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Vice President Biden's Trip to Cyprus: A Lost Opportunity?

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Venice sent Othello to Cyprus to defend it from a Turkish fleet. Upon arrival, the great captain ordered his weapons offloaded and summoned the local Venetian commander. When, on May 21, 2014, Joe Biden became the first U.S. Vice President to visit Cyprus since Lyndon Johnson in 1962, he declared that he had "come to primarily underscore the value the United States attaches to our growing cooperation with the Republic of Cyprus." These are good words, but they missed the opportunity to address with action the profound changes that have occurred over the past fifty-two years.

At the time of Johnson's visit, the Cold War had long since established the American strategic involvement in the eastern Mediterranean. U.S. leaders had quickly grasped the importance of the Mediterranean in containing Soviet expansionism and securing Western Europe. In 1947 Secretary of State Dean Acheson noted the danger that littoral states, such as Greece, might fall to Communist forces "like apples in a barrel infected by one rotten one, the corruption of Greece would infect Iran and all to the east. It would also carry infection to Africa through Asia Minor and Egypt, and to Europe through Italy and France, already threatened by the strongest domestic Communist parties in Western Europe." Just two years before Johnson's historic visit, Cyprus had gained independence from Britain. At the hub of three continents and made up of an overwhelming Greek-Cypriot majority and Turkish- Cypriot minority the island found itself a focus of superpower competition as the U.S. and Soviet Union jockeyed for position in the inland sea on Europe's southern flank. Changes in Europe and to its east after World War II forced America to construct a framework to resist Soviet expansion. As the Soviet Union sought to control the Balkan Peninsula, a civil war raged in Greece between Communists and loyalists. Simultaneously, on the other side of the Aegean, the Soviets, as did their tsarist predecessors, made territorial demands against Turkey, including the effort to establish Soviet bases and control the

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Dardanelles Straits. During the immediate years after World War II, Great Britain had supported Greece and Turkey economically and militarily. However, just as during the 1970s in the Gulf, the British government informed Washington that it could no longer prop up both countries in their struggle against Soviet expansionism.

Britain's retrenchment created a vacuum for American influence in the region. This placed Washington in direct competition with Moscow. In 1947, Dean Acheson, presented the vision of the Communist shadow that might darken Europe and its impact on U.S. policies. Acheson aimed at the isolationist Republicans who controlled the House. The Truman Doctrine, as it was termed, became a major part of the global struggle between democracy and communism that aligned both Greece and Turkey within the West's security framework and propelled their eventual accession into NATO in 1952. "Only two great powers remained in the world…the United States and the Soviet Union. We had arrived at a situation unparalleled since ancient times. Not unlike the time of Rome and Carthage the polarization of power became a determinant…. For the United States to take steps to strengthen countries threatened with Soviet aggression or Communist subversion…was to protect the security of the United States—it was to protect freedom itself."

In 1974, this structure almost came undone. The most serious threat to the new transatlantic alliance emerged when Turkey invaded Cyprus. Turkish forces began their illegal invasion of the island, and occupied the northern third of the island. The invasion triggered a brief proxy war when NATO members Greece and Turkey skirmished against one another. The event create a de facto partition of the island with an internationally recognized Greek-Cypriot government, the Republic of Cyprus, and a rump state known as the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus," that only Turkey has recognized and has continued to prop up by subventions and 40,000 NATO-supplied troops. Vice President Biden's May 2014 trip to Cyprus occurred at the fortieth anniversary of this invasion. The timing was not propitious. Turkey has disavowed secularism and embraced Islamism under the rule of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. This has shattered Ankara's previous foreign policy doctrine of "no problems with neighbors." Turkey today not only has problems with all its neighbors, but U.S.-Turkish relations are now characterized more by mutual suspicion and acrimony than the common values or shared vision that are the glue of an effective alliance. Turkey's embrace of Islamism threatens the security of NATO's southeastern flank, its most vulnerable one. The geographic position of Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean *and* its democratic politics offer the Obama Administration a golden strategic opportunity to reexamine Turkey's military presence on the island and its impact on a range of security and energy policies that affect the future of U.S. influence in the region, America's

European allies, and the Atlantic alliance that is the most visible expression of the bonds that unite the Western democracies.

Following the Cold War, and up until 2010, the division of Cyprus was in remission. The relations between Israel and Turkey that underpinned regional security were intact, and Cyprus was known more for its olive oil, than petrol or natural gas. Following the Mavi Marmara incident, a deliberate provocation by the Turkish government aimed at creating discord between Israel and Turkey, relations between Jerusalem and Ankara descended and have never recovered. Anti-Israel calumny has followed an equally squalid path in Turkey, and a rapprochement between the two countries seems unlikely now that Mr. Erdogan will likely remain in power until 2023.

"*Si vis pacem, para bellum*," is a remark attributed to a fourth or fifth century Roman author. It means, "If you want peace, prepare for war." Both Israel and Cyprus have taken this sensible advice to heart. They have engaged in energy security defensive measures bilaterally, and with the U.S., Greece, and most recently, the UK. In the fourth book of the Physics, Aristotle argued that matter will always move to fill a vacuum. The corollary in foreign affairs is less ironclad. But generally speaking it works: self-interest often pressures states with the means and common values to accept the costs, sacrifices, and risks of assuring their collective security.

Since 2010, Cyprus and Israel have enjoyed new and strategic relations based upon common security and energy interests. Massive quantities of nature gas were discovered within the exclusive economic zones of both countries. Each has signed defense pact and exclusive economic zone agreements to safeguard their riches. The start of exploratory drilling in the Cypriot exclusive economic zone sparked Turkish leaders' anger at the highest levels of government. Saber rattling, air and naval exercises in the sea south of Cyprus, and illegal seismic surveys began and continue to the present day. Turkey threatened that—following the Mavi Marmara incident of 2010—all flotillas to Gaza would be accompanied by a naval escort and that the Turkish navy would be much more active in the region.

It is no surprise that the two democracies in the eastern Mediterranean, along with Greece, have joined in a relationship to balance Turkey. The Cypriot Foreign Minister, stated in May 2014 that, "In Cyprus, Israel recognizes a steadfast, stable and predictable partner, one that is democratic, moderate and discreet—a reliable partner through thick and thin." Responding, Israeli President, Shimon Peres, noted to the President of Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades, "Cyprus is an important and strategic partner for Israel. We are committed to working together because we have not only historic ties, but the same culture and values. We also have a common blessing; in our sea God blessed us with energy. It is a duty to see how we can secure one another, to see how

we may contribute to you and you to us. It is much better to have a neighbor close to you than a brother far away. I do believe that we have not just a neighbor and you do not just have a neighbor, but a brother as well. We have to work together to bring peace, stability, and prosperity."

Vice President Biden might have bolstered this promising sign of effective regional cooperation by raising the possibility of Cyprus's membership in NATO, lifting the embargo on weapons that the Cypriots can purchase to defend itself its littoral areas or increasing U.S.-Cyprus military-to-military cooperation. The Obama administration's silence on these and other issues that would acknowledge the expanding shared strategic interests of the U.S. and Cyprus indicates that the current U.S. administration has yet to realize the large changes that have reversed Turkey's progress toward moderate, secular governance. This reversal ends, at least in the foreseeable future, the hope that Turkey will emerge as the first country in history successfully to combine Islamism and democracy, while maintaining strategic relations with the world's Jewish state. Instead, Ankara uses authoritarian tactics to crush widespread dissent. Rather than seeking to build up independent institutions such as the courts, the media, and police—elements of the government and civil society that check state power in mature democracies—Turkey has undermined them by installing cadres of Prime Minister Erdogan's AKP party supporters. Their zeal alarms Turkey's secular population. It has alarmed the region's democracies, Greece, Israel, and Cyprus, into pooling their military capabilities to deter potential Turkish security threats. Turkey's continued military presence in the north of the island now constitutes a threat to both regional peace and Europe's energy security. Mr. Erdogan's mercurial governing style may continue to perplex policy makers. But there is no doubt that it has altered the region's security—for the worse. This has necessitated a reconsideration of how best to respond to Turkey's large and continued military presence on the island.

The U.S. will have to craft energy policy and deterrence in the eastern Mediterranean under conditions that are different than those of the Cold War or even before March 2014. Events in the Ukraine and continued instability in North Africa have highlighted European energy vulnerabilities and elevated Cyprus' reserves as both an alternative source and route for energy to Europe. In 2013, the Russian state-owned company, Gazprom, obtained an unprecedented 30% of the European market share due to depleting indigenous European production, continued instability in North Africa, and Qatari preference to ship liquefied natural gas (LNG) to the premium Asian markets. Russia's share of Europe's gas market has resulted in U.S. and European policy divergence on how to respond to Russia's invasion of Crimea.

According to European Commissioner for Energy Gunther Oettinger, no large-scale economic measures such as sanctions should be implemented against Russia. "It would be wrong to question the economic ties that have been built over decades with Russia. They are important for the economy and jobs in Europe and Russia." Poland's Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, noted that "Germany's dependence on Russian gas may effectively decrease Europe's sovereignty. I have no doubts about that. We will not be able to effectively fend off potential aggressive steps by Russia in the future, if so many European countries are dependent on Russian gas deliveries or wade into such dependence."

On the future of the large hydrocarbon discoveries off Cyprus's coast, the Vice President was resolute in defending Cyprus' rights to explore and drill for oil and gas within its exclusive economic zone. He called on Turkey to refrain from interfering. However, gas is not of any value, geopolitically, or in an economic sense, without a market. The absence of the American government's declared support for Cyprus as an energy hub—in addition to Turkey—that can eventually pool some Israeli energy reserves at its prospective land based liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility on the southern coast of the island demonstrates again Washington's lack of understanding that the region has changed and will continue to do so. The current U.S. administration's position that piping Cypriot hydrocarbons to Turkey is an effective way to settle the island's division assumes that economics will trump political, ethnic, and national sentiment. There is a chimera for which no precedent exists.

The crisis between Ukraine and Russia belies the notion that "peace pipelines" can be constructed to improve relations between neighbors. As energy vulnerability increases in Europe, does it make sense for the U.S. to pressure Cyprus and Israel into dependence on Turkey as the sole transit point for western energy reserves to Europe? Relations between Turkey and Europe have not been this low since the Ottoman Empire. If Turkey's secular minority and western-oriented opposition were able to retake the country from the Islamists then a pipeline may be feasible. However, as Turkey continues abandoning the Kemalist enterprise, and eviscerates the remnants of the secular republic on which modern Turkey was founded, reversion to the ambition and intolerance of the old Empire is more likely than not. Turkey's future as a transit route for energy is subject to its rulers' political calculation just as Russia's leaders have used energy as a political lever in Europe. Is this risk one that either Europe or America should accept? Should our allies offer Turkey the ability to cut Cypriot and Israeli gas deliveries to Europe from the region's only democratic states?

Fortunately for America and Europe, there are more politically suitable export options to Europe from Cyprus and even Israel than the pipeline route to Turkey.

America and Europe have an opportunity to mitigate risk by supporting and promoting further energy cooperation between Cyprus and Israel for the construction of the proposed liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility at Vassilikos that will have the capacity to accommodate some of the reserves in Israel's giant Leviathan gas field, while permitting the operators, and the state of Israel, to diversify their export portfolio. The construction of this facility can also leverage Cyprus' strong ties with Lebanon to help facilitate a binding resolution to the long lasting maritime dispute between Israel and Lebanon by inviting Lebanon to export its gas to this facility. This would transform the eastern Mediterranean into an integrated energy zone. Gas can then be exported from this facility to Turkey's regasification terminals *if* Turkey removes its troops from the island, reunifies Cyprus and repair relations with Israel. A pipeline to Turkey can then be constructed when political circumstances permit, not before.

If there is a political breakthrough, which would include the removal of all Turkish troops from the north of the island, and the return of the city of Famagusta, and perhaps other lands, to their previous Greek-Cypriot owners, energy cooperation between Cyprus and Turkey can reinforce political goodwill and even potential commercial agreements between the government and Turkish oil companies to invest in Cyprus' exclusive economic zone. For as long as Turkish troops occupy the north of the island, and procure advanced amphibious assault ships that can land thousands more Turkish troops on the island, the world's supply of energy is aggravated by even more political risk. Escalation by the Turkish military will only increase tension in the region and create risks of an incident.

For the Vice President's trip, the Cypriot government formulated a package of confidence-building measures, such as the return to Cypriot control of the port town of Famagusta. The Vice President's proposed that the U.S. fund a team of international experts to develop a master plan for the reconstruction of the Famagusta area of Cyprus that has been fenced off for decades. The plan included studies to upgrade that city's strategic port. The opening of the ports would encourage bi-communal cooperation, open Turkish ports and airports to Cypriot traffic, and Cyprus would lift the veto on some of Turkey's EU chapters. The Vice President's overtures were rejected out of hand by Turkey. After failed attempts to restart the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, this rejection of U.S. diplomatic efforts is evidence that more persuasive measures are required, ones that place greater pressure on Turkey.

A good start to encouraging Turkey to remove its troops would be to support Cyprus' Partnership for Peace (PfP) membership which, as with other recent new NATO members would precede Nicosia's eventual accession into NATO. The Vice President might have had a greater measure of success had this possibility been offered

as a real one. Supporting Cyprus' PfP and NATO prospects would generate political goodwill, fortify NATO's southeastern flank, and help convince Turkey to improve relations with her Cypriot neighbors.

Since 1999, twelve new countries have joined NATO via NATO's Open Door policy. New members have expanded democracy, prosperity and collective security for North America, Europe, and the globe. According to Secretary of State John Kerry, "The United States joins our Allies in reaffirming that NATO's door remains open to any European country in a position to undertake the commitments and obligations of membership, and that can contribute to security in the Euro-Atlantic area. Our challenge today is to work toward a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace—and to use the power of the planet's strongest alliance to promote peace and security for people all over the world."[1] The confluence of security interests between America and Europe spans many areas and is evident from NATO's need to protect its new members from Russian forays to the continuous instability in the eastern Mediterranean where there is no sign that the upheavals caused by Turkey's authoritarianism and military posturing will subside and every indication that they will multiply. The current Cypriot administration is the most pro-American and western in the country's modern history. They make the country's resolute and authentic pleas for security hard to ignore.

Cyprus for the first time has formally asked to be accepted into NATO's Partnership for Peace. It would betray America's interest in maintaining influence in the region, weaning Europe away from its dependence on Russian energy, and securing NATO's southeastern flank if the U.S. refuses to facilitate Cyprus' accession into PfP and eventually NATO. The U.S. has the opportunity to leverage its strongest ties ever with Cyprus. The U.S. can support Cyprus's legitimate desire for a democratic, peaceful, and prosperous future within both western political and security institutions by assuring the Cypriot people's ability to cast their lot with the West. The U.S. can marshal a full package of measures aimed to demonstrate support for Cyprus' accession. These would include expanding military exercises and supporting Cyprus' PfP prospects, overturning its antiquated ban on exporting weapons to the legitimate government of Cyprus, and maintaining a veto on the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus."

Most important, the U.S. could reconstitute its Mediterranean fleet which from its Cold War strength of two aircraft carrier battle groups has fallen to a single command ship based in Italy and several ballistic missile defense destroyers stationed at the western end of the inland sea. A renascent Sixth Fleet would check Russia's increasing naval presence in the East Mediterranean and offer the leadership and muscle to forge a redoubtable naval coalition with Cyprus, Israel, and Greece. It would

help reverse dissolving American influence in a region whose importance the turmoil of the Arab world, Turkey's disappearance as a reliable NATO ally and the possibility of Iran's accession as a nuclear power all emphasize.

Since the end of World War II, the U.S. has been the one country which has possessed the broad array of political, economic, and military instruments to shape the international order in accordance with its values and interests. America's military power, diplomatic authority, and will shaped and organized the defense of the noncommunist world throughout the Cold War. Current U.S. foreign policy, by contrast, is in a state of deliberate retreat. After landing on the tarmac of Larnaca airport, the Vice President observed that, the "relationship (between the U.S. and Cyprus) is now a genuine, strategic partnership, and it holds even greater promise." However, implementing a genuine strategic partnership requires a robust, effective, and sustained presence.

During the Cold War, the U.S. achieved this through a new set of political and security alliances such as NATO and sustained U.S. efforts to manage alliances and shape the security environment. The Vice President's message would have been strengthened had he addressed the new tools of statecraft that combine energy policy and military assistance to Cyprus which recognize Turkey's drift into the Islamist camp and its illegal use of NATO- supplied weapons to preserve its hold on sovereign Cypriot territory. The U.S. can once again reshape the eastern Mediterranean. This time the challenge has emerged not from the ruins of the European continent, but from the relit embers of religious zealotry and discredited empire that have upended the principles of tolerance, state sovereignty, and territorial integrity. The overlapping of politics and economics had, in the second half of the 1940s, created a new strategic focus for the U.S. in the eastern Mediterranean. Europe is once again faced with two old powers, Russia and Turkey that covet Europe to the east, in Ukraine, and to the south, in Cyprus. Will the U.S. continue to permit Cyprus to be Turkey's Sudetenland when Europe's energy supply and the security of American partners in the Mediterranean, Israel and Cyprus, are challenged by a burgeoning and increasingly active Turkish military? Too much is at stake, and the establishment of a massive Turkish military presence, or support for Islamism, is a growing threat to American interests. A Turkish (or Turkish-sponsored) attack on Cypriot or Israeli shipping or energy infrastructure will not only disrupt the flow of energy, it will panic markets and spike prices. This is a preeminent risk to regional security and the world's energy security, one that becomes part of the calculations the U.S. will need to reckon as it decides on a new strategy in the eastern Mediterranean. Turkish revanchism should have illuminated the importance of defending Cyprus, while simultaneously upholding the principles of the free flow of

energy and territorial integrity that the U.S. defended when it operated as a superpower. The same principles remain central to American security.

Endnotes

[1] M.state.gov/md224228.htm