

The 50th Anniversary of Türkiye's Military Intervention in Cyprus and the Quest for Turkish Cypriot Sovereign Equality - Erol Kaymak



As Türkiye prepares to commemorate the 50th anniversary of its military intervention in Cyprus on 20 July 1974, the symbolic weight of the occasion is dramatically underscored by the [planned presence](#) of 50 Turkish naval vessels. This flotilla, a powerful representation of military might, is meant to serve as a potent reminder of the events of 1974 and Türkiye's enduring influence in the region. The magnitude of this display extends beyond a simple anniversary observance. It carries significant political implications, particularly in the ongoing Cyprus issue and the delicate balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean. Türkiye intends to send a clear message about its commitment to protect what it

perceives as Turkish Cypriot interests and its resolve in the face of international pressure. The naval display will feature the flagship TCG Anadolu, further emphasizing its maritime capabilities.

The historical context of 1974

Türkiye's intervention was prompted by a coup d'état on the island on 15 July 1974 by Nikos Sampson, orchestrated by the then-ruling Greek military junta in Athens, aiming to unite Cyprus with Greece (the *Enosis*). In response, Türkiye, invoking its rights under the Treaty of Guarantee, initiated the first phase of what it termed the 'Cyprus Peace Operation' (*Kıbrıs Barış Harekatı*) on 20 July 1974 to prevent the annexation of the island to Greece and protect the Turkish Cypriot community. The second phase of the operation, in August 1974, led to population displacements and the partition of the island, which has remained divided since then with ongoing efforts to resolve the dispute.

While the first phase of the operation was met with muted reactions internationally, the second phase caused tension with Türkiye's allies. Disagreement also arose within the Turkish government between Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit and his coalition partner Necmettin Erbakan about the operation's extent, with Erbakan favoring full control of Cyprus. Recently, [President Erdoğan suggested](#) that Türkiye could have taken all of Cyprus during the 1974 intervention. His comments, aimed at domestic audiences, coincided with a UN diplomatic mission to Cyprus.

The broader regional and geopolitical dimension

Türkiye's resolve and show of power are not limited to the Cyprus dispute. It now also encapsulates a broader ambition and role in the Eastern Mediterranean. This is not only related to disputes over energy and natural resources and differences over maritime boundaries but also to broader regional aspirations. While Türkiye utilizes the Montreux Convention to limit navies of non-riparian countries -including its NATO allies- from entering the Black Sea, simultaneously balancing Russia, it faces what it views as *fait accompli* in the Eastern Mediterranean. Through its Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of National Accord (GNA) of Libya in November 2019, it attempted to affect the calculus of regional actors and corporations. However, the hostilities in the Gaza Strip have effectively strengthened the strategic bonds between Israel and the Greek Cypriot-led Republic of Cyprus.

More recently, Turkish Foreign Minister [Hakan Fidan](#) has raised significant concerns about the West's utilization of Cyprus for logistics and military operations in the wake of the Israeli military offensive in Gaza. Fidan accused Western allies of using the humanitarian corridor to Gaza for other purposes, asserting that Cyprus has become an operational hub since the outbreak of hostilities on October 7th. He claims to have intelligence reports indicating that the 'Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus' is being used as a base for operations against Gaza, including intelligence and military flights. Fidan suggests that the humanitarian aid corridor established to deliver food and medicine to Palestinians in Gaza through Cyprus -[the 'Amalthea Initiative'](#)- is a guise, stating it "has obviously turned into an activity that conceals the fact that it is actually a military base."

Fidan's concerns extend beyond the current situation, highlighting the increasing militarization in the region and the need to prevent escalation. He explicitly advises Greece and Greek Cypriots to distance themselves from the conflicts in the Middle East, warning that their involvement could lead to repercussions. In diplomatic efforts, Fidan attempted to persuade his American counterpart, Antony Blinken, to halt the Cypriot initiative, arguing against the implementation of the Cyprus maritime corridor [during talks in Washington](#). These efforts were further reinforced by Ibrahim Kalin, Fidan's successor at Türkiye's National Intelligence Agency (MIT), who also [raised the issue in Washington](#). However, the US government did not comply with these Turkish demands, maintaining strong support for the Amalthea initiative.

These diplomatic efforts, primarily directed toward Arab governments, have been [largely ignored](#), as the Arab countries and other interlocutors disregarded Ankara's claims. These actions highlight Türkiye's strategic concerns regarding its Western allies' use of Cyprus for military purposes, particularly in the context of heightened tensions in the Middle East. Fidan's statements and Türkiye's diplomatic maneuvers underscore their perception of Cyprus's evolving role in regional geopolitics and its potential implications for Türkiye's security interests.

Seeking unity on the domestic front

On 20 July 2024, President Erdogan is scheduled to deliver a speech at the Turkish Cypriot parliament building, which is no surprise. What is different is his emphasis on involving political rivals in commemorating the military operation. On July 18, 2024, the [Turkish parliament passed a resolution](#) marking the 50th anniversary of the Cyprus Peace Operation. The resolution calls for

international recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and an end to the isolation of Turkish Cypriots. It criticizes the Greek Cypriots' stance and supports a two-state solution for lasting peace. Türkiye reaffirms its support for the TRNC and its guarantor role.

Significantly, the Turkish main opposition party leader, Özgür Özel, of the Republican People's Party (CHP), will be visiting Cyprus and in attendance. CHP's approach towards the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) has changed since Özel assumed leadership in November 2023, and the party is now actively engaging with the TRNC at all levels. This represents a strategic shift for Türkiye's main opposition party and indicates a re-prioritization of the TRNC for the CHP.

Erdogan's invitation to the opposition CHP for the Cyprus Peace Operation anniversary reflects efforts to reduce political polarization in Türkiye. The CHP's engagement with the TRNC could strengthen ties and impact Türkiye-TRNC relations. The CHP's presence at the commemoration would also signal unity in Cyprus to the international community. However, deep mistrust and divergent political agendas between the governing AKP and CHP [cast doubt on the long-term sustainability](#) of the normalization process. For its part, CHP also seeks to build relations with the Turkish Cypriot opposition in anticipation of elections in Türkiye and TRNC. In parallel, [renewed contact](#) between Turkey's ruling AK Party and the main opposition party in Northern Cyprus, the Republican Turkish Party (CTP), illustrates a broader initiative seeking strategic alignment. These developments will be closely watched for further indications of shifting political alliances and their potential impact on Cyprus and Turkish foreign policy.

On the other hand, Turkish Cypriots remain polarized over strategy. While the TRNC President, Ersin Tatar, aligned with Ankara, advocates for a two-state

solution based on 'sovereign equality,' a significant portion of the electorate continues to favor a federal settlement based on the political equality of the Turkish Cypriots. Thus, the internationally endorsed bizonal, bicomunal federation (BBF) model [remains the formal aim](#) of the main opposition party, CTP, led by Tufan Erhürman. It remains to be seen whether the newly forged bilateral ties between Özel's CHP and Erhürman's CTP may lead to more consensual political strategies going forward, presumably with CTP subtly moving towards confederal stances over BBF.

The Run up to the 50th anniversary

In July 2024, Turkish President Erdoğan undertook a series of strategically planned overseas visits with geopolitical aspirations in mind.

His travels began on July 3rd when he attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, where he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. However, on July 5th, he abruptly canceled his attendance at the Organisation of Turkic States (OTC) summit to travel to Berlin to witness the Euro 2024 quarterfinal match between Türkiye and the Netherlands. This decision came after UEFA investigated a Turkish player making a 'grey wolf' sign during a previous game. Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz represented Erdoğan at the OTC, which was formed in 2009 to promote cooperation among Turkic-speaking states, with Türkiye playing a significant role. Erdoğan's itinerary then included the NATO leaders' summit in Washington D.C. from July 9th to 11th, where he met, among others, with the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

Mitsotakis will also participate in memorial services and commemorative events in the Greek Cypriot-led Republic of Cyprus on July 20th, coinciding with the Turkish celebrations. Despite improving bilateral relations between Greece and Türkiye, progress on the Cyprus issue and the broader

Eastern Mediterranean remains challenging to achieve. During a meeting with Erdoğan on the sidelines of the NATO summit on July 10th, Mitsotakis [underscored](#) [the urgency](#) of advancing reunification discussions in Cyprus. He reiterated this message in a subsequent meeting with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres a few days later.

Whereas Turks commemorate the ‘peace operation’, the Greek Cypriots mourn and protest the ‘Turkish invasion of Cyprus’ (*Τουρκική εισβολή στην Κύπρο*). On July 15, 2024, Greek Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides led events marking the 50th anniversary of the 1974 coup and Turkish intervention. The day included sirens at 8:20 am, a memorial service, and wreath-laying in Nicosia. Christodoulides [stressed](#) honesty, accountability, and respect for differing views to prevent future conflicts.

The background of stalled settlement talks

The ceremonies are taking place in the context of stalled peace talks. No formal negotiations have been held since 2017. The Crans Montana Summit of 2017 marked a watershed moment, with negotiations collapsing and the Turkish side shifting away from the previously agreed-upon framework of a BBF model. Endorsed by the UN Security Council, the model aims to reunite the island under a single federal structure with power-sharing provisions for Greek and Turkish Cypriots. However, the Turkish Cypriot leadership, now aligned with Türkiye’s stance, has since advocated a two-state solution, arguing that the BBF model is no longer viable.

This shift is rooted in several factors, including the perception that

decades of negotiations based on the BBF have failed to yield results and have allowed the Greek Cypriot side to maintain a dominant position. The Turkish side now insists on recognition of “sovereign equality” and “equal international status” as a precondition for future talks, essentially demanding international recognition of a separate Turkish Cypriot state. They argue that this is necessary to address the historical injustices they perceive and to ensure a sustainable solution that guarantees their rights and security. This stance is further underscored by Turkish Cypriot President Ersin Tatar’s [assertion](#) that there will be “never again” a settlement without sovereign equality. This position has significant implications for the future of the peace process, effectively ruling out a return to the negotiating table under the previous framework.

The Greek Cypriot side, meanwhile, remains committed to the BBF model as the only viable path to reunification. They view the Turkish Cypriot demands for “sovereign equality” as a veiled attempt to legitimize the island’s partition and entrench the existing division. This stalemate has created a profoundly polarized environment, exacerbated by accusations of bad faith and provocative actions on both sides.

Open letter by the UNSG’s Personal Envoy

Despite this apparent stalemate, the United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG), Antonio Guterres, appointed former Colombian Foreign Minister Maria Angela Holguin Cuellar as his Personal Envoy in January 2024. Holguin [submitted her report](#) to Guterres on 10 July. The report was submitted after the UNSG had submitted his Good Offices report on July 3, allowing Guterres

sufficient time to reflect on the way forward in preparation for the UN General Assembly meetings in September 2024. Surprisingly, Holguin also [published an open letter](#) on July 10, reflecting on her six months of experience. Holguin's open letter did not address substantive matters. Still, it did hint that her mission to uncover 'common ground' and 'political will' to recommend the recommencement of fully-fledged and formal peace talks was not successful.

While Holguin's appointment initially offered a glimmer of hope for reinvigorating the stalled peace process, her open letter and the reactions it elicited paint a less optimistic picture. Holguin's mandate, as [outlined by the UN Secretary-General](#), was to assess the feasibility of restarting negotiations and to identify any potential common ground between the two sides. However, her open letter, published ahead of her official report submission, suggests that this mission has been unsuccessful. She notes the lack of trust between the parties and the need to move beyond past solutions that have only led to greater disagreement and frustration.

Significantly, Holguin highlights a sense of resignation among Cypriots, suggesting that many have accepted the *status quo* due to the repeated failures of past negotiation attempts. This perceived apathy poses a challenge to any future peace efforts, as a lack of public support or pressure can make it easier for leaders to maintain entrenched positions.

Another surprise was the [open letter](#) by the Greek Cypriot opposition leader from the Democratic Rally (DISY) Party, Annita Demetriou, calling on President Christodoulides to make urgent progress as the international community loses patience in the pursuit of a federal settlement to the Cyprus issue. Demetriou warns that the international community's patience with the stalled peace process is wearing thin and calls for the resumption of the Türkiye-EU High-Level Dialogue, contingent on the restart of Cyprus negotiations, highlighting the interconnectedness of the Cyprus issue with broader regional dynamics and Türkiye's relationship with the EU. This linkage underscores the need for a comprehensive

approach that addresses not only the internal divisions on the island but also the external factors influencing the situation.

Sovereign equality, the EU, and the strategy

Strategic disagreements among Turkish Cypriots persist. In the aftermath of local elections in Türkiye, President Erdoğan's position has been somewhat weakened, so there seem to be efforts to forge a broader coalition regarding Cyprus. This relates to Erdoğan's call on the opposition to join him in Cyprus for commemorations. For its part, CHP also seeks to build relations with the Turkish Cypriot opposition in anticipation of elections in Türkiye [and TRNC](#).

Whereas Turkish Cypriots remain internally divided on strategy, Erdoğan and TRNC President Ersin Tatar continue to pursue a two-state settlement as the basis of negotiations. This means that Tatar has rebuffed all calls to restart negotiations based on the BBF model based on the political equality of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities. Instead, the Turkish side insists on the acknowledgment of the 'sovereign equality' and equal international standing of the two sides as a prerequisite for formal talks.

Critics argue that Türkiye's pursuit of a two-state solution in Cyprus is a non-starter and hinders the EU's positive agenda. However, this stance can be seen as a strategic move tied to broader regional dynamics and Türkiye's ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean. The emphasis on sovereign equality strengthens

Türkiye's geopolitical position, enhances the international legitimacy of the TRNC, and secures greater autonomy for Turkish Cypriots. These actions can complement the EU's goals by promoting realistic negotiations, contributing to regional stability, and fostering cooperation.

The EU has been striving to implement conditions on its [proposed](#) 'Positive Agenda for Türkiye,' aiming to prompt changes in the stances of Türkiye and the TRNC. However, these efforts have yet to yield the desired results, complicated by Türkiye's steadfast position on Cyprus, which presents a significant challenge for the EU and the international community in pursuing strategic relations with Türkiye.

Türkiye's demands are not explicitly centered on the overt recognition of the TRNC as a precondition for settlement talks. Instead, insights can be gleaned from the annexes to Guterres' Good Offices reports. In the latest report, TRNC President Tatar emphasizes the 3Ds -direct flights, direct trade, and direct diplomatic contacts- as a tangible demonstration of the acknowledgment of the Turkish Cypriot side's sovereign equality and equal international standing. This position, likely endorsed by Ankara, is well understood by international diplomats as the official Turkish stance.

This suggests that resolving the issue of extending the customs union to include the Republic of Cyprus, thereby fulfilling Türkiye's obligations to the EU, could be achievable if the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots is addressed. The intricate dynamics between the EU, Türkiye, and the Cyprus issue, particularly in relation to the EU's conditional positive agenda and Türkiye's demands for the TRNC, are crucial to understanding this situation.

Türkiye's strategy, while complex, could potentially align with broader regional and European interests. This alignment offers pathways to a lasting resolution of the Cyprus issue, benefiting all parties involved.

The EU has employed a carrot-and-stick approach, offering potential rewards like modernizing the Customs Union and visa facilitation in exchange for Turkish cooperation in Cyprus, among other issues, centered on leveraging its relationship with Türkiye. The bloc seeks a "[cooperative](#)

[and mutually beneficial relationship](#)” with Türkiye, recognizing its strategic importance in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, the EU remains steadfast in its commitment to a “[comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem](#)” within the UN framework.

President Tatar’s articulation of the 3Ds sheds light on Türkiye’s strategy. These demands, characterized as tangible manifestations of sovereign equality, suggest a desire for practical recognition of the TRNC, even without formal international recognition. This strategy aims to break the TRNC’s isolation and potentially strengthen its claim to statehood in the long run, aligning with Türkiye’s broader geopolitical goals in the region.

The complexities and potential roadblocks associated with Türkiye’s demands are significant. The EU’s insistence on a UN-backed settlement in Cyprus and its rejection of a two-state solution directly clashes with Türkiye’s preconditions for progress. Additionally, the EU’s emphasis on conditionality in its engagement with Türkiye underscores the challenges in finding common ground. While extending the customs union to Cyprus may not hinge solely on lifting the TRNC’s isolation, the contrasting positions and lack of tangible progress on the 3Ds suggest this remains a significant obstacle.

The EU’s conundrum is evident: balancing its strategic interests in engaging with Türkiye against its commitment to a Cyprus settlement based on UN resolutions. Türkiye’s unwavering stance on sovereign equality for the TRNC and its strategic use of the 3Ds further complicate the path toward a resolution. The stalemate will likely persist without a fundamental shift in either side’s position.

The Turkish side seeks to upgrade its status through the OTC and open ports to direct trade and strengthen its position. There is also [a broader push](#), supported by various international advocates,

including British politician Ian Duncan Smith and others from the UK and beyond, to challenge the isolation of Turkish Cypriots and facilitate direct trade and direct international flights through Ercan airport. However, the Greek Cypriot side views these demands as unreasonable and counterproductive to peace. They criticize the Turkish refusal to acknowledge the BBF as the agreed basis for negotiations. They see the push for direct trade and recognition through the OTC as attempts to solidify a two-state solution and undermine the UN-led peace process.

Property disputes

In this context, the Greek Cypriot side's recent legal actions regarding property in Northern Cyprus appear to be a coercive tactic to pressure the Turkish Cypriot side amid stalled settlement negotiations. Domestically, the Greek Cypriot side is signaling an intent to deter EU citizens from trading in Greek Cypriot-owned properties in the north. Although these matters are under the purview of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) via the Turkish Cypriot Immovable Property Commission (IPC), such actions are seen as measures to compel Turkish Cypriots to revise policies.

The Greek Cypriot side is intensifying efforts to prevent the sale and development of Greek Cypriot-owned properties in the north, evidenced by recent arrests of individuals, including EU citizens, involved in such transactions. Notably, a German woman and an Israeli businessman were arrested for promoting property sales in the north, highlighting a concerted effort to deter such activities. While these arrests seem to target EU citizens, Turkish Cypriots

are also potentially vulnerable, as seen in the case of Turkish Cypriot lawyer Akan Kürşat, who was arrested for his involvement in property transactions.

While the IPC is recognized by the ECHR as a legal mechanism (i.e., a domestic remedy) for addressing property disputes, the Greek Cypriot side argues that these [arrests](#) are justified. They view the IPC as a tool used by the Turkish Cypriot side to legitimize the acquisition of Greek Cypriot properties, which they consider illegal under international law. The Turkish Cypriot representative at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Oğuzhan Hasipoğlu, [criticizes these actions](#), claiming they contradict the ECHR's acceptance of the IPC and violate international law. He calls for an investigation into these arrests, asserting they are politically motivated to pressure the Turkish Cypriot side into accepting the Greek Cypriot position.

The broader context of property disputes between the two sides is complex. Hasipoğlu accuses the Greek Cypriot side of expropriating Turkish Cypriot properties in the south without compensation. This highlights the intricate nature of the property issue, which remains a significant point of contention and a potential flashpoint for legal battles.

The prospects for an interim deal

The consequences of the lack of common ground for formal negotiations do not negate the substantive elements of the Cyprus issue. It does, however, offer Türkiye an opportunity to argue not only in favor of a two-state solution but also to claim that the preconditions of the EU for progressing on strategic

areas of mutual interest should not be linked to progress on Cyprus talks via the Turkish side's reaffirmation of the BBF model. Guterres is unlikely to produce a report that opens that path. It is more likely that he will push for a package of CBMs that address Turkish Cypriot concerns over isolation while simultaneously strengthening the Technical Committees to negotiate the implementation of CBMs and cooperation agreements.

In this context, the question becomes whether the Greek Cypriot side can be induced into a normalization process through the Technical Committees. The difficulty for Greek Cypriot leader Christodoulides is that he has [openly referenced](#) fully-fledged negotiations based on BBF, including convergences and the acquis of the talks through the failed Crans Montana Summit as a diplomatic goal. Moreover, he has attempted to avert the introduction of CBMs that have the effect of upgrading the TRNC, opting instead to retain control over the process by introducing selective CBMs aimed at the rights of Turkish Cypriots as citizens rather than as a political community. In the annexes to Guterres' most recent report, he touts the 14 unilateral measures his government took announced on 26 January 2024.

The UN, the EU, and the broader international community will undoubtedly watch domestic political developments in Türkiye and the TRNC. Among Turkish Cypriots, the upcoming presidential elections, scheduled in 2025, are likely to feature a challenge by opposition candidates to Tatar's re-election. Notwithstanding Türkiye's influence, [polls suggest](#) the unpopularity of the current governing coalition headed by the National Unity Party (UBP) and that opposition leader Tufan Erhürman leads Tatar. Of course, how a change in government or president would affect policy remains to be seen.

Aside from any potential softening of stances on the part of Turkish Cypriot leadership, the real gauge is whether President Erdoğan of Türkiye,

potentially supported by the main opposition CHP, seeks closer relations with the West and thus progress on Cyprus-related issues. This would manifest itself partly vicariously through the positions of the Turkish Cypriot leadership. Taken at face value, Tatar must realize the 3Ds he seeks cannot be granted to him via Holguin's contacts, especially over direct flights. This implies that the Turkish side hopes that the UN will not only determine a lack of common ground regarding the settlement model but also advocate for the lifting of the international isolation of the Turkish Cypriots.

Independent of [Tatar's](#)

[view](#) that the 3Ds are not subject to negotiation, the real issue is whether the authorization of Ercan Airport for international flights is subject to reversal. Ercan's status has been part of previous CBM proposals, including one proposed in 2022 through the initiative of the Greek Cypriot Foreign

Minister, Ioannis Kasoulides, who [suggested](#)

that the airport could open under UN administration in exchange for the simultaneous administrative control of Varosha/Maraş. Still, should TRNC succeed in upgrading its international status through the OTC and other institutions, the claim to sovereign control over ports may be strengthened without the need for trade-offs.

Direct trade, by contrast, is an area where progress could be made,

given the precedent of the [proposed](#)

[direct trade regulation](#) by the European Union in

2004. Whereas it was shelved, it is within the purview of the EU to revive the proposal or otherwise propose how trade can be facilitated to overcome the limitations of the current Green Line Regulation that administers crossings of individuals and goods across the Green Line that divides Cyprus. Moreover, it relates to Türkiye's obligations to the EU to extend customs union to all

members, including the Republic of Cyprus. This suggests that while the Turkish side is not prepared to negotiate BBF and engage in fully-fledged negotiations, rebuffing any efforts to link CBMs to the affirmation of federalism, it is open to negotiation of the positive agenda and customs union via the 3Ds tabled by President Tatar in Cyprus. Whereas EU member state diplomats are constrained

by the European Conclusions of April 2024, there is ample opportunity to exchange ideas with Türkiye via Corepor, if not directly with the Turkish Cypriot leadership.

In discussing this with respect to Holguin's mandate, the Turkish side has been emphasizing that it's not really for the duration of her mandate, although they underlined six months, which was to determine whether there was 'common ground.' This does not foreclose the possibility that some other diplomat, if not herself, could be reappointed under a different mandate.

While the Turkish side remains adamant in its stance, it still relies on the UN-led process precisely because the Good Offices mission of the UNSG and relevant UN Security Council resolutions provide a forum that underlines the equality of the sides. Therefore, going forward, the Turkish side will pursue UN-based contacts rather than the EU, as the latter serves to consolidate the sovereign authority of the Greek Cypriot side over the Republic of Cyprus.

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