

Cyprus sabotage

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If the EU, which deserves much of the blame for perpetuating the Cyprus conflict, is not prepared to move vigorously to resolve it, then Turkey should try to force a resolution. Otherwise, it will watch its goal of EU membership die a death of a thousand cuts at the hands of Greek Cypriots.

A recent meeting between Turkish and Greek Cypriot leaders was unproductive. With every passing year the impasse on the otherwise idyllic island solidifies. The lackluster attention paid by the EU and the U.S. the past few years has worsened matters.

Cyprus was divided in 1974, and a thousand U.N. blue-helmets have been there ever since. Despite the seemingly intractable nature of this peaceful dispute, the basic ingredients for its resolution are acknowledged by all the major players: a bizonal, bicomunal federation. This was offered in a 2004 U.N. peace proposal dubbed the “Annan Plan.”

In the 2004 referendums to approve the Annan Plan, there was an incredible role reversal. Turkish Cypriots, who had rigidly resisted unification for 30 years, overwhelmingly endorsed the proposal. Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) pushed for a settlement despite ferocious opposition at home.

Cyprus President Tassos Papadopoulos, however, campaigned for and won a crushing (76%) “no” vote. Mr. Papadopoulos overturned a 30-year-old policy and called for a single state with a Turkish minority—a solution acceptable only to the Greeks. Despite rejecting an historic opportunity to end the dispute, and despite an EU injunction not to admit a country embroiled in a major international conflict, Greek Cyprus entered the EU a month later.

The current impasse with the EU is focused on Turkey’s refusal to open its ports to Greek Cypriot shipping—an obligation under its Customs Union agreement with the EU. As a result, Brussels has frozen eight of the 30-plus chapters open for Turkey’s accession negotiations. Ankara is angry at the EU’s failure to keep its promise to end the economic isolation of Northern Cyprus and fears political upheaval at home if it lifts the ban with nothing gained.

While most EU members dislike Mr. Papadopoulos’s high-handed behavior, it’s doubtful that, without a further stimulus, the EU will persuade Greek Cypriots to accept realistic adjustments to the Annan Plan, the only avenue to an agreed settlement.

A brick wall called Cyprus

Perhaps Turkey will be patient and, despite the EU’s failed promises, open its ports. But the government still has to navigate difficult domestic political shoals. The AKP’s resounding parliamentary election victory, followed by the election of Abdullah Gül to the presidency, has heightened civil-military tensions. The AKP government also faces monumental and controversial tasks: it wants to introduce a new civilian constitution, start a new initiative on the Kurdish problem and consolidate Turkey’s economic gains. All of these necessitate a continuing EU accession process that—at least for now—still provides the government with some protection from the influential secularist opposition.

Sooner or later, however, the AKP reform process will hit the brick wall called Cyprus. In the face of Greek Cypriot intransigence and EU dithering, will the government let its ambitious agenda get bogged

down by the military and its allies, who can use failure on Cyprus to force a domestic political showdown in Ankara and another with the EU?

Turkey is on the cusp of an historic transformation. It has a majority party with an unprecedented mandate and a commitment to liberalize. If Ankara misses the boat now, it is not clear when it will get another chance.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has now to make a decision on whether to open Turkey's ports to Greek shipping without assurances on ending Turkish Cyprus' isolation. This is not only politically costly; it risks institutionalizing the Cyprus issue as a continuing sore in Turkish-EU membership negotiations. But Mr. Erdogan is a risk-taker and alternatively he can shake things up.

While making clear that he intends to negotiate a Cyprus resolution on the basis of a bizonal, bicomunal federation, he should hold firm on not opening the ports. If Mr. Papadopoulos and EU are not ready for real negotiations, Mr. Erdogan might announce that Turkey has no choice but to plan for a long period of nonsolution. His options include a serious economic development program to strengthen the Turkish side of the island. Mr. Erdogan could also make a determined effort to use his political capital in the Muslim world to gain recognition for Northern Cyprus. The nuclear option for Mr. Erdogan is a referendum on the future status of the Turkish Cyprus, with choices including independence or becoming part of Turkey.

Only such a challenge—that the northern half of the island could be lost forever—may prompt the Greek Cypriots to listen to resume negotiations in good faith. It might even induce the EU to confront Mr. Papadopoulos and inject more urgency into efforts by all sides.

Neither Turks nor Turkish Cypriots want to proceed in this way. It could be economically and politically costly for both and may deny them long-cherished goals, including access to EU passports. Some EU members may secretly rejoice because this proposal could spell the end of Turkey's accession process. But if the prospect of permanent separation does not prompt serious negotiations, Ankara can at least find breathing space for the next year to devote itself to more important reforms and policy challenges at home and in Iraq.

Until the Cyprus presidential elections in February, Turkey should stick to its position: no relief for the Northern Cypriots, no opening of ports. If Mr. Papadopoulos loses, Turkey is likely to try to proceed to regular negotiations and conceivably will find it politically easier to open its ports and demonstrate their good faith for a negotiated solution. If Mr. Papadopoulos wins, Ankara will have to think hard about radical changes. In any case, Turkey's political transformation should not be sabotaged by the Cyprus issue.

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