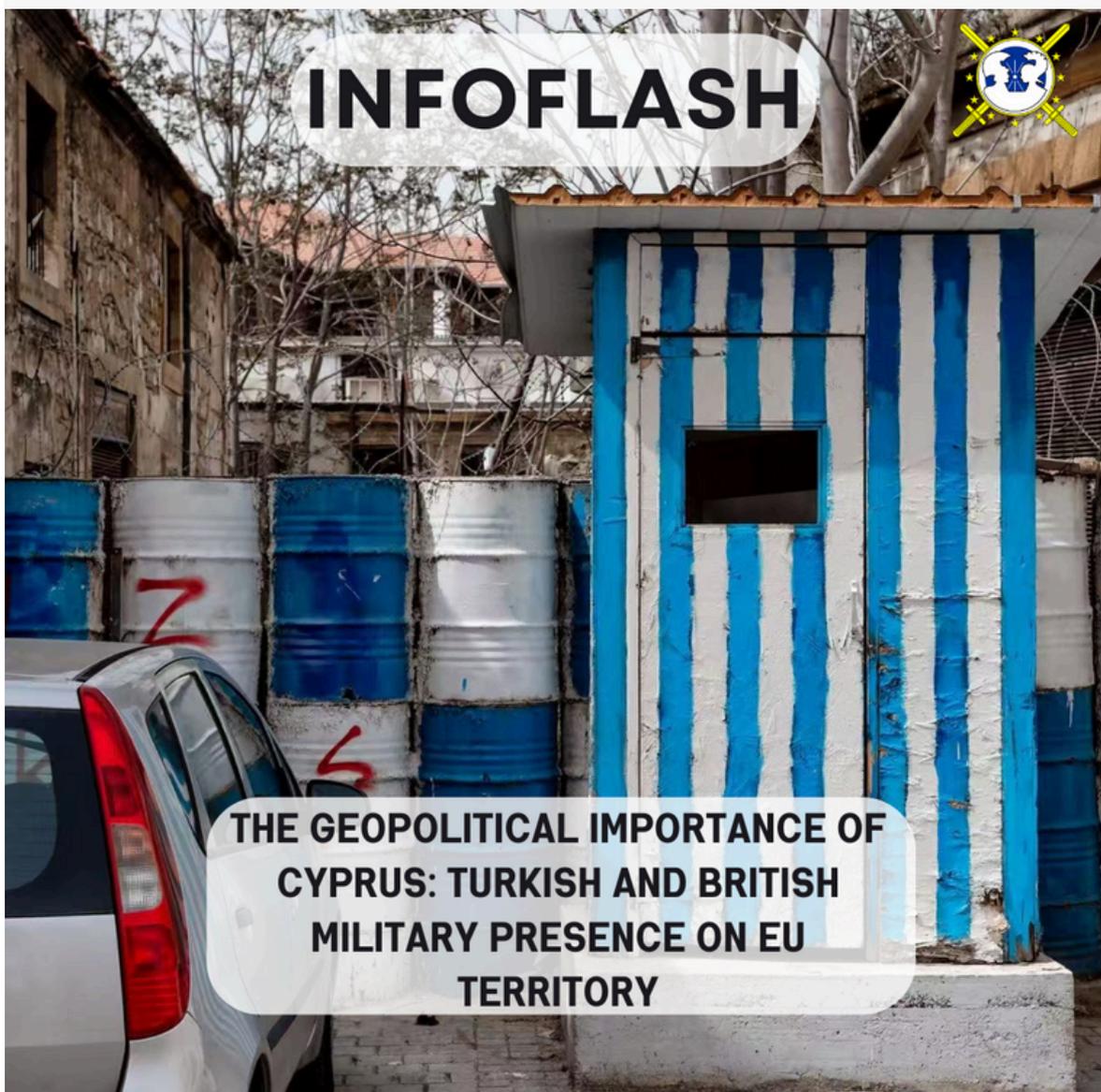


AUGUST 2025



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Introduction

The Republic of Cyprus holds a uniquely sensitive position within the European Union, being a Member State whose sovereignty is compromised by the ongoing Turkish military occupation and the UK/UN military presence. Since EU accession in 2004, the entire island has been considered de jure part of EU territory. However, EU law is suspended in the northern third of the country, which has been under Turkish military occupation since 1974. The self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), recognised only by Türkiye, exists outside the effective control of the Republic of Cyprus and of the European Union, creating a legal and political anomaly at the Union's southeastern border.

The cohesion of the island has been further compromised by Brexit, due to the peculiar status of the British Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) in Akrotiri and Dhekelia. Remnants of the historical Crown colony, they remain under UK sovereignty even after its exit from the EU. These bases not only serve British military interests but have also been used by the US army and to support Israeli military operations, further consolidating external strategic interests on EU soil. The convergence of Turkish and British military assets in Cyprus highlights the island's enduring geopolitical significance, as the only Member State hosting large-scale non-EU military operations with no oversight from its government, the Republic of Cyprus.

The island of Cyprus, due to its geopolitical anomalies, challenges EU sovereignty, regional security, and the implementation of EU law. The presence of non-EU military on EU territory without effective EU control can have adverse effects contributing to the strategic uncertainty of the Eastern Mediterranean.

1. The Status of Cyprus

The so-called Cyprus problem can be considered one of the most intricate legal issues that the EU had to face since its creation. At the heart of the problem is ethnic rivalry between the Greek Cypriots, composing the majority of the population, and the Turkish Cypriot minority (Dundas, 2004, p. 86). This rivalry has deep colonial roots and has been fuelled by the political interests of the two ethnic motherlands, Greece and Türkiye.

When Cyprus was still under British colonial rule, the Greek majority of the population started to pursue independence under the idea of enosis, the subsequent unification with Greece (Nation, 2003, pp. 281–283). Therefore, during the bloody 1955–59 war of independence, Turkish Cypriots sided in favour of British rule as a response to the rise of Greek nationalism, rather opting for a territorial partition between the two ethnic groups. The Treaty of Nicosia, signed between the UK, Greece and Türkiye in 1960, granted

independence to the newly formed Republic of Cyprus while maintaining British sovereignty over the two Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) of Akrotiri and Dhekelia. These bases, held as British Overseas Territories, span 156 square kilometres and include several villages inhabited by Cypriot citizens (Hadjigeorgiou & Skoutaris, 2019, p. 3).

After the island was granted independence, a complex constitutional order was forced upon the Greek majority to secure political equality with their Turkish counterparts (Zervakis, 2004, p. 108). The 1960 Constitution provided for disproportional representation within key state organs in favour of Turkish Cypriots, relying also on significant veto powers (Dundas, 2004, pp. 86–87). The newly born Republic of Cyprus was further weakened by the constant oversight of the guaranteeing powers – United Kingdom, Greece, and Türkiye – to any domestic constitutional changes (Zervakis, 2004, pp. 107–108). The destabilising aspect of this external influence became evident in subsequent intra-Cyprus civil wars in 1963, 1967, and 1974, which all featured the direct intervention of Greece and Türkiye, both NATO members. (Zervakis, 2004, p. 108). After 1964, Türkiye deployed a military contingent to protect strategic positions in Northern Cyprus, while Greece had over 10.000 troops stationed on the island by 1967 (Nation, 2003, p. 291).

In 1974, after years of institutional deadlock caused by intransigent use of the veto, a right-wing coup supported by Greece overthrew the Cypriot government in support of a more hard-line Greek Cypriot regime (Dundas, 2004, p. 88). As a reaction to the coup, Türkiye invaded the northern part of the island, forcing the Greek population living in the area to flee their homes. In fear of further repercussions, Turkish Cypriots in the rest of the island resettled in Turkish occupied territory, later declared the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) (Dundas, 2004, p. 88). To prevent further violence, a UN peacekeeping force (UNFICYP) occupied the so-called Green Line, the 180-kilometre-long border separating the Greek and the Turkish spheres of influence (Nation, 2003, p. 291). The UNFICYP deployment, originally planned to last three months, has today become the longest UN peacekeeping mission, evidence of the international diplomatic failure to solve the dispute (Zervakis, 2004, p. 112).

In the 90s, when the Republic of Cyprus expressed interest in joining the EU, the territorial dispute between Greece and Türkiye came to Brussels. However, while Türkiye and Cyprus were still candidate members, Greece had already been a full member of the Union since 1981 and used its position in favour of the Greek Cypriots. Greece leveraged its veto power by threatening to block all other potential EU members if the territorial division of Cyprus was used to refuse its membership application (Dundas, 2004, p. 90). Thus, throughout the application process, the EU disregarded Türkiye's objections to the fact that the Republic of Cyprus' bid for EU membership was made in the name of the entire island and,

consequently, no Turkish Cypriot representative participated in the accession talks (Zervakis, 2004, pp. 117–118).

It is important to note that, prior to EU membership, Greek Cypriots were fervently in favour of joining the Union as a unified island, while Turkish Cypriots strongly opposed the accession as they feared it would jeopardise their status and demote the role of Türkiye in Cyprus (Lefteratos, 2024, p. 7). However, after the Treaty of Accession was signed in 2003, the Greek Cypriot motivation for reconciliation faded, as it was clear that they would have joined the EU even without the Turkish part of the island, while pro-EU sentiment surged among Turkish Cypriots, as they saw fading away their possibility to join the EU. In the popular vote of April 24th, 2004, Turkish Cypriots voted in favour of acceding to the European Union as a unified island, while the Greek Cypriots turned out overwhelmingly against it (Lefteratos, 2024, p. 8). This led to the overall rejection of the UN-backed 2003 Annan Plan, which aimed at constituting a confederate unitary government under the auspices of the EU and Türkiye. The failed plan would have constituted two federated states, the Greek Cypriot State and the Turkish Cypriot State, under the single international legal personality and sovereignty of the United Cyprus Republic (Annan Plan, 2004, Part A, Article 2). Consequently, on the 1st of May 2004, the island of Cyprus became an EU member without any agreement between the Republic of Cyprus and the TRNC.

Immediately after accession, the Republic of Cyprus started to leverage its position as the only legitimate authority for the island of Cyprus by arbitrarily allotting EU financial aid and modifying titles and roles of TRNC officials (Lefteratos, 2024, pp. 8–9). Additionally, Greek Cypriots could rely on Greek being the only language included as an official language of the EU (Treaty of Accession, 2003, Article 3), to the disadvantage of the Turkish minority. The EU, not expecting this level of opposition from the Greek Cypriots, managed to adopt the Green Line Regulation in 2004 shortly before the official accession of the Republic of Cyprus, to prevent Greek Cypriots from potentially blocking it. While the European Commission claims that the militarised border on the island is not an external border of the EU (European Commission, 2025), the Green Line Regulation sets out the terms under which persons and goods can cross from the non-government-controlled areas, the TRNC and the British SBAs, into the government-controlled areas of the Republic of Cyprus.

According to Protocol No. 10 to the Treaty of Accession, the application of EU law is suspended in those areas of the Republic of Cyprus in which the Republic of Cyprus does not exercise effective control. In accordance with Article 2 of the same Protocol, all matters on the applicability of EU law in the TRNC must be decided by unanimity, granting the Republic of Cyprus a continuous veto power on the issue of further north-south integration. The EU failure to resolve the Cyprus situation before the accession of the Republic of Cyprus

chas had increasingly negative consequences for the relations between the two communities of Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots (Bryant & Hatay, 2009, pp. 1–2). The ever-present coordination between Greece and the Republic of Cyprus has deeply affected Türkiye-EU relations and, given Türkiye's membership in NATO, the possibility of further NATO-EU cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean (Felde, 2021, p. 96).

2. The Turkish Presence

After the Turkish military invasion of 1974, any attempt at instituting a federation or confederation before the EU accession did not yield concrete results (Dundas, 2004, p. 89). The Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus was consolidated by the unilateral declaration of the TRNC in 1983. The TRNC controls around 37% of the island, home to 18% of the total Cypriot population (Nation, 2003, p. 295). The only country recognising the TRNC is Türkiye, while every other sovereign state denies its existence. With the TRNC not existing according to international law, the entity can practically be equated to a Turkish protectorate, politically and economically dependent upon its sponsor state (Dundas, 2004, p. 90; Nation, 2003, p. 295). Simultaneously, any geopolitical solution recognising the existing territorial division is unacceptable for the Greek Cypriots, amounting to legal recognition of the TRNC's territorial claims and a legitimisation of the Turkish invasion (Nation, 2003, p. 295).

Türkiye permanently occupies the area by stationing approximately 35,000 soldiers and maintains a powerful position within the TRNC's police force, militia, and secret services (Nation, 2003, p. 295). In recent years, the size of the Cyprus Turkish Peace Force has remained relatively stable, with an increase in Turkish investments for key infrastructures, such as drone hubs, radar installations and naval facilities (Newsroom, 2024). In 2024, the de facto president of the TRNC confirmed that the presence of Turkish armed forces on the island is of vital importance for Turkish Cypriots (Altun & Efesoy, 2024).

In the aftermath of the occupation, the Turkish government started relocating Turkish citizens on the island to ensure a stronger strategic and political hold. Consequently, the majority of the population of the TRNC was of non-Cypriot origins when Cyprus joined the EU (Dundas, 2004, p. 90). An important reason for the failure of the UN-backed Annan Plan of 2003 was that it did not address the resettlement of the immigrated Turkish population and the fact that Greek Cypriots refugees would not have been allowed to return to their homes before the Turkish invasion (Zervakis, 2004, p. 122). The economic disparity between the two areas also contributed to their detachment. While the Turkish occupied areas stagnated, the Republic of Cyprus flourished rapidly. In the 1990s, the Republic of Cyprus' average per capita income was far higher than in the TRNC, even surpassing that of Türkiye and Greece (Nation, 2003, p. 295).

To promote further integration, the EU institutions granted EU citizenship to the entire island, including the Turkish Cypriot population. However, the Republic of Cyprus enforced its authority to protect its interests against Turkish settlers on the island. Based on the current requirements, a person born in Cyprus after 1960 is a citizen of the Republic of Cyprus, and therefore an EU citizen, if one of the parents was a citizen (Citizenship Law of the Republic of Cyprus, 1967, Article 3). However, the same provision excludes all cases where the entry into or stay in Cyprus of any one of the parents of the said person was illegal. In practice, the provision is used to exclude all Turkish Cypriot children with one non-Cypriot parent who either settled in the TRNC from Türkiye or that failed to provide proof of residence on the island prior to 1960 (Bryant & Hatay, 2009, p. 5; Lefteratos, 2024, pp. 9–10). That said, Turkish Cypriots born from mixed families, meaning Turkish and Turkish Cypriots, are irrevocably excluded from acquiring EU citizenship. While citizenship acquisition in the Republic of Cyprus might appear asymmetrical, it is not in violation of EU law. The national law of a Member State is the only relevant source for the establishment of the conditions of attribution and loss of citizenship, with limited oversight from EU institutions (Kaur Case, 2001).

An additional source of fragmentation is the Turkish support to the Turkish Cypriot population, to which Turkish citizenship is provided to all citizens of the TRNC upon request (Turkish Citizenship Law, 2009, Article 42). The issue of citizenship is not only a source of tension between the two communities but also represents a risk for the stability of the armed forces in the region. In case of further tensions, all Cypriots will be required to fight for the Republic of Cyprus, while the Turkish Cypriots will also have to defend the TRNC and/or Türkiye, in case they have additionally acquired Turkish citizenship. Türkiye, the TRNC and the Republic of Cyprus all have compulsory military conscription, with serious consequences for the citizens of the TRNC. Turkish Cypriots with Turkish citizenship can find themselves under the obligation to fulfil their military obligation both in Türkiye and in the TRNC, despite the authorities' intentions to end such practice (Cleaver, 2025). Similarly, Turkish Cypriots are in principle required to serve in the Cypriot military, whose National Guard Law (2011, Article 18) dictates that all male citizens of the Republic of Cyprus, as well as all those persons having one parent of Cypriot origin but not being citizens, must perform compulsory military service. Hence, Turkish Cypriots are forced to choose between two militarised gates, one guarded by Türkiye, which they start to view as a colonial power, and the other controlled by the Republic of Cyprus, which has the monopoly of EU-Cyprus relations and all the related benefits (Bryant & Hatay, 2009, pp. 2–6).

3. Consequences of Brexit

Another important development that weakened NATO-EU alignment in the region is Brexit.

This is due to the two SBAs of Akrotiri and Dhekelia present on Cypriot territory. The Akrotiri base is the biggest air base of the Royal Air Force outside the UK (Georgiou, 2011, p. 126). When the UK joined the EU in 1973, the bases were first excluded from the accession treaty (Stergiou, 2015, p. 291). However, when the Republic of Cyprus became an EU member, Protocol No. 3 of the Treaty of Accession included the SBAs within the customs territory of the EU, subject only to certain provisions of EU law. Free movement of people was established between the SBAs and the Republic of Cyprus, with the possibility for third-country nationals to enter the SBAs only when in possession of a valid visa for the Republic of Cyprus (Protocol No. 3, 2003, Part 4, Annex).

When the Republic of Cyprus signed the Treaty of Nicosia in 1960, independence was given to the previous UK colony with the exception of the SBAs, which remained under British sovereignty as undeclared colonial territory (Aimilianides, 2009, p. 2; Stergiou, 2015, p. 293). Current legal interpretations uphold the de jure sovereignty of the Republic of Cyprus over the whole island, while recognizing the de facto concession of some sovereign rights over the SBAs to the UK (Aimilianides, 2009, pp. 2–3; Constantinou & Richmond, 2005, p. 70). However, the EU undoubtedly recognises that the Republic of Cyprus does not have effective control within the SBAs (Hadjigeorgiou & Skoutaris, 2019, p. 9).

Before Brexit, British citizens working in the SBAs and the Cypriot population living there were all EU citizens. Even if the UK had the intention to leave the single market and the customs union, the Treaty of Nicosia prohibited the UK from establishing customs posts on the island. The UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement in 2019 created a situation analogous to that of Northern Ireland, where SBAs remained within the single market and the customs union of the EU. Excluding military goods and goods belonging to UK military personnel, all customs checks related to goods imported to or exported from the SBAs are entrusted to the Republic of Cyprus (Protocol on SBAs, Withdrawal Agreement, 2019, Article 2). However, the UK remains responsible for checking all persons crossing the external borders of the SBAs, including airports and seaports but excluding land and sea boundaries with the Republic of Cyprus (Protocol on SBAs, Withdrawal Agreement, 2019, Article 7).

As the SBA of Dhekelia extends across the Green Line, the UK retains control over the crossing points of Pergamos and Strovilia in the eastern part of the island (Hadjigeorgiou & Skoutaris, 2019, p. 13). The issue with this arrangement is that the Green Line Regulation from 2004 obliges the Republic of Cyprus to carry out checks on all persons entering government-controlled areas. The Protocol on SBAs from 2019 allows free movement of people between the Republic of Cyprus and the SBAs without giving the Republic of Cyprus control over all crossing points along the Green Line, allowing individuals to enter the EU without being checked by any EU country. This paradoxical situation has been created by

entrusting the implementation of the Green Line Regulation to a non-EU country, namely the UK (Hadjigeorgiou & Skoutaris, 2019, p. 14).

Finally, Brexit has created a situation where a non-EU member can autonomously dispose of military assets within the territory of the EU. The SBAs are regarded as the most important listening post for Western intelligence in the Eastern Mediterranean, monitoring communications in the Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans, Russia and beyond (Georgiou, 2011, p. 122). While the British, for economic reasons, were willing to give up the SBAs in the 1970s, they encountered strong opposition from the USA, which saw Cyprus as an asset for defending Israel (Stergiou, 2015, p. 291). Since then, the USA has taken vast advantage of the SBAs, relying on the continuous, albeit sometimes tense, cooperation between the US and UK intelligence agencies (Georgiou, 2011, p. 122). Various military and intelligence operations in North Africa, Middle East, Central Asia and the Balkans have relied on the SBAs, mostly following USA-UK interests in the region and regardless of the EU's strategic priorities (Georgiou, 2011, pp. 122–126; Stergiou, 2015, p. 295). Contrary to other NATO foreign military bases in Europe, the SBAs retain sovereign rights and remain completely outside of the jurisdiction of the hosting state. In comparison, foreign NATO military bases are established with the consent of the hosting state and, even if they exclude jurisdiction for acts of soldiers committed on duty, they do not grant territorial rights (NATO, 1955).

The island of Cyprus has proved to be an essential military asset in the region, and control over it can prove to be an essential determinant in future EU and NATO military developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. The geopolitical fragmentation of the island has real consequences on any military cooperation between EU and NATO in the region. This is because the Republic of Cyprus is an EU Member State outside NATO, Türkiye and the UK are NATO members outside the EU and Greece is present in both organisations. In a confrontation in the Eastern Mediterranean between a third country and an EU Member State, NATO would be paralysed by the lack of consensus and the EU would need to make crucial decisions to protect the interests of its Member States (Felde, 2021, p. 92).

Conclusion

From a NATO-EU perspective, the geopolitical situation in Cyprus has the potential to undermine the stability of future military developments in the region. Despite EU membership, the Republic of Cyprus suffers from a lack of effective control over a considerable portion of the island's territory. The entities exercising effective control, namely the TRNC, the UN and the UK, are not bound by EU law and do not need to be aligned with the strategic priorities of the EU and of its Member States. Even in the case of the UK, which currently maintains close cooperation with the EU, future geopolitical developments may not

guarantee their strategic alignment. This is highly detrimental to NATO-EU coordination in the Eastern Mediterranean, as the island's colonial past and the subsequent Turkish occupation create a constant divergence between the territorial claims of the Greek Cypriots, the political demands of the Turkish Cypriots and the military interests of the UK. In addition, the island has been the centre of attention of other external actors. This includes Türkiye's strategic interests in the island, Greece's unwavering support for the Greek Cypriots, the EU's need to regulate its external borders of the customs union and the internal market, and the USA's reliance on the island for its military and intelligence operations. The presence of non-EU military on EU territory without effective EU control can exacerbate the precarious situation of Cyprus, leaving the island vulnerable to the geopolitical developments in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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