

Cyprus and Israel: A New Geopolitical Equation

by **George N. Tzogopoulos**

The foreign policy of the Republic of Cyprus is grounded in the premise that its partners ought to help in defending its cause and subsequently contribute to the resolution of the “Cyprus question,” an international problem created by the Turkish invasion and subsequent continued occupation of northern Cyprus in 1974. For four decades following its independence in 1960, closer ties with the Arab world were seen as an appropriate policy decision to achieve this goal. In the second



Cypriot president Nicos Anastasiades (left) and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed an agreement along with Greece for the East Med gas pipeline to Europe, Athens, January 2, 2020.

decade of the twenty-first century, however, Cyprus began an approach to Israel.

This reorientation of strategic interests has created opportunities and challenges for Nicosia with reference to the Palestinian issue and beyond. In the last years in particular, new trends are evolving while the regional importance of the island has dramatically grown. Although opportunities for a resolution of the Cyprus question are almost non-existent, Cyprus is currently drawing closer to the United States politically and militarily—especially since the start of the war in Ukraine—a development that causes concern to both Russia and Türkiye. The Republic of Cyprus is thus in the process of making strategic choices that reinforce its position in the Western world so as to recontextualize the “Cyprus question” into conditions favorable to its national interest.

The “Cyprus Problem”

Nicosia’s foreign policy is anchored to the “Cyprus problem.” Its relations with other eastern Mediterranean countries echo this fundamental interest. During the Cold War, the Cypriot governments reached an understanding with Arab countries in which Nicosia would offer them support on the Palestinian question and would, in return, receive support on the Cyprus question. Cypriot-Israeli relations were affected by this reality—in tandem with the warming in Israeli-Turkish relations. Although Jerusalem and Nicosia established diplomatic relations in 1960, it was only in 1993 that Nicosia opened an embassy in Israel, and only in 1994, did the government appoint an ambassador to the Jewish state. For the Israelis, the importance of Cyprus as the closest non-Arab state to its territory could not be ignored in a period during which Jerusalem was seeking to lessen its isolation, position itself better in the region, and enhance trade.¹

The stance of Nicosia in the aftermath of the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War and that of Jerusalem after the invasion of the island by Türkiye in 1974 reflected their contrary positions in regional affairs. Although not involved in their conflicts, Nicosia cultivated a strong relationship with Arab countries, which it considered more important for its interests than the Jewish state, while Jerusalem preserved military ties with Ankara. Also, in 1988, the Cypriot government officially recognized the state of Palestine, leading the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to open an embassy in Nicosia and Cyprus to establish a representative office in Ramallah. Jerusalem, for its part, did not recognize Turkish northern Cyprus as the

¹ Zach Levey, “[Israel’s Entry into Cyprus](#), 1959-1963: Diplomacy and Strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Sept. 2003.

“Republic of Northern Cyprus,” which only Ankara has done in the international sphere. After the end of the Cold War, relations between the governments of Cyprus and Israel did improve in practice but Jerusalem still considered its close relationship with Türkiye as one of its major foreign policy achievements.² Within this context, pre-existing strategic choices did not change, but did begin to modify at the start of deteriorating Turkish-Israeli relations beginning in 2008

A New Regional Foreign Policy

Cyprus—like Greece—saw an opportunity in the Turkish-Israeli crisis. Under the new circumstances, cooperation with Jerusalem could begin to serve its strategic interests by building partnerships with powerful regional actors and alienating Türkiye. In May 2010, Cypriot authorities prevented pro-Palestinian activists from leaving the island to join a flotilla sailing to Gaza. One year later, they re-iterated their decision and notified any pro-Palestinian activists who might use Cypriot ports as a springboard to challenge the Israeli blockade of Gaza that these facilities were not available for this purpose.³ In 2011, President Demitris Christofias travelled to Jerusalem and President Shimon Peres made a reciprocal visit to Nicosia. During his official trip to Jerusalem, Christofias described Israel as one of Cyprus’s “most important strategic partners.”⁴

² Arnikam Nachmani, “A Triangular Relationship: Turkish-Israeli Cooperation and Its Implications for Greece,” *Cahiers d’Études sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le Monde Turco-Iranien*, June-Dec. 1999, pp. 149-62.

³ Ministry of Transports and Work, [June 23, 2011](#).

⁴ *Sigma Live* (Nicosia), [Mar. 16, 2011](#).

The discovery of natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean created the potential for Nicosia and Jerusalem to get closer. The Israelis found the Mari-B field in their waters in 2000, and more importantly, the Tamar and Leviathan fields in 2009 and 2010 while Cyprus discovered the Aphrodite field in 2011. By 2010, the two countries agreed on the delimitation of their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).⁵ In 2012, Benjamin Netanyahu became the first Israeli prime minister to visit Cyprus. At that point, Jerusalem and Nicosia publicly discussed the possibility of constructing a pipeline to transport natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean reservoirs to Europe via Greece and Italy, the so-called “East Med” pipeline.⁶ In 2016, a tripartite mechanism—with the participation of Greece—was inaugurated to facilitate multidimensional collaborations.⁷ The first trilateral meeting took place in Nicosia, in January 2016. Prime ministers Netanyahu and Alexis Tsipras of Greece as well as Cypriot president Nicos Anastasiades took



Bilateral trade between Israel and Cyprus has risen as has tourism. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, close to 300,000 Israelis visited the island.

part. Since then, seven more trilateral summits have been organized. The last one took place in Jerusalem in December 2021 where the Israeli government was represented by then-prime minister Naftali Bennett. In the interim, trilateral meetings of foreign and defense ministers have frequently been convened.

The results of the Cypriot-Israeli cooperation have been multifaceted. In 2014, almost 70,000 Israelis visited the island compared to 30-35,000 in 2010-13.⁸ This number rose to 293,756 in 2019, the year before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹

The volume of bilateral trade rose from \$950.7 million in 2014 to \$1.33 billion in

⁵ “Agreement between the Government of the State of Israel and the Government of the Republic of Cyprus on the Delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone,” Office of Legal Affairs, U.N., New York, Dec. 7, 2010.

⁶ *The Jerusalem Post*, [Feb. 15, 2012](#).

⁷ Orna Mizrahi, “Israel’s Policy in Its Triangular Relations with Greece and Cyprus,” *Strategic Assessment*, Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv, July 2020.

⁸ “Israeli Ambassador: [Cyprus and Israel Engaged](#) in a Constant Dialogue to Deepen Relations,” Association of the Balkan News Agencies-Southeast Europe (ABNA-SE), May 10, 2015.

⁹ *Brief.com* (Nicosia), [Jan. 17, 2020](#).

2022.¹⁰ Additionally, Nicosia has intensified efforts to fight anti-Semitism. In 2019, it adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition. Then-Israeli foreign minister Israel Katz welcomed the decision as "an important step in the fight against all forms of anti-Semitism, including anti-Zionism."¹¹ This momentum is reflected in public opinion. A 2012 survey organized by the Embassy of Israel in Nicosia indicates that 69 percent of Cypriots had a positive view of the Jewish state, and 89 percent saw the development of bilateral relations favorably.¹² In fact, bonds between Cypriots and Israelis have some historical roots. More than 50,000 Jews experienced the hospitality and friendship of the Cypriots during their detention by the British in camps on the island from 1946 until 1949.

As trust between Nicosia and Jerusalem grew, practical cooperation began to develop. Analyst Gal Luft argued that Cyprus can provide Israel with landing rights on its runways and hence an exit to the world as well as with space for training.¹³ A number of military exercises have taken place. In June 2017, the Israeli Defense Forces' (IDF) newly formed commando brigade chose Cyprus for its first foreign drill, in moun-

The governments of Cyprus and Israel have joined forces in responding to terror threats.

tainous areas resembling those along Israel's northern border.¹⁴ A few months later, Israeli and Cypriot soldiers trained together in urban warfare

and tactical planning at Tzeelim training base in southern Israel.¹⁵ Israeli forces have also trained in Cyprus in an exercise designed to simulate war against Hezbollah.¹⁶ In 2022, the two sides went further and signed defense export agreements that will provide the Cypriot army with protective and tactical carrying systems developed by Source Defense company and a tactical carrying system for Cypriot soldiers developed by Marom Dolphin, a provider of military supplies for armed forces.¹⁷

With a clearer understanding of Israeli security sensitivities in a turbulent neighborhood, Nicosia welcomed the 2020 Abraham accords and conveyed its willingness to take part in common projects with the parties to the accords. In 2021, the Cypriot government hosted a quadrilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of Cyprus, Greece, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the city of Paphos.¹⁸ In a similar vein, the governments of Cyprus and Israel have joined forces in responding together to terror threats. In a remarkable case, the Israeli government accused Iran in 2021 of plotting to attack Israelis on the island. The Cypriot police reportedly arrested a suspect.¹⁹

¹⁰ "Israel's Foreign Trade in Goods, by Country: With a Focus on [Trade in Goods between Israel and Cyprus](#)," Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), Jerusalem, Oct. 31, 2016; "Israel's Foreign Trade in Goods by Country," CBS, [Jan. 19, 2023](#).

¹¹ *The Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), [Dec. 18, 2019](#).

¹² Costas Constantinou, "How Upcoming Cypriot Elections Could Affect Israel," *The Jerusalem Post*, [Sept. 11, 2022](#).

¹³ Gal Luft, "[It's Time for Israel to Stop Neglecting Cyprus](#)," *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), June 14, 2015.

¹⁴ *The Times of Israel*, [June 15, 2017](#).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, [Oct. 26, 2017](#).

¹⁶ *The Jerusalem Post*, [May 29, 2022](#).

¹⁷ "[Israel and Cyprus sign defense exports agreements](#)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, Tel Aviv, June 30, 2022.

¹⁸ *The Times of Israel*: [Apr. 16, 2021](#).

¹⁹ *Haaretz*, [Oct. 4, 2021](#).

The Palestinian Factor

Closer ties with Jerusalem threatened to impact on Nicosia's previously warm relations with the Arab world. As a result, the Cypriot government attempted to strike a balance and accompany its pragmatic foreign policy reorientation with continued rhetoric in favor of the Palestinians. In response to the December 2008 Gaza crisis, Nicosia condemned Jerusalem. In a rare indication of unity on the island, President Christofias and Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat issued a joint statement to criticize the "disproportionate use of force applied by the Israeli forces that has led to huge loss of life of innocent civilians including women and children."²⁰ In 2011, according to the Palestinian news agency, Christofias sent a letter to Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas in which he recognized the state of Palestine within the 1967 borders and expressed his hope for East Jerusalem to be its capital.²¹

Christofias' successor Nikos Anastasiades employed a similar approach, albeit milder in style. In 2015, he combined his trip to Israel with a visit to Ramallah where he met Abbas and talked about the importance of Cypriot-Palestinian relations.²² Abbas made a return visit to Nicosia in 2022. During Anastasiades's administration, the Cypriot House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning Israeli actions in Gaza in 2018. The Israeli embassy to Cyprus responded to the resolution and asserted that "it cannot be justified" as the Jewish state was responding



Cypriot president Nicos Anastasiades (right) with PA president Mahmoud Abbas, Nicosia, June 14, 2022. Cypriot support for the Palestinians has been in line with European views since Cyprus joined the EU in 2004.

to violence initiated by Hamas.²³ On the whole, the traditional Cypriot support for the Palestinians has been in line with European mainstream views since Cyprus became an EU member in 2004. Nevertheless, the historical background and European guidelines have not prevented Nicosia from opting for a balanced stance vis-à-vis Israel in some U.N. votes. In a remarkable case, Cyprus abstained when a resolution on the protection of the Palestinian civilian population was debated in the U.N.

²⁰ Reuters, Jan. 5, 2009.

²¹ Wafa News Agency (Palestine News Agency, Ramallah), [Dec. 31, 2015](#).

²² RIK News (Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation, Nicosia), [Nov. 13, 2015](#).

²³ "[Response to Parliament's Resolution on Gaza](#)," Embassy of Israel in Cyprus, Nicosia, May 22, 2018.

General Assembly in 2018.²⁴ It again chose neutrality in January 2023 when the U.N. moved to refer Israel's "occupation, settlement and annexation of Palestinian territory" to the International Court of Justice.²⁵ Nicosia is also playing a minor role in facilitating some Israeli-Palestinian contacts. In 2018, Jerusalem asked the Cypriots to examine the possibility of establishing a shipping point on the island for sending goods to the Gaza Strip.²⁶ And, in 2022, the two sides cooperated on a pilot program for Palestinians to fly abroad from Ramon airport via Larnaca airport.²⁷

The Palestinian reaction to the Cypriot pivot toward Jerusalem does not necessarily demonstrate an understanding of regional readjustments. In 2016, former Palestinian foreign minister Nabil Shaath demanded that the leader of the governing Democratic Rally party in Cyprus, Averof Neofytou, retract his comments that Israel is not an aggressive country.²⁸ Within this framework, the most important concern for Nicosia is the potential influence the Turkish government might exert on the Palestinian Authority to embrace its positions in the eastern Mediterranean.

Nicosia is playing a role in facilitating some Israeli-Palestinian contacts.

Ankara is steadily spreading information about Turkish-Palestinian potential synergies, among other things on maritime zones.²⁹ Further to this,

the Turks are courting their partners to recognize Northern Cyprus as the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" in a period during which it is advocating for a two-state solution on the island. In November 2022, the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" was admitted to the Organization of Turkic States as an observer.³⁰ In a recent interview, Palestinian ambassador to Cyprus Abdallah Attari was asked about this move and said that Palestinian foreign policy would not damage the interest of the Cypriot people.³¹

Eastern Mediterranean Energy

Energy opportunities in the eastern Mediterranean do not mean disagreements are absent, even between partners such as the governments of Cyprus and Israel. A delicate Cypriot-Israeli disagreement derives from geological reality as Aphrodite gas findings stretch into the Yishai field. Article 2 of the 2010 bilateral agreement states that if there are natural resources extending from the maritime zones of one country to that of another, the two parties shall cooperate to reach a framework utilization agreement on the modalities of the joint development and exploitation of such resources while Article 4

²⁴ [Protection of the Palestinian Civilian Population](#): Resolution/Adopted by the General Assembly, U.N. Digital Library, New York, 2018.

²⁵ Herb Keinon, "UN vote imperfect map of [Israel's friends](#): Analysis," *The Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 3, 2023.

²⁶ Reuters, June 26, 2018.

²⁷ *KNews (Kathimerini-Cyprus, Athens)*, [Aug. 22, 2022](#).

²⁸ Nabil Shaath, "[Cyprus, Greece and Palestine](#)," *Masarat*, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, Ramallah, Jan. 24, 2016.

²⁹ Nurbanu Kizil, "[Turkey, Palestine Should Strike Maritime Deal](#) Similar to Libya," *The Daily Sabah* (Istanbul), May 17, 2021.

³⁰ *Yeni Şafak* (Istanbul), [Nov. 11, 2022](#).

³¹ Abdallah Attari, interview, *Gnomi* (Nicosia), Apr. 8, 2023.

stipulates for arbitration if required.³² Nicosia and Jerusalem reached a compromise in 2021 to give the involved stakeholders time to start negotiations and possibly agree upon how the Israeli companies would be compensated for their share in the reservoir.³³ Media reports suggest progress, but notwithstanding friendly consultations, differences have not yet been definitely settled.³⁴

Beyond the Aphrodite-Yishai issue, Nicosia and Jerusalem have joined forces in multilateral mechanisms to foster energy synergies in the eastern Mediterranean. The East Med Gas Forum (EMGF), proposed by Egypt in 2018, already functions as a regional organization. Along with the governments of Egypt, Cyprus, and Israel, five additional actors have joined, namely France, Greece, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. Libya and Syria cannot participate due to internal instability caused by their civil wars while Lebanon and Türkiye remain outside due to their complicated relations with their neighbors. The October 2022 Israeli-Lebanese maritime accord, if realized, will perhaps pave the way for Lebanon to be invited to the EMGF. Nicosia welcomed this accord in hopes of re-energizing Beirut to ratify the 2007 agreement they had signed on maritime zones.³⁵ In fact, Nicosia has been pushing in

Nicosia and Jerusalem have joined forces to foster energy synergies in the eastern Mediterranean.

this direction for years starting from Christofias' term.³⁶ Lebanon also must come to a maritime agreement with Syria for a holistic demarcation of maritime zones in the

region to be made.

Another consideration is how natural gas could be transported from the eastern Mediterranean to Europe. During the Trump administration, Washington had appeared enthusiastic in supporting trilateral Cypriot-Israeli-Greek cooperation, including the potential construction of the East Med pipeline.³⁷ The Biden presidency, however, opted for a lukewarm stance regarding the tripartite mechanism and practically withdrew its support for the ambitious pipeline project.³⁸ Under the new circumstances, Nicosia's most important concern derives from ongoing conversations between the Israeli and the Turkish governments to realize another, cheaper subsea pipeline that will connect the eastern Mediterranean reservoirs with the Turkish port of Ceyhan. This project appears controversial because such an Israeli-Turkish pipeline might pass through the waters of Northern Cyprus without a prior resolution of the Cyprus question, so another option has been suggested: the use of Egyptian terminals for liquefied natural gas where Egyptian ships can carry the gas to other European markets. The U.S.

³² "State of Israel and the Government of the Republic of Cyprus on the Delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone," U.N., New York, Dec. 7, 2010

³³ "[Aphrodite-Yishai's Dispute Resolved](#)," Ministry of Energy of Israel, Jerusalem, Mar. 9, 2021.

³⁴ *The Times of Israel*, [Sept. 19, 2022](#).

³⁵ *Kathimerini* (Athens) [Oct. 26, 2022](#).

³⁶ Simon Henderson, "Cyprus Helping with Israel-Lebanon Maritime Dispute," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., Jan. 10, 2013.

³⁷ Mike Pompeo, "[The United States and Greece: Showing the Way Forward](#)," Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, Athens, Oct. 5, 2019.

³⁸ *The Jerusalem Post*, [Jan. 18, 2022](#).

abandonment of the East Med pipeline does not exclude other energy connectivity routes for the governments of Cyprus, Israel, and Greece. The three sides may cooperate in constructing the Euro-Asia Interconnector, a subsea cable to connect their electricity grids starting from Hadera.³⁹

Expectations from Israel and Türkiye

The deterioration of relations between Jerusalem and Ankara served as the catalyst for the strategic alignment of interests between Nicosia and Jerusalem. Although Nicosia, Jerusalem, (and also Athens) gradually reached multidimensional collaboration themselves, the lack of trust between Jerusalem and Ankara facilitated the process. The new partnership, however, has some limits. No military alliance was formed because Nicosia and Jerusalem perceived threats differently. The former was not willing to break ties with Iran and the Palestinians while the latter sought to keep open channels of communication with Ankara. The Israeli government never expressed any interest in becoming actively involved in Cypriot-Turkish spats. During the eastern Mediterranean crisis of summer 2020 when the Turkish seismographic vessel Oruc Reis endeavored to do research in waters not delimited, which both Nicosia and Athens consider part of their continental shelves, the Jewish state limited its solidarity to a tweet.⁴⁰



Israeli foreign minister Yair Lapid (center) with Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Jerusalem, May 25, 2022. Renewed diplomatic relations between Jerusalem and Ankara will not prevent the Israelis from pursuing a partnership with Nicosia.

Following years of complex negotiations, the governments of Israel and Türkiye resumed diplomatic relations in 2022. This development certainly removes the conditions that permitted Nicosia and Jerusalem to reach common ground in the years prior. The depth of the Cypriot-Israeli cooperation—with or without Greece’s participation—is the result of a mutual diplomatic effort that was not made in vain, though. Nicosia and Jerusalem have learned to work together for years by acknowledging the limits of their partnership, a trend that continuously benefits both and is unlikely to be reversed. In March 2023, for instance, only months after the resumption of Turkish-Israeli diplomatic ties, Nicosia and Jerusalem discussed a new plan for the construction of a pipeline that will bring natural gas from the Israeli reservoirs to Cyprus for liquefaction, and subsequently complement Egyptian

³⁹ Jewish News Syndicate (Newton, Mass., JNS), [Dec. 7, 2022](#).

⁴⁰ Embassy of Israel to Greece, Nicosia, @IsraelinGreece, [Aug. 12, 2020](#).

terminals in linking the eastern Mediterranean to European markets.⁴¹

The Israeli-Turkish reconciliation can be seen in the context of the adjustment of Ankara's strategy since the beginning of the Joe Biden administration; relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are other examples—in tandem with Israel. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has seen the risks in constantly feuding with others and is striving to recalibrate relations with his country's neighbors. By approaching the Jewish state, he is interested in appeasing Washington and preventing a situation where his government might be sidelined from regional deliberations about natural gas and beyond. Whether full normalcy in Israeli-Turkish ties can be achieved, remains to be seen. Confidence looks set to be restored in the short and medium term, but concerns remain. Under Erdoğan's presidency, Ankara has cooperated with Hamas.⁴² It has also condemned Israel about Al-Aqsa Mosque tensions.⁴³ Erdoğan's victory in the presidential elections of May 2023 is likely to produce a certain continuity in Turkish practices. Jerusalem may see opportunities in the new chapter of its relations with Ankara, but these will not automatically restore the bilateral relationship to the pre-2008 level or prevent the Israelis from pursuing their partnership with Nicosia. A combination of selective policies in the eastern Mediter-

Washington has been eager to safeguard the Western orientation of Cyprus.

anean is the most likely scenario for its regional strategy.

Closer to the West

While Nicosia has re-defined its regional policy towards Israel, Washington has been eager to safeguard the Western orientation of the island. Cyprus can hardly become a NATO member state because of the unresolved Cyprus question and Turkish objections. But this reality has not prevented Washington from exploring opportunities of deeper military collaboration in spite of Ankara's concerns. In particular, the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Partnership Act of 2019 stipulates for "robust International Military Education and Training (IMET) programming with the Republic of Cyprus" and also for countering Russian interference and influence in the eastern Mediterranean "through increased security cooperation with the Republic of Cyprus (as well as Greece and Israel)."⁴⁴ More importantly, in 2020 Washington decided to ease the arms embargo on Cyprus partially, and two years later, in 2022, to lift it completely. President Anastasiades hailed the decision by tweeting his gratitude.⁴⁵ Türkiye condemned the U.S. decision, warning that as it is a

guarantor country, in line with its legal and historical responsibilities, [it] will continue to take necessary steps for the existence, security and serenity of the

⁴¹ Associated Press, Mar. 15, 2023.

⁴² JNS, [Dec. 28, 2022](#).

⁴³ Anadolu Ajansı News Service (Ankara), Apr. 5, 2023.

⁴⁴ Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019, U.S. Congress, Washington, D.C., [S.1102](#), 2019.

⁴⁵ Voice of America, [Sept. 17, 2022](#).

Turkish Cypriots, by all means.⁴⁶

The French are also expanding military collaboration with Nicosia. The two countries signed a defense cooperation agreement in 2017 that came into force in 2020.⁴⁷ According to *Naval News*, the deal will likely permit French naval vessels to dock on the island for long durations.⁴⁸ Moreover, Nicosia plans to upgrade a naval base on its southern shores. The Evangelos Florakis naval base located in Zygi is attracting the interest of Paris. In recent years, French ships including aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle have participated in exercises around Cyprus. These exercises are not of a bilateral nature. Other countries including Egypt, Israel, Italy, the UAE, and the United States have participated.⁴⁹ This highlights the new geopolitical role Cyprus has begun playing and the emphasis several countries have placed on it.

Even before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Nicosia was spending more on defense as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) than most EU member states. In



French and Cypriot ships joined the Israeli navy in joint anti-submarine exercises in waters west of Cyprus, 2021.

2021, it was ranked fifth in the European list (together with France and Lithuania) with 1.8 percent, preceded by Greece, Latvia, Estonia, and Romania.⁵⁰ Cyprus is also a participant in the Permanent Structure Cooperation (PESCO), an EU initiative to enhance the operational readiness of the armed forces of the twenty-five member states that have joined, and in Operation Iirini, another EU structure to enforce the arms embargo on Libya. The rising contribution of Nicosia to European defense projects can, to some degree, facilitate the Western military presence on the island that cannot be channeled via NATO.

The implications of the new strategic assessment of Cyprus by Washington also entail implications for the region. At first, the U.S. government will likely provide military equipment to the country in parallel with others such as Israel and Germany. Reportedly, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Nicosia has been under pressure by Washington to send its S-300 missiles to

⁴⁶ “Regarding the US Decision to Lift the Arms Embargo on the Greek Cypriot Administration,” Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ankara, [Sept. 17, 2022](#).

⁴⁷ “[France-Chypre](#): Relations Bilatérales,” French Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs, Paris, Mar. 8, 2023.

⁴⁸ *Naval News* (Paris), [Aug. 6, 2020](#).

⁴⁹ Charalampos Petridis, minister of defense, Evangelos Florakis Naval Base, Ministry of Defense, Republic of Cyprus, [Dec. 6, 2021](#); *The Times of Israel*, [Mar. 24, 2022](#).

⁵⁰ “Government Expenditure on Defense,” Eurostat (European Statistical Office), European Commission, Luxembourg, [Feb. 2023](#).

Ukraine and receive new weapons from Western states.⁵¹ Publicly, President Anastasiades rejected any potential military shipment from his country to Ukraine although he appeared positive about the prospect of seeing the Cypriot arsenal replaced by modernized weapons.⁵² His successor, Nikos Christodoulides, who became the president of the Republic of Cyprus in February 2023, has pledged to spend 2 percent of the country's GDP on defense. Whether this could lead to an arms race remains to be seen.

Cyprus, under Christodoulides, will likely expand defense cooperation with both Washington and Jerusalem. The strengthening of Nicosia's air defenses is expected to be on the agenda in a period during which voices in the United States for arming Cyprus are getting louder.⁵³ Obviously, Türkiye's ire and determination to expand its military presence in Northern Cyprus will increase, whereas Russia's traditional privileges on the island will possibly be challenged. As it will be very difficult for Christodoulides to get security guarantees from either Washington or Jerusalem against Ankara, he will need to ensure that stronger deterrence will function practically as a peaceful game changer on the island. The closer Nicosia grows to Washington, the more likely it will be asked to play an active military role in Ukraine, including by supplying Kyiv with Russian-built weapons. Christodoulides's responsibility is to ensure that closer ties with Washington will not lead to an alignment of Turkish-Russian security objectives with the potential of damaging Nicosia's national interests. There is a risk that the Cypriots could be squeezed in the growing

antagonism of others. But, what matters more for Nicosia is not only to invest in new arms but to link new military expenditures and new military deals to a specific goal, perhaps NATO membership.

Conclusion

The Republic of Cyprus finds itself at a crossroads. While the Cyprus question remains unresolved and prospects for a breakthrough look rather grim, the country needs to forge a foreign policy carefully for a new era. Its dynamic cooperation with Jerusalem is one of its most important projects and one that serves its strategic interests. Closer ties with the Israelis, however, are not a panacea for the resolution of the Cyprus conflict. Türkiye, traditionally employing a muscular strategy, does not hide its own ambitions for the Mediterranean, pushing for a two-state solution on the island and building drone bases on the northern part. Ankara also approaches closer Cypriot-Israeli ties from the prism of its own interests and seeks to receive Palestinian support for its cause. The situation is made even more complicated in an environment of international uncertainty where Washington sees the island as a theatre for the ongoing antagonism with Russia in the eastern Mediterranean. It is in this theatre where already tense U.S.-Turkish relations are tested. Cyprus's new president faces perhaps the most critical geopolitical equation since the Turkish invasion of 1974.

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⁵¹ *Forbes* (New York), Oct. 25, 2022.

⁵² *Kathimerini*, [Oct. 13, 2022](#).

⁵³ Michael Rubin, "It Is Time to Arm Cyprus," *19FortyFive* (Washington, D.C.), [Sept. 16, 2022](#).