

Could Trump and Putin Solve the Cyprus Conflict?

Written by William Mallinson

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WILLIAM MALLINSON, MAY 19 2025

To a greater or lesser extent, Cyprus has been on-and-off a cat's paw of the greed and ambitions of stronger powers for hundreds of years, but the island had never been divided both geographically and racially until Turkey invaded in 1974, cutting off the northern third of the island, expelling nearly all the Greek Cypriots and importing Turkish settlers who have almost swamped the original Turkish Cypriots[1]. The modern manifestation of the island's strategic importance are Britain's SBAs (Sovereign Base Areas), on which Cyprus' qualified independence in 1960 was predicated. As the talks on re-uniting Cyprus grind on, as they have for over fifty years, it is time to consider the potential effect of the current fluidity and re-setting of inter-state relations. China, Ukraine and the Middle East are now in the cross-hairs of US policy. But when and if Syria and Palestine stabilise – at least to some extent – and when the tension vis-à-vis China lessens, Cyprus is likely to come under increasing scrutiny from its controllers. In this brief overview, we shall consider the current fluidity, bordering on disorder, of world affairs, to the extent that it affects Cyprus, the British bases, Greek-Russian relations, and Israel and Turkey, concluding by looking at Russia's enhanced role and influence in the wake of her putative victory over NATO in the Ukraine fighting, and how she and the US might cut the Gordian knot.

Currently

Along with Trump's new business-oriented approach to inter-state affairs, and his clear interest in the Middle East and supporting the Jewish State, including a somewhat bizarre plan to resettle the inhabitants of Gaza and create an American haven, we have the Russian factor, and the intense meetings going on between Russian and American diplomats to restore and normalise relations. Despite Trump's support for Zionism, he may well become increasingly irritated by suggestions that American foreign policy is managed by the Jewish State, at least as regards the Middle East. In this connection, there have been indications that Americans, particularly younger ones, are increasingly outraged by the killing of Palestinian civilians. And given his interest in normalising relations with Russia, even to the extent of understanding and acting on the latter's security concerns, it is possible that, despite Israeli objections, the Russian preference for a neutral Cyprus, free of foreign forces, could be discussed, sidelining the EU and UK, at least in the initial stages, as *per* the Washington-Moscow talks on Ukraine. The recent resumption of UN-sponsored intercommunal talks (March 2025) ended, as usual, in a polite stalemate. Let us now start to cut to the chase.

NATO and the Bases

It is sufficiently well known that the qualified independence that Cyprus achieved in 1960 was due largely to the efforts of the island's first president, Archbishop Makarios, as well as to American pressure to achieve a 'NATO solution', in other words the *de facto* annexation of almost 3% of Cyprus to harbour the SBAs, which Makarios was obliged to accept. Perhaps somewhat surrealistically, over half the text of the treaty establishing the new state was devoted to the British bases and Britain's peripheral rights in military movements and overflights. The very creation of the new state was predicated on NATO strategy. That says it all. The bases, part of British sovereign territory, remain in perpetuity, at least as long as the United Kingdom does, or until Russian and even American pressure forces them out.

The SBAs have proved to be an embarrassment to Britain: as early as 1964, the Foreign Office was admitting privately that the SBAs would be regarded as increasingly anachronistic by world public opinion; by 1975, according

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to the Foreign Office, British strategic interests in Cyprus were considered to be minimal, and Britain tried hard to relinquish its bases, but came up against Kissinger's opposition. Even after the latter was no longer in charge of American foreign policy, his spectre remained, and by 1981, Britain had given up trying to relinquish the bases: in a bizarre about-turn, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office now even put retaining her bases as more important than the search for a solution, claiming privately that an early solution might not help (since pressures against the SBAs might then build up), and that British interests were best served by continuing movement towards a solution – without the early prospect of arrival[2]. Clearly, Britain no longer has a say in the matter, and is obliged to take its instructions from Washington. Similarly, the Greek government, for all its lip-service to a seriously sovereign and unified Cyprus, also has no serious say in the matter, being obliged to follow Washington's policy, and not daring (even if it wanted to) to ask for Moscow's support (as Makarios was able to do), in the knowledge that Washington, and therefore London, consider Turkey more important strategically than Greece[3]. Given the Ukraine war, up to now Greece has been forced into an even more hostile stance vis-à-vis Russia than previously, following Brussels slavishly, to the point of expelling Russian diplomats. The Greek government is too timid to dare to adopt a Hungarian, Serb or even Slovakian stance towards Moscow, despite the fact that the Greek people as a whole are friendly towards Russia.[4] But Russia has no reason to trust Greece the Greek leadership, and, as we shall see, could cause her considerable problems *via* Cyprus.

Russia and Greece

Greece's first leader, Ioannis Kapodistrias, was undeniably friendly towards Russia. This was hardly surprising, since he had not only been a foreign minister of Russia, but because Greece owed its independence from the Ottoman Empire to Moscow, which had intervened militarily, defeating the Ottomans, thus forcing Ottoman-friendly London to give up its idea of an 'autonomous' Greece under Ottoman control. But the honeymoon in Athens-Moscow relations was destroyed when Kapodistrias was murdered – to London's glee – in 1831. Thenceforth, Greece, a protectorate of Britain, France and Russia, was to be a political battleground of English, French, Bavarian and Russian interests. Britain, needing its friendship with the Ottoman Empire for strategic reasons, was obsessively worried about Russian influence in Greece, particularly because the Tsar was threatening to capture Constantinople. Indeed, Edmund Lyons, the British minister to Greece famously stated: 'A truly independent Greece is an absurdity. Greece can either be English or Russian, and since she must not be Russian, it is necessary that she be English.' The Crimean War underscored the English fear of Russia, with the British navy even blockading Greece to prevent support being sent to Russia. The 'Great Eastern Crisis' was another indicator of London's fear of Russian power, when London surreptitiously acquired Cyprus for strategic reasons, leading to Cypriot demands for union with Greece. Fast forward to 1919, when Greece sent thousands of troops to the Ukraine to fight the Red Army, thus irritating not only Moscow, but weakening Greek attempts to defeat Atatürk's army in Asia Minor. Moscow's trust in the Greek State was badly dented, and by 1944, the Soviet Union had agreed with Churchill that Greece would be in Britain's sphere of influence, a deal to which Moscow stuck. Since then, despite the Cold War, Greek governments, with the arguable exception of the Andreas Papandreou administration, have followed the NATO agenda on Greece, even though the Greek people as a whole are generally friendly towards Russia. But Greek-Russian intergovernmental relations took a hard knock when the Moscow-sponsored Burgas-Alexandroupolis oil pipeline project foundered, following Prime Minister Karamanlis' visit to Moscow December 2007, when the pipeline project was discussed. Moscow saw that despite Karamanlis' enthusiasm for the pipeline, Greece was becoming a US client state *par excellence*. The story is indeed a murky one: in 2008, according to the Greek Intelligence Service (EYP), Karamanlis' life was threatened. Nineteen Russian Federal Security Bureau (FSB) operatives were reported to have followed Karamanlis, and confronted those following him. According to Russian intelligence, the reason for their presence was the attempted tapping of the telephones of President Putin, the Bulgarian Prime Minister and Karamanlis. After conducting a preliminary investigation, Greek public prosecutor Nikos Ornerakis actually filed a felony count of conspiracy to destabilise the government against 'persons unknown'. Ioannis Corantis, who headed Greece's National Intelligence Service at the time, told *The Associated Press* that 'he was among those called to give evidence in the case, and confirmed that the service had received information from Russia's spy agency about a suspected plot against Karamanlis'. Corantis did not give any details of the alleged plot or speculate who may have been behind it. Since then, the story has disappeared from the public domain.

At any event, for all the historical closeness of the Greek and Russian people, based on a shared religion and

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Russia's leading role in Greek independence, Moscow no longer trusts Greek governments, and all the more so since Greece has increasingly become a hub of American military strategy, the SBAs apart. On the religious front, the fact that the Church of Greece is no longer in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate^[5] has hardly helped relations between Athens and Moscow, notwithstanding that the Church of Greece is autocephalous. We see here how religion and politics can complicate inter-state relations. To make matters worse, Greece recently became the only mainly Christian Orthodox country to permit state weddings between homosexuals. Although the Church of Greece, like the Moscow Patriarchate, is absolutely opposed to homosexual marriages, the fact that the Russian Parliament has amended the constitution to ban same sex marriage has created another area of disagreement between Athens and Moscow at the political level. On top of all this, Moscow's disdain for the Greek leadership was also enhanced when the Greek Prime Minister, Mitsotakis, slavishly praised the illegal killing of the Iranian general Suleimani in Iraq. Even Berlin and Paris refrained from doing so.

As for Cyprus, although same-sex marriage is not recognised, its Church, like the Greek one, is no longer in communion with Moscow. But Cyprus-Russian relations are a very different kettle of fish compared to Greek-Russian ones, given Russia's strategic interest in Cyprus. Russian influence is indeed stronger in Nicosia than in Athens. Since Cyprus' qualified independence, Moscow has pursued a consistent line, namely pushing for an independent Cyprus free of foreign forces. Thus it threatened force to prevent Turkey from invading in 1964 and 1967. Its reason for not intervening militarily in 1974 was its wish to prevent the Greek junta's attempt to unite Cyprus with Greece, and thus strengthen NATO. That has been its policy since then, hence its criticism of the Annan Plan, which was little more than a disguised attempt to maintain NATO influence. However, since Nicosia, under American pressure, scrapped in 2022 an agreement to allow Russian ships to use Cypriot ports, Moscow is considering its options vis-à-vis Nicosia. We now turn to the Israeli-Turkish connexion.

Israel and Turkey

As mentioned above, Kissinger scotched London's attempt to relinquish the bases. The oft-quoted reason was that Kissinger considered the SBAs vital in the Arab/Israel dispute. And so it has proven to be, with Akrotiri being used by the Anglo-Saxons to transport weapons to Israel to kill Palestinians.^[6] Turkey, for all Erdogan's pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli bombast, has a common interest in the SBAs, since were the SBAs to be given back to Cyprus, there would be international pressure on the Turkish occupying troops to also leave, and Israel would no longer have the bases supplying her with aerial intelligence and weapons. And just as Turkey and Israel share a common interest in Assad's ousting, Turkey because it occupies the Kurdish parts of Syria, and Israel because it wishes to consolidate its hold on the Golan Heights, and maybe more, one begins to see the strategic connexion: both countries are illegally occupying parts of Syria, while Israel subtly supports Turkey's occupation of one third of Cyprus, just as America does. After all, Israel can hardly openly criticise Turkey's occupation of Cyprus, while it occupies Palestine. Although Greece's and Cyprus' arrangements with Israel, based mainly on energy, might leave some to think that Israel would pressurise Turkey to withdraw from Cyprus, Israel needs the SBAs, as mentioned above; In short, neither Israel nor Turkey will support the Russian idea of a united independent and neutral Cyprus. But let us now cut to the chase, and consider the 'Trump-Putin' effect, and how they could use Turkey to achieve a solution for Cyprus.

A Business Solution?

Turkey, given its strategic location and large armed forces, has traditionally pursued a policy of being all things to all men, often dancing diplomatically between the different interests of Moscow and Washington, both of which consider Ankara important to them. Moscow's essential policy on Cyprus is to get the SBAs out – since they are *de facto* NATO bases – and ensure a solution *via* a unified but neutral Cyprus. As we are currently witnessing, Trump appears to support Putin's insistence on a neutral Ukraine, whatever territory will remain when the killing stops. Thus, in Trump's business logic, this could extend to Cyprus and the Middle East. If he decides to put his relations with Russia on an even par in the Middle East, let us consider the different scenarios. At the moment, the tension is palpable: Israel wishes to coax the US into attacking Iran, since this would help Israel's expansionist policies, by weakening or doing away with her largest local rival. Threat meets counter-threat, with Moscow's relationship with Tehran ensuring that neither the US nor Israel will have an open war with Iran. We are currently witnessing the war of the threats.

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Trump's and Putin's objectives are to balance their interests in the Middle East. This is where Cyprus comes in. Various scenarios present themselves, admittedly hypothetical.

First, Moscow, angry at Athens' clear slavish anti-Russian stance, could recognise northern Cyprus, in a deal that it would be neutral and never apply for NATO membership. The British bases would be relinquished to the two Cypriot states, and the Greek and Turkish contingents (ELDYK and TURDYK) would be withdrawn. Britain would be keen to satisfy Washington's wishes, as it always has since 1960, and indeed ever since the Suez crisis. It would be almost impossible for the Jewish state to throw a spanner in the works, as it needs Trump's support for its illegal occupation of Palestine and parts of Syria.

At this point, part of the deal could involve the two new states negotiating for the return of refugees and property, for which a mechanism already exists. It would of course be a hard and long haul. At a later point, the two states could negotiate for a confederation à la Suisse, thus finally ending up with a new and peaceful state. This whole process could of course take some years. But one can't build Rome in a day. Turkish pride would be satisfied, while Greece would simply have to swallow the bitter pill of having 'betrayed' Russia. With the Turkish linkage to Cyprus and the Aegean now cut, this might simplify Greek-Turkish negotiations on the Continental shelf. *Most important, it would reduce the chances of a Greek-Turkish war, which Washington has always feared, since it would make a mockery of NATO.*

Second, another deal would be double *enosis*. But since this would strengthen NATO, it would be unacceptable to Russia, unless NATO, in a new Western security architecture, were to transmogrify into a non-aggressive purely defensive organisation, with the emphasis on culture rather than on manufacturing and selling weapons. This second idea is however somewhat idealistic, given the vagaries of human behavior and the greed of shareholders.

To conclude

Since 1955, thanks to Britain's success in cultivating enmity between Greece and Turkey, in order to hang on to Cyprus, these two NATO members have come close to war three times, something unacceptable to the US, since a war would benefit Moscow by destroying NATO's southern flank. The arms merchants and their shareholders, particularly in the US, have filled their coffers, just as they have in the supply of arms to the Ukraine. War is good business, at least for some, as is the threat of war, the latter often leading to arms races, witness the current Ukraine-related vying for prominence between Britain, France, Germany and Poland to increase defence expenditure dramatically, to the detriment of their healthcare and social services.

But now, with what is increasingly looking like a new approach to world affairs by the Trump administration, we can see different scenarios as regards NATO's south-eastern flank. America's traditional approach to the Cyprus situation has been one of managing a continuing *modus vivendi*, while delivering arms to Greece and Turkey on a 7:10 ratio. If push were ever to come to shove, America would usually support Turkey more than Greece, since it considers the former more important to its strategic Middle East interests, hence its base at İnçirlik, as well as its subtle condoning of Turkey's invasion and occupation of Cyprus in 1974.

But with the new developing 'business climate' between Washington and Moscow, Cyprus, like the Ukraine, may well be sorted out, whatever European Union shrieking. Nor will any amount of linguistically bulimic, misused and tautological phrases such as 'diversity', 'equity', 'sustainability', 'inclusion', 'going forward', 'shoulder to shoulder', 'global world', and 'period of time' alter reality.

Notes

[1] This was indeed one of the world's largest ethnic cleansing operations since the Jewish State expelled some 750,000 Palestinians in 1948.

[2] See *Minute* from Fergusson to Foreign Minister's Private Secretary, 8 December 1980, BNA FCO 9/2949, file WSC 023/1, part C, in Mallinson, William, 'Greece and Cyprus as Geopolitical Fodder', *Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 2, No,

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2, Autumn 2014.

[3] 'British interests in the Eastern Mediterranean', *paper* prepared by Western European Department, FCO, 11 April 1975, FCO 46/1248, file DPI/516/1, in, *inter alia*, Mallinson, William, *Guicciardini, Geopolitics and Geohistory*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 23.

[4] 'Greeks See Russia, U.S. Most Aligned With Country's Interests', *To Vima.com*, 14 May 2025.

[5] The schism begun when the patriarch in Istanbul arbitrarily annulled a 1685 agreement with Moscow granting control over the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, then recognising the 'Orthodox Church of Ukraine'.

[6] Needless to say, the Ministry of Defence has stonewalled on the question, despite parliamentary questions.

About the author:

William Mallinson is a former British diplomat. His books include *Cyprus 1974: Anatomy of an Invasion* (Routledge, 2024). *Guicciardini, Geopolitics and Geohistory: Understanding Inter-State Relations* (Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature, 2021) and *The Threat of Geopolitics: Obsession with Heartland* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016 and 2017).