THE IDEA OF A STRONG CYPRIOT STATE IN THE POST-SETTLEMENT ERA

Giorgos Kentas
Research Associate, Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs
Lecturer, Department of European Studies and International Relations

A pervasive view on the Cyprus conflict seems to prevail across the international community. It is argued that Cypriots may only have one last chance to settle their political problem and reunite their country. Otherwise, there will be only one remaining option, namely partition. This line of analysis makes sense if someone considers the failed attempts of the UN—and other mediators—to bridge the gap between the objectives of the two Cypriot communities and, ultimately, to reach a mutually acceptable solution. In the face of the outcome of the April 2004 referenda, as well as the deepening of the zero-sum mentality across the political spectrum in Cyprus after that event, the election of Mr. Christofias to the Presidency of the Republic of Cyprus, some argue, provides a new—and maybe a last—window of opportunity. Time, it is argued, works against re-unification.

Considering the emerging trends of conflict resolution in the post-Cold War era, this way of thinking about the Cyprus problem is valid. As of the early 1990s, and up until today, the sources of international conflict seem to derive from intrastate struggles among communities that maintain incompatible subject positions which are difficult to reconcile. Most scholars and diplomats see eye-to-eye with regard to possible solutions to these types of conflict: When the reconciliation of subject positions is impossible to reach and when co-existence enjoys little support—or has a few chances to succeed—the best solution, it is argued, is the creation of homogeneous nation-states. The European experience in the former-Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo in 2007 and the Russian intervention to South Ossetia in 2008—and the subsequent declaration of independence of the latter as well as of Abkhazia—would suffice to support the emergence of a new trend in conflict resolution. Advocates of this view on conflict resolution point to the

case of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a mere derogation to the new trend, which is actually a proto-type of bad solution to ethnic conflicts.

The Westphalian principles of (1) state-sovereignty, (2) territorial integrity and (3) non-intervention into issues of domestic jurisdiction—as they were adopted by the UN charter in the aftermath of WWII—seem to lose momentum in the post-Cold war era. On this account, the sentiment of re-unification in Cyprus will likely erode. In other words, if a settlement to the Cyprus problem is not reached quite soon, partition will follow suit, as it will be the inevitable development.

The crux of this analysis is evident: Cypriots must make a decision whether they are eager to compromise some of their original positions—namely to accept their second best option in dealing with the core issues of the conflict—or leave things to deteriorate and develop into *de jure* partition. This is a dilemma that Cypriots will, sooner or later, come across with.

Academics, commentators and diplomats who champion this line of reasoning develop their accounts on the Cyprus conflict on the basis of an array of assumptions or convictions, such as:
- The Cyprus conflict is an ethno-national/political conflict with deep historical roots
- A major factor of the conflict is the (ethnic) nationalistic sentiments of Cypriots
- Both parties maintain intransigent positions
- In the course of time this problem is deteriorating and the possibility of settlement is reduced
- Third party intervention and mediation does not seem to have a positive impact

If valid, these assumptions depict a peculiar state of affairs in Cyprus—with regard to the conflict—and indicate the necessary steps that must be taken in order to tackle it. It is suggested that the Cyprus problem remains unresolved

due to the parties' stubborn positions, which are fueled by a pervasive sentiment of ethnic nationalism. On this account, progress, and an ultimate solution, can be reached if only (1) historical animosity is overcome, (2) political leaders compromise their original positions, (3) Greek and Turkish Cypriot nationalisms are kept at bay, (4) laypersons and elites accept the fact that time works against the prospect of solution, and (5) third party mediation is more effective and efficient.

The dominant view on the Cyprus problem, however, underestimates some other aspects of the problem which are equally important. Some academics, commentators and diplomats do not attach much weight to the international dimension of the Cyprus problem. After Cyprus' accession to the European Union, however, the international aspects of the problem came to the fore. In view of the on-going negotiations, some important variables must be taken into consideration:

- The Cyprus conflict is a frozen problem of the Cold War, which involves some third parties—namely the UK, Turkey, Greece and the US—that maintain some considerable vested interests in the Eastern Mediterranean region
- Some elements of the inter-communal dispute derive from colonial arrangements and regulations, which were perpetuated in the post-1960 era
- The crisis of 1963-4, Turkey's invasion in 1974 and the unilateral declaration of independence of the "TRNC" in 1983 did not alter the legal status of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC). With some minor exceptions, the international community of states continues to abide by the norms and standards of the UN Charter
- Since 1974 a vast number of Turks colonized the northern part of Cyprus. Most of these individuals seem to be loyal to Ankara and they could hardly integrate in the Turkish Cypriot community.

The international dimension of the Cyprus problem adds to the complexity of the domestic variables. Could the interests of third parties be addressed in the framework of a comprehensive settlement? Are these interests commensurate with the interests of the Cypriot communities? How could Cypriots deal with the remnants of the colonial rule without jeopardizing the prospect of solution? How could the RoC be transformed into a new polity in accord with international legal standards? Could Turkish colonists integrate in a re-united Cyprus? These are just some important questions that need to be addressed.

Both the communal and international aspects of the problem are, from time to time, discussed—especially the former—in an exhaustive manner. Paradoxically, however, a major aspect of the Cyprus issue does not attract the attention of scholars, journalists and politicians. In the post-Cold War era, the viability of post-conflict settlements seems to be closely linked with the degree of a state's strength. In other words, strong and effective states fair much better than weak and ineffectual states. In fact, only strong states are capable of threading their way in the post-conflict era.[1]

The strength of a state is generally defined in three ways: (1) the material approach emphasizes military and economic might, access to natural sources, population, technology, and the like; (2) the instrumental approach attaches weight to the instrumental capacities of states such as the degree of institutionalization, delivery of services, autonomy and the like; and (3) the ideational or constructivist approach stresses the issue of *legitimization of authority* and *the state of relationships* across the members of the community(ies). Following, Kalevi Holsti (1996), the third approach is vital, but sometimes overlooked. The legitimacy of authority or "the right to rule" is defined as the *vertical* legitimacy of a state and the status of the community(ies), as well as their political role, is defined as the *horizontal* legitimacy. Holsti's approach to strong states could be considered as an

---

[1] The literature on strong (and week) states is vast and, of course, an extensive discussion of the concept of strong state and its implications in keeping multi-ethnic/cultural communities together lies beyond the scope of this commentary. Besides, the central point could be made without resorting into technical analysis.

extension to Buzan's (1991) view of the state. The latter suggests that the state contains three intertwined components: (1) the idea of the state; (2) its physical basis and (3) its institutional expression.

On this account, the settlement of the Cyprus problem could be considered as an effort to reconstruct the Cypriot state; actually a project of constructing a strong and consequently viable state. Following Holsti and Buzan, a strong Cypriot state must consist of four core elements: (1) a shared view between Greek and Turkish Cypriots about a common state and a strong commitment (i.e. loyalty) to it; (2) a shared view about the state's physical unity (geographical, territorial, social, wealth, sources, and the like); (3) comprehensive and effective machinery of government (e.g. rules, laws, norms, incumbents of official office, and the like), as well as autonomy in dealing with domestic and international affairs; and (4) a high degree of vertical and horizontal legitimacy, namely, effective participation of the communities in governing and making decisions, as well as effective authority of the (central) government (and regional bodies) to rule in accord with the constitution and the shared principles of the common state.

On the other hand, a weak Cypriot state will lack the basic characteristics of resilient mutli-ethnic/cultural states. In a weak Cypriot state (1) Greek and Turkish Cypriots will exert their loyalty to their communities (and probably to their motherlands) instead to their (common) state; (2) they will compete over physical sources, wealth, territorial control, and the like; (3) their governmental machinery will be fragmented into various strata, with considerable (and unnecessary) overlaps of competences; and (4) each community will claim the "right to rule" over its own affairs and prevent the "other" from assuming certain political competences. In other words, in a weak Cypriot state the mentality of "us" against "them" will prevail.

The notion of a strong Cypriot state implies a strong civic state based on the concept of (Cypriot) citizenship, the unity of physical sources and institutions and a high degree of horizontal and vertical legitimacy. A weak Cypriot state,

on the other hand, implies a distinction among communities on the basis of ethnicity, language, culture, religion, privileges, sources, and the like. Historical experience and cumulated evidence demonstrate that only strong states have good chances to make it through in a post-settlement environment.

For more than one year, the leaders of the two Cypriot communities seem not to be able to find common ground on some practical arrangements for a new state of affairs in Cyprus. The point that this commentary makes is that the idea of a strong Cypriot state in a post-settlement era must be a chief goal of bi-communal dialogue. Constitutional arrangements alone would not suffice for establishing order and promoting security and prosperity across the island and its communities. A strong Cypriot state may come in many constitutional guises, but unless it is endowed with the characteristics of successful multi-ethnic/cultural states—which do not imply any sort of centralization of power, but, first and foremost, a high degree of legitimacy—it will be as stillborn as the 1960 model was. Last but not list, Cypriot leaders must be concerned with third party interests that militate against the idea of a strong Cypriot state. Needless to say that an effort to promote the idea of a strong Cypriot state must focus on development of social consciousness around this crucial factor, which seems to be one of the most difficult tasks ahead.

Of course, this account on the idea of a strong Cypriot state is rudimentary. Having established a relatively new normative concept about the Cyprus conflict, more research is required in order to illuminate the major aspects, as well as limitations, of such a prospect.

References:

Buzan, Barry (1991) *People, States, and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-cold War Era*. Boulder: L. Rienner.

Holsti, Kalevi (1996) *The State, War, and The State of War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.