Karpasia, the Strategically Important 'Bit' of Cyprus

Andrekos Varnava presents us his thoughts on the latest developments on the Cyprus issue. Are we really closer to a solution and is new president Tassos Papadopoulos the one to secure it?

I was in Cyprus when the first Annan plan was presented, and experienced the optimism, despair and resignation pervading the minds of many Greek-Cypriots. Some recognised the UN initiative as an opportunity, while others opposed the unification of the island on such a basis. One side wanted to negotiate; the other wanted to walk away. I belonged to the former school, I still do, but I have reservations. It was clear that only one side represents the interests of the Cypriots, while the other was guarding its strategic interests in the eastern Mediterranean. The developments of the past week, whether they bare any fruit or not, vindicates these suspicions. For Turkey, a solution to the Cyprus Problem based on the Annan proposals hinges on complete Turkish control of the Karpas Peninsula.

Recently, Turkish leader Tayyip Erdogan dropped a bombshell when after meeting Kofi Annan in Ankara, he emphatically announced that Annan's new plan "will bring the solution we want and... we can wrap up the issue in March with referenda on both sides." What was so dramatically different in this plan to give Turkey the solution it wanted?

According to reports, the only significant change in Annan's third and final plan is that the whole of the Karpas Peninsula will remain under Turkish-Cypriot control. In the first Annan proposal there were two maps offered, one including and the other excluding northern Karpasia in the Greek-Cypriot sector. This enclave comprised four villages, Rizokarpaso (which is really a town or 'komopolis'), Gialousa (also substantially large), Agia Triada, and Melanarga. In private discussions, the Clerides Government made it clear to the UN that at the very least this part of Karpasia must return to Greek-Cypriot control. Accordingly, the second Annan plan discarded the map that excluded Karpasia. Denktash showed little concern about this aspect of the map, until the Turkish military pointed out the value of Karpasia, or rather its perceived value.

The strategic worth of any place hinges on two factors, national 'interests,' and what these are perceived to be. Therefore, strategic expediency itself is determined by perception. Whether real or imagined, the idea of a place being strategically important to the 'interests' of a state is usually deep-rooted and politically powerful. One need only look at the reasons and motivations behind Britain's occupation of Cyprus, and in recent times the continued Israeli
occupation of the Golan Heights. The situation since the 1974 invasion in occupied Cyprus reflects this too. Why has Turkey invested so much money into this economically mismanaged and destitute place? Why has it invested so much political support to a man who can only be described as a corrupt chauvinist despot who has oppressed his people for decades? It certainly was not to keep the Turkish-Cypriots content - more of them live in the north of London than in the whole of Cyprus. Those that do live in occupied Cyprus are today demonstrating for his removal and unification. The reason was to preserve the territorial status quo, and at second best to preserve as much of it as possible in case of being forced to accept a solution. Now the force has finally come, but at what price?

Short of occupying all of Cyprus, or retaining the territorial status quo, Turkey considers the Karpas Peninsula to be the most important 'bit' of Cyprus. The 'pan-handle' or 'ox-tail' of Cyprus projects forty miles beyond the rest of the island. It contains many small anchorages, from Boghazi, Koma tou Gialou, and Chelones at Rizokarpaso, on the eastern side, to Gialousa and Davlos on the western. From the majestic Kantara Castle at the base of Karpasia, both sides of this narrow peninsula can be seen, as can Asia Minor, and on clear days, even the Lebanese Mountains. The same can be said of Cape Apostolos Andreas, the northern most tip of Karpasia. Although expected by many Cypriots, Kantara was not in any of Annan's plans, nor was the coastal road that would have incorporated dozens of Greek-Cypriot villages, but also the eastern anchorages. But Cape Apostolos Andreas was. Here, projecting like a dagger at the only two major southern ports of Turkey, Mersin and Alexandretta (Iskenderun), the Greek-Cypriots could become a nuisance to Turkish shipping and oil interests. This is the perceived value of Karpasia to Turkish national interests.

In order for Turkey to take its place in the EU it must compromise over Cyprus. Erdogan has come to this realisation; Denktash has not. A confrontation between them is looming. However, Erdogan has to placate the military. Hitherto the military and Denktash have been allies, but with Erdogan's success in capturing the Karpasia, the military may be content. If Erdogan has the military on his side, than all that remains is the Greek-Cypriots.

Many may be wondering why the Greek-Cypriot side does not acquiesce over Karpasia. It is not a question of compromising and coming out second best, but rather a historical, spiritual, and humanitarian question. Ancient Karpasia, two miles north of Rizokarpaso, was once the capital of Cyprus, and the seat of the Orthodox See during Latin rule. Later Saint Synesios, the main church at Rizokarpaso filled this role. The Apostolos Andreas monastery is the most important place of pilgrimage for a Cypriot. There are still Greek-Cypriots living here. Although dwindling owing to the hardships and policies to expel them, they have resolutely remained behind to preserve their homes, fields, and churches. It is to them that Greek-Cypriots owe much inspiration, and successive Cypriot governments have promised them freedom under Greek-Cypriot auspices.
At this crucial juncture in the history of the Cyprus problem, there is a changing of the guard in the Greek-Cypriot leadership. The highly respected and experienced Glafkos Clerides has been voted out, and Cypriots have elected Tassos Papadopoulos. This could be an unfortunate development. Papadopoulos has a reputation as an impetuous individual. In the 1960's he was second in command to Polycarpos Giorgadjis, the Minister of the Interior, who organised armed cadres supported by CIA funds. Not only did these armed groups fight the Turks, but also unarmed Greek-Cypriot political groups, especially the left, which ironically now supports Papadopoulos. Papadopoulos was also second in command of the Akritas disagreement by undermining the Zurich-London Accords, the founding documents of the Cyprus Republic. During the turmoil immediately before and during the coup that ousted Makarios, Papadopoulos stood by him, but after his death he parted with his successor Spiros Kyprianou and formed the United Party. It won a pitiful 2.7% in the parliamentary elections of 1981. He soon realised that without a party supporter base he would never become president. His opportunity arose when Kyprianou fell from power and shortly thereafter became ill. Now he had a party, but his past actions almost scuttled his plans. Having made a fortune as a businessman and lawyer, Papadopoulos was exposed at the European Court recently as the man who masterminded the exodus of Slobodan Milosovic's millions out of Serbia. He was then denounced in Cyprus, as an instrumental figure in the shares scandal that gripped the island in the late 1990's. However, political opportunism knows no bounds. He won favour with the strongest anti-Clerides group in Cyprus, AKEL - the Communist Party. With the support of the Socialists, whose leader was overlooked by the party backing Clerides, and his reputation as a hardliner, he was easily elected president on a platform of 'change.' He clearly has a mandate, but does he have the responsibility to resist the pressure from outside to sign an agreement that is against the European acquis communautaire, and which enshrines the strategic 'interests' of Turkey in Cyprus?