
The Cyprus Issue Project

February 11, 2014

Geography Matters

Vasileios P. Karakasis

Introduction

In the aftermath of Soviet Union's dissolution and after the end of the Cold War, the dismantling of a man-made boundary in Germany -the Berlin Wall- made people believe that all territorial divisions in our world would be surmountable (Kaplan 2012; 3-4). The deepening impacts of "globalization" and the de-territorializing consequences of new informational technologies seemed to have "driven a stake into the heart of geography" and geopolitics (Tuathail and Dalby 1998, p. 1). These disciplines had seemingly reared their implacable heads and were supposed to have been faded into the intellectual background. Nevertheless, while the prevailing literature of international relations theory had started to discount the role of geography, the Cyprus conflict is one of those cases which stress why geography remains a key variable shaping the grand strategy of states.

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The **Cyprus Issue Project** will embark upon the examination of the conflict at a number of different levels: intrapersonal, societal and (inter-)national. As explained in the previous paper, the conflict will be approached primarily from a behavioral point of view- the emphasis being laid on personality, attitude(s), ideology and communication. However, in order to be able to correctly predict and explain the involved actors' behavior, it is necessary to look also at what is around them. To understand the developments on the conflict-ground, it is essential not to lose sight of the whole forest while looking at the trees. In trying to explain the behavior of the policy-makers and the grassroots constituents we should never neglect Cyprus' location in relation to other states. As a consequence, my central tenet is that geography and geopolitics should be taken into consideration as a rather explanatory (although not determinant) variable (Grygiel 2006; 16). Bearing these in mind, this paper decided to devote this issue to the role of geography in the generation of the Cyprus conflict.

The significance of geography and geopolitics

A state's position on the map is the first thing that defines it, even more than its governing philosophy. Quoting Mackinder, a map conveys "at one glance a whole series of generalizations" (Parker 1988; 93). Geography, a notion rooted in the Greek word

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γεωγραφία¹ should be understood as “a metaphor that can indicate not only place but the history, context and evolution of the conflict and the cultural meaning structures that are part of the makeup of the people and their setting” (Mitchell 2002; 49). It could be considered as the preface to the very track of human events (Kaplan 2012; 30). In the words of the Dutch-American geostrategist, Nicholas Spykman (1893-1943), “*geography is the most fundamental factor in the foreign policy of states because it is the most permanent. Ministers come and go, even dictators die, but mountain ranges stand unperturbed*”. (1942; 41 cited in Kaplan 2012; 29-30).

The political history of nations, as influenced by their position and surroundings, has in the last centuries, received its share of emphasis. It has been given a name and called geopolitics (Montgomery H. 1942; 93). The neologism “geopolitics” coined in 1899 by the Swedish political scientist and parliamentarian Rudolf Kjellen (1864-1922) underlines the role of territory and resources in shaping the condition of states. As a field, geopolitics studies the impact of geography on international politics and international relations. It constitutes a method of foreign policy analysis which seeks to understand, explain, and predict international political behavior primarily in terms of geographical variables

¹ That means essentially a “description of the earth”

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(physical location, size, climate, topography, demography, natural resources) of the state being evaluated².

Geopolitics helps us frame the conflicts within a grand strategic perspective, offering an Olympian viewpoint. It promotes a spatial way of thinking that arranges different actors, elements and locations simultaneously on a regional and global chessboard. It can help us gain an unusual insight into the future direction of the developments on the ground (Tuathail and Dalby 1998; 1). That is why many decision and policy makers, analysts and think-tanks resort to geopolitics while searching for crystal ball visions of the future. Even in the context of a shrinking and speeding world of intense time-space compression - wrought by telecommunication revolutions and economic networks and webs-, the desire for perspectives offering “timeless insight” is stronger than ever (ibid).

Understanding Cyprus' geography

Cyprus possesses a central position in the global politics since it is located at the juncture of Eurasia³ with Africa. Situated in the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean Sea (see Map 1) it

² Evans, G and Newnham, J. (1998), *The Penguin Dictionary of International relations*, Penguin Books, London, UK

³The land mass comprising the continents of Europe and Asia

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constitutes the third largest island in the region after Sicily and Sardinia, in terms of area and population.

Map 1: The Mediterranean Sea

Source:

<http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/medsea.h>



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The total area of the island is 9.251 square kilometer, 10 square kilometer of which is covered by water and the rest by land. It measures 149 miles latitudinally and 62 miles longitudinally. Its coastline amounts to 648 kilometers (*CIA World Factbook*). As illustrated in Map 2, there are two mountain ranges, the Kyrenia Range in the north, and the Troodos Range in the south with the Nicosia plain in the middle. The maximum altitude of the Troodos Range, at Mount Olympus, enables wide-scale aerial surveillance (Leigh J. & Vucovic P. (22.12.2011).

Map 2: The physical map of Cyprus

Source:

<http://www.freeworldmaps.net/europe/cyprus/cyprus-map-physical.jpg>



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The island's main natural resources are copper, pyrites, asbestos, gypsum, timber, salt, marble and clay earth pigment (*CIA World Factbook*). Recently, the island has also become home to vast reserves of natural gas since enormous deposits have been detected off Cyprus' southern side⁴.

With respect to its demographic status, Greek Cypriots form up around 77%⁵, Turkish Cypriots (without including the Turkish settlers) more than 18% (according to estimates by the *CIA World Factbook*) and other ethnic or religious groups (Maronites, Latin Catholics, Armenians and the non-officially recognized Gypsies) the rest 3%.

Concerning the location of the island, Turkey is the closest neighbor with almost 50 miles north of the island distance, while Syria and Lebanon are approximately 70 miles to its eastern side. Other neighboring territories include Egypt in the south (240 miles) and Israel to the southeast (124 miles). On the westward direction, the nearest Greek Dodecanesian island Castellorizo is 170 miles away while its distance from the Greek mainland is 497 miles (*ibid.*).

⁴ We will cast light on this issue in the following pieces.

⁵ The census conducted in 2011 in the Republic of Cyprus, depicted a number of 840,407 citizens

http://www.cystat.gov.cy/mof/cystat/statistics.nsf/populationcondition_22main_en/populationcondition_22main_en?OpenForm&sub=2&sel=2

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Along with the Greek island Crete, Cyprus is based on an axis where the Mediterranean Sea arteries are intersecting. It is positioned on the sea lane of the great maritime highway which links the Mediterranean Sea with two sea gates, the Suez and Bab al-Mandab, with the Indian Ocean. From there, it is connected with two other sea gates, the Strait of Hormuz which ends to the Persian Gulf, and the Strait of Malacca to the Pacific (Leigh J. & P. Vucovic 22.12.2011). This location is “instrumentally designed” to facilitate a fixed base and aircraft carrier that could control the regions environing the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea and the sea arteries of Aden and Ormuz. Furthermore, the vast majority of the imports coming from the Pacific and Indian Ocean, and the Persian Gulf have to pass through these key locations (see Map 3). It is assumed that approximately 40% of the EU’s oil derives from the Persian Gulf and must pass through these three “chokepoints”. Any threats along these sea lanes and particularly around the chokepoints could severely disrupt the supply of imports and oil into Europe (ibid.).

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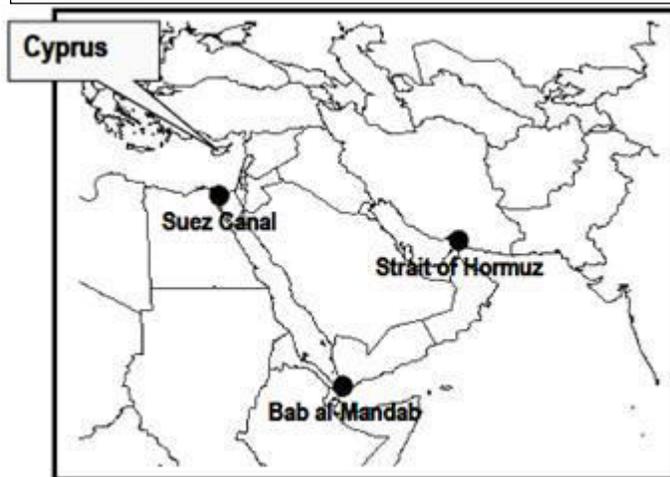
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Map 3: Cyprus and Choke Points

Source: Leigh&Vucovic 22.12.2011



A thorough analysis of Cyprus' geopolitics has been presented by the current Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu, in his book: *The Strategic Depth Doctrine* (first published in Turkey in 2001)⁶. Among others, he underlines: *"a state that neglects Cyprus cannot play a decisive role in the realm of regional and global politics. This island stands in a position that could directly influence the strategic links between Asia and Africa,*

⁶ To my knowledge so far, there has been no official publication in English.

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Europe and Africa, Europe and Asia. Cyprus eastern coast (or edge) is paralleled to an arrow oriented towards the Middle East. Due to its western coast this island constitutes the keystone upon which the strategic balances within the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans and Northern Africa have been constructed". While highlighting the geopolitical importance of Cyprus -which according to him is placed at "**the heart of Turkey's vital space**"- he makes clear that even "**if no Muslim Turk had been there, it would be required for Turkey to maintain a Cyprus question**" (Davutoglu 2010; 279).

Conclusions

The above mentioned could partly explain why Cyprus, the island of Aphrodite⁷, has turned into a conflict-ground for so many years. This analysis will help us understand why, due to its strategic location on the main routes between Europe and Asia, Cyprus has always been the epicenter of diachronic political conflicts. Taking the geopolitical parameter into consideration, the next part will proceed with the unwrapping of the conflict's history.

⁷ The goddess of love

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