

Trump's Cyprus Signalling Is More Against Turkey Than Russia

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#), [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

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*The [Al-Monitor portal](#) has left many extremely surprised with news that was not expected in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. With over 600,000 cases and 25,000 deaths in the U.S., **President Donald Trump** has made a bold geopolitical move and instructed **Secretary of State Mike Pompeo** to determine whether Cyprus should have its arms embargo against it lifted, according to Al-Monitor's congressional correspondent, Bryant Harris.*

“Trump tasked Pompeo with the decision [yesterday] via a presidential memorandum after signing two separate bills to lift the embargo in December — legislation that Turkey had unsuccessfully sought to forestall,” explained Harris.

In 1987, the U.S. embargoed arms sales to Cyprus under the pretext of preventing an arms build-up on the island. However, this was not a problem for Cyprus as Russia became one of the biggest weapon suppliers instead. If the U.S. were trying to have balance on Cyprus, it certainly did not achieve this as the country only became closer with Russia and to this day still have close ties.

In 1974, Turkey invaded the northern parts of the island to prevent Cyprus from uniting with Greece and to this day continues an illegal occupation. The occupation is to maintain the quasi “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” that is recognized by no other state in the world bar Turkey and is recognized by [United Nations Security Council Resolution 541](#) and [UN Security Council Resolution 550](#) as illegal.

The U.S. has never taken an interest in protecting Cypriot interests despite the illegalities of the occupied northern Cyprus – up until recent times. Turkish **President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan** going rogue against U.S. and NATO interests by strengthening relations with Russian **President Vladimir Putin**, including the sale of the S-400 missile defense system that are not compatible with NATO doctrine.

The irony is that Turkey bought the S-400 system despite the fact that in 1997 Cyprus bought the S-300 air defense missiles from Russia, but had to trade it with Greece for other weapons under a Turkish threat of blockade and/or war. The S-300 is now located on the Greek island of Crete. As Greece in recent years has been a loyal subject to NATO without much independent foreign policy, Washington is now willing to give the country more concessions. In previous years, Washington would only appease Turkey as it controlled the Bosphorus Straits that connects Russia's Black Sea Fleet to the rest of the world.

However, these concessions and attempts to strengthen relations between Cyprus and the U.S. come at a price. Harris explains that the U.S. Congress laid out specific criteria that Cyprus needs to fulfill before it is allowed to procure arms from the U.S., if it ever choose to.

“Specifically, the law requires Cyprus to deny Russian military vessels to its ports despite a 2015 agreement with Moscow to do so. It also requires Cyprus — a financial heaven for wealthy Russians to evade US sanctions — to comply with anti-money laundering regulations,” he said.

It is very unlikely that Cyprus will meet these demands made as it is not a NATO member, nor does it have the incentive to abandon a partner that supplied it weapons when the U.S. turned its back. Knowing this fact, Harris explained that “even if Cyprus fails to comply with these conditions, the law gives Pompeo the freedom to lift the embargo anyway via a national security waiver.”

This therefore means that the true target of this arms embargo lift is not necessarily Russia, but rather Turkey. It is effectively in Cypriot hands on whether they want to take on these U.S. conditions. Cyprus is being ‘rewarded’ by Washington as in recent years it has formed a strategic partnership with Israel in the economic, energy and military sector. Because of this, pro-Israel groups in the U.S. lobbied to lift the arms embargo last year, especially as Erdoğan frequently antagonizes Tel Aviv.

Although it is in Pompeo’s hands to decide whether to lift the embargo or not, it is more likely he will choose to do this even if Cyprus decides not to conform to the anti-Russian measures demanded. Not only is Trump and Pompeo receiving pressure from the Israeli lobby, but they are also receiving pressure from the extremely influential think-tanks.

In [an article](#) from June 2019, titled “Lift the Arms Embargo on Cyprus,” that was first published by The Center for the National Interest, and then republished by the CATO Institute, the author explains “The current arms embargo on Cyprus is unbalanced and unfair. Favoring Turkey never was likely to help keep the peace. Today, given the Erdogan’s transformation into a frenemy of America at best, and confrontational policy toward Cyprus and Greece, the embargo rewards an essentially rogue government. The United States should see Turkey plain and stop tolerating the latter’s unfriendly conduct.”

However, there is no guarantee that just because Cyprus is now being noticed and recognized by Washington that it will quickly abandon Russia, especially because of decades of limited relations and the important role [the U.S. played](#) in supporting the Turkish invasion of northern Cyprus. Rather, the lifting of the arms embargo is just one small gesture that Washington might make to antagonize a rogue Erdoğan, and if this is the aim, it will certainly work as the Turkish president believes the island to be a part of his domain.

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