

Cyprus Victim of External Efforts to Drag It into Rival East Mediterranean Orbits of Russia, US

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Cyprus has become the victim of fresh external push-and-pull efforts with the aim of dragging the island republic, a European Union (EU) member, into one or other of the rival East Mediterranean orbits of Russia and the US.

Cyprus received Russian **Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov** on September 8. He came to Nicosia to mark the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations and the signing of an amended double taxation agreement. Lavrov used the occasion to voice Russia's concern over Turkey's risky actions in the Eastern Mediterranean and to call for dialogue.

Russia and Cyprus have had particularly warm relations over the decades for several reasons. Russia supported Cypriot independence from Britain, Russia and Cyprus both embrace the Orthodox Christian faith, and the Cypriot Communist Party has been a king-maker over the decades. The predecessor of current Cypriot President, **Nicos Anastasiades**, was Cyprus' first communist president and the EU's only communist president.

In 2015, Anastasiades and his Russian counterpart **Vladimir Putin** signed an agreement to give Russian naval ships access to Cypriot ports for maintenance and refuelling. This has upset the Trump administration. Although it does not really want to employ assets to assert US naval power in this region, it does not want Russia to do so. To Washington's chagrin, Moscow has gained influence in the Levant by playing a key role in Syria's civil and proxy wars, preventing the overthrow of the government and imposing, along with Turkey, a ceasefire in Syria's northwestern Idlib province.

Last December, the US Congress adopted a law approving the partial lifting for one year of a US embargo on the sale of non-lethal military equipment to Cyprus in exchange for abandonment of the deal granting access to Cypriot ports to Russian naval vessels. US lawmakers from both the Republican and Democratic parties argued that Russian ships do not need to call at Cypriot ports because they have a naval base at Tartus in nearby Syria.

Cyprus **Foreign Minister Nicos Christodoulides** has tried to get round the US legislation by saying that Cypriot policy on this issue has not changed and Russian ships would be allowed to dock for "humanitarian reasons", whatever that means. Presumably, Nicosia hopes to buy US equipment while allowing Russian ships to pause at Cypriot ports.

Ahead of the November US election, Trump administration realised that denying Cyprus US military equipment could alienate the influential Greek lobby in the US, which has been

pressing for the lifting of the 1987 US embargo. US citizens of Greek origin number 1.4 million and they vote in Florida, Pennsylvania and Michigan, swing states Trump needs to win. Their political interests are represented by lobby groups operating under the umbrella of the American Hellenic Institute, which promotes policies favourable to Greece and Cyprus. The Institute often works in concert with the all-powerful Israeli lobby. This is significant at this time because Cyprus, Israel, Greece and Egypt have joined forces to counter Turkey's expansionist ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

There are estimated to be about 500,000 US citizens of Turkish origin who do not pack similar power of the ballot. However, over the years Ankara has built up an influential political lobby in Washington and Trump has expressed his admiration for Turkish **President Recep Tayyip Erdogan** who jails journalists, political opponents and critics.

Nevertheless, 48 hours after Lavrov's departure, US **Secretary of State Mike Pompeo** informed the Cypriot government that he intended to make a three-hour stop-over on Saturday evening after attending the launch of Taliban and Afghan government talks in Doha. Following talks with Anastasiades and Christodoulides, Pompeo urged Turkey to halt activities boosting tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and called on all involved to hold talks. He expressed deep concern over Turkey's continuing deployment of survey and drill ships and armed naval escort vessels in Cypriot and Greek waters. Cyprus has the right to exploit its offshore natural resources and to harvest hydrocarbons in its exclusive economic zone, Pompeo stated.

He said Trump had spoken to both Erdogan and Greek **Prime Minister Kyriacos Mitsotakis** about rising tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean with the aim promoting dialogue.

However, as I mentioned Trump is a great admirer of Erdogan and did not prevent him invading and occupying swathes of Syrian territory along the border with Turkey. Instead, Trump capitulated and gave Erdogan permission to seize specific areas from which Turkish troops and their takfiri allies expelled more than 250,000 Syrian Kurds.

The US has refrained from taking action against Turkey for its intervention in the Libyan civil war on the side of the UN-recognised government in Tripoli in the west, which is under challenge from the parliament based in Tobruk in the east. The latter's forces, commanded by rebel General Khalifa Haftar, had camped outside Tripoli for months until Turkey dispatched reinforcements for the largely takfiri militias defending Tripoli and turned the tide of battle. In exchange, Ankara demanded that Tripoli unilaterally declare a broad exclusive economic zone extending across the sea that would meet Turkey's self-declared zone and bisect the Eastern Mediterranean. Erdogan has sworn to protect with force this fait accompli recognised by no one but Ankara and Tripoli.

If this is allowed to stand, the Turkey-Libya zones would cut off Egypt, Israel, Cyprus and Lebanon to the east from countries on the west. Turkey also intends to block the construction of the Eastern Mediterranean pipeline designed to carry natural gas to Italy and prevent Cypriot and Greek drilling within their own territorial waters. It is unlikely that Turkey would tangle with Israel or Egypt on this issue while major gas fields have not been proven off Lebanon. So far, Erdogan has stated he will not back down on his demand that Turkey should have full rights over Eastern Mediterranean maritime resources.

Due to Erdogan's stubborn stand and Trump's admiration of Erdogan, Pompeo's surprise

mission to Cyprus is unlikely to cool tensions or counter Russia's efforts to maintain ties to Cyprus and Greece without alienating Turkey. Both Washington and Moscow do their best to maintain good relations with aggressive Erdogan in the hope that he will not start a war.

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