Turkish-Cypriots. This brought Turkey in, first as a guarantor and protector of Turkish-Cypriot interests and second as a regional player seeking to secure the hydrocarbon transfer to Europe through pipeline facilities sitting in its territory. In early 2013, hydrocarbon experts argued that some of those actors may have been seeking ways to 'intervene' in order to secure their interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot political elite hold persistently and diametrically opposite views on how wealth sharing should be achieved.²⁵ The Greek-Cypriots aim to proceed with oil and gas extraction independently depositing the Turkish-Cypriots share from the proceeds in an account to be collected once a solution to the Cyprus Problem is achieved. This would give them the upper hand in the political negotiations. Conversely, the Turkish-Cypriots, fearing the impact of such a deal, want all extraction plans either to proceed jointly, or to follow the solution to the Cyprus Problem. On 11 February 2014, the two community leaders, *Nicos Anastasiades* and *Dervis Eroğlu*, met under the auspices of the UN and made a *Joint Declaration* to resume decisive negotiations in a positive atmosphere for a settlement of the Cyprus Problem, as the *status quo* was unacceptable to both sides. The agreement would be followed by separate referenda on the creation of a bi-communal, bi-zonal federation with political equality, a single international legal personality and a single sovereignty. The seeds of the declaration had been planted much earlier, in September 2008, by the then leaders, *Dimitris Christofias* and *Mehmet Ali Talat*. Following the *Joint Declaration* of 2014, negotiations between

²⁵ Gürel, Mullen & Tzimitras. *The Cyprus hydrocarbons issue*.

Anastasiades and the new Turkish-Cypriot leader, *Mustafa Akıncı*, began on 15 May 2015, only three weeks following the latter's successful campaign against *Eroğlu* and his election to the presidential post. The talks reached a record number of meetings, 70 by the two leaders, 150 by the negotiators and 369 at the level of experts (UN Security Council 2017). This focused engagement at all levels led to substantive progress on all issues and enabled a convening conference scheduled for the 12th January, 2017 in Geneva. The two sides had almost managed to reach convergence on many issues, including governance and power sharing, economy and finance, the sensitive issue of citizenship and even property. Thus, the two leaders decided to hold intensive talks in Switzerland's *Mont Pèlerin* in November 2016. This would formally open their negotiations, with the issue of the territorial jurisdictions of the Federation's two zones first on the agenda, followed by security guarantees that had not been previously concluded. Each side began presenting the other with maps, a process that was seen by both parties as a sign that they were approaching the "end of the game", although a final agreement was still far from reach. When the security issue came up, the conference was interrupted. The Turkish-Cypriot side insisted on keeping the Turkish troops on the island to guarantee their security. The Greek-Cypriot side rejected this option. Their rejection stemmed from their traumatic memories of the 1974 Turkish military invasion and their indisputable view that the presence of Turkish troops in a new independent European state was unacceptable, let alone unethical. The Conference reconvened on 28 June 2017 in *Crans-Montana*, Switzerland, where the territorial issue did not appear difficult to resolve, but only as part of a final agreement including the security guarantees on which there was no convergence at all. The Conference failed altogether. The lesson learnt from this round of rapprochement is that it was once again an elitist negotiation with Turkey against it, and with civil societies playing a parochial role. Overall, for a positive-sum game, we need to have a strong involvement of the civil societies desiring reunification so that their extractive capacity will force the leaders to sign the relevant agreement. Also, Turkey must stand positively, too. These prerequisites can occur under the following scenario. Turkey's dwindling economy may weaken the Islamo-nationalist regime and its influence on TRNC's society, let alone TRNC's economy. Even if the regime survives, it will be thirsty for an economic injection by the EU. Greece has been holding a positive posture, ready to facilitate Turkey's accession to the EU. Erdogan's economic policy appears to be driving the Turkish economy to a deadlock which may force him to change his attitudes and rhetoric.²⁶ In that case, the Turkish-Cypriots will push their own leader to accept the bizonal federal solution to the Cyprus Problem. The Greek-Cypriots would have achieved its target of the bizonal solution and with it the hydrocarbon distribution problem.

4. Conclusions

The proposed IR theoretic framework offers a springboard through which a solution to the Cyprus Problem might be pursued in the future, under the proviso that Turkey will abandon its maximalist position and aggressive behaviour. In other words, the limitations of this

²⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/6be3efd1-a8e9-47a8-abac-966db2d3cf93>

model stem precisely from the unpredictable behaviour of Turkey which may lead us back to a classical realist world. Turkey with its settlers has completely changed the demographics of Cyprus. Most Turkish-Cypriots have emigrated abroad. No one knows the actual number of those left, but the majority do not go to the polls. The older Turkish Cypriots who remember peaceful coexistence with the Greek Cypriots, have either died or are elderly. Young people only know what Turkish propaganda has taught them. Regardless of an electoral outcome in TRNC that will favour a federal state, they may still use guns to impose their will. Akinci was an ideologue, but in the 2017 negotiations, the Turks never let him do what he wanted. Nor will the change of guard make any difference for the Turkish-Cypriots. It has always been and will remain oppressed by Turkey. From the beginning, the Turks wanted to make the whole of Cyprus part of their own territory, just as all the conquerors from antiquity wanted, not only because of its natural wealth, but mainly because of its geographical position among three continents. The only wise move made during all those years was RoC's accession to the EU in 2004. This automatically ensured that the Turks would not try to occupy the whole island. But since that time, things have changed. Now they openly support the two-state solution and this may happen in the end. From the beginning, this was their goal. In that case, it will have been the Greek-Cypriot leaders who were asleep. The goal of the Bi-Zonal Bicomunal Federation may prove utopian. A bargain, as it is known by the Turks, implies that you start from your most maximalist goal and meet them somewhere in the middle. For me, the most maximalist goal is a single state. For the Turks, the two states or a confederation (it is almost the same in practice, simply in the case of the confederation, Cyprus becomes a protectorate of Turkey throughout its territory). Now they have made it clear that they want two states. As soon as they succeed, the next move will be the annexation of TRNC to Turkey. Beyond that, Turkey will be able to legally claim an EEZ. It is done!

In view of the above, the Greek-Cypriots need to maintain their strength and resolve. Any concessions made by the Greek-Cypriot government to the Turkish-Cypriot hardliners as a basis for confidence-building measures, to nudge the stalled bi-communal talks under the UN into restartings, will simply be exploited by Turkey and its TRNC loyalists for more concessions in an endless spiral of claims.²⁷ Such a development would probably box them in, forcing them to concede to a partition of the island into two sovereign and internationally recognized states.

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²⁷ See. e.g. the July 15, 2021 online video of the Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation on such possible confidence building measures, <http://cybc.com.cy/video-on-demand/%CF%81%CE%B9%CE%BA-1/%CF%80%CF%81%CE%BF%CE%BA%CE%BB%CE%AE%CF%83%CE%B5%CE%B9%CF%82/episodes-2/%CF%80%CF%81%CE%BF%CE%BA%CE%BB%CE%AE%CF%83%CE%B5%CE%B9%CF%82-15-07-21/>

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