

Assessing the Effectiveness

of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP)

and the Office of the Special Adviser to the
Secretary-General on Cyprus (OSASG)

Dr Alexandra Novosseloff

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Visiting address: C.J. Hambros plass 2d

Address: P.O. Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway

Internet: effectivepeaceops.net | www.nupi.no

E-mail: info@nupi.no

Fax: [+ 47] 22 99 40 50

Tel: [+ 47] 22 99 40 00

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Author

Dr Alexandra Novosseloff, International Peace Institute (IPI), New York
and Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Oslo

Contributor

Ms Lisa Sharland, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra
and Stimson Center, Washington DC

EPON series editor

Cedric de Coning

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United States

Executive Summary

On 29 July 2021, the UN Security Council renewed the mandate of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) with Resolution 2587 after the Secretary-General submitted his bi-annual reports on the peace Mission (S/2021/635) and on his Good Offices (S/2021/634) on 9 July 2021. The Security Council has had “the Cyprus question” on its agenda for 57 years, following the creation of UNFICYP through Resolution 186 and a subsequent mediation role for the Secretary-General. At the end of 2021, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), Head of UNFICYP, and Deputy Special Adviser of the Secretary-General for the Good Offices, Elizabeth Spehar, will end her assignment. The two Missions on the island are likely to open a new chapter of their existence. In 2024, the UN Missions in Cyprus will celebrate the 60th anniversary of their presence in the country, and it seems timely to analyse their impact and effectiveness over the years.

Cyprus’ frozen conflict, often referred to by researchers and scholars as the “Cyprus problem”, has a complex history that takes up a third of this report, along with different episodes in the evolution of the two UN Missions. It is considered essential to establish the facts and drivers of the conflict clearly. This history does not start at the same time for the two sides. It begins with the inter-ethnic events of 1963-1964 for the Turkish Cypriots, who cannot forget the violence and humiliation they suffered at the time. For the Greek Cypriots, it begins in July 1974, with the trauma of the Turkish intervention and the flight which followed. The Turkish intervention in 1974 de facto partitioned the island between a legally and internationally recognised country (except for Turkey), the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), and an illegal entity (“Northern Cyprus” or “the north”, also called “occupied areas” by the RoC). From then on, both parts of Cyprus developed as economically, politically and culturally separate, which has continued despite the

progressive opening of crossing points along the “Green Line” since 2003. These differences each constitute stumbling blocks on the path to a settlement of this conflict.

Cyprus is a unique case in international relations and peace operations. Its capital city is the only remaining divided capital in Europe and in the world. Cyprus is the only country in the world to have “Guarantors” with a right to intervene and station troops on a permanent basis. UNFICYP is one of the peacekeeping operations created during the Cold War which continues to operate (along with those in Kashmir, Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and South Lebanon). These missions belong to a particular period (bipolarity) when super power rivalry during the Cold War limited UN peacekeeping to third-party cease-fire monitoring missions in interstate conflicts. However, the missions in Cyprus and South Lebanon have de facto intervened within a country in a conflict that is also internal. These legacy missions have remained deployed in conflicts referred to as “frozen”. Cyprus is also one of the few cases (besides Western Sahara and Jerusalem) where a peacekeeping mission has evolved alongside a peacemaking mission: the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Cyprus (OSASG), also known as the Mission of Good Offices.

UNFICYP has been understudied by the peacekeeping research community, which has been more focused on multidimensional missions. In the current context of a paralysed Security Council, however, lessons from missions created during the Cold War are increasingly important, as is the study of interposition forces as a potential conflict prevention mechanism. What is true for a mission like UNFICYP is also often true for UN special political missions (peacemaking and peacebuilding). Beyond issues around the achievements and the effectiveness of such UN missions, this extended UN presence in Cyprus triggers additional research questions, such as: Can a conflict be resolved without pressure or any sense of urgency? Can a conflict be resolved without leverage or accountability mechanisms? Is time on the side of conflict resolution? Can a conflict be left to the mercy of time? Can it remain unsettled? Can a conflict be solved by one major peace agreement or comprehensive take-it-or-leave-it package? Can efforts to advance gender equality and women, peace and security (WPS) progress when there is a lack of genuine commitment from political leaders in a peace process? Is it possible to move away from the status quo while not moving away from certainty? Can peace be made without paying a certain price and willingness to make concessions?

The effectiveness of UNFICYP and OSASG across six critical dimensions

Political Primacy: The Multiple Interactions between Peacekeeping and Peacemaking

The UN considers peacekeeping an enabler of political processes. UNFICYP's goal is to create conditions conducive to a successful peace process. Over the years and to this day, the UN has been the only consistent actor accepted by the parties who are relentlessly seeking a solution to the Cyprus problem. Mandated as a mediator, the UN was mostly a facilitator of successive negotiations with specific common features, including:

- Cypriot-owned and UN-facilitated;
- Top-down leadership process, excluding grassroots movements, with information insufficiently shared with the public;
- The search for a comprehensive settlement in a process in which “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”;
- Deep mistrust between two key leaders;
- Length of open-ended negotiations prolongs the status quo where the two sides are locked into a dead-end; and
- Multiple negotiations and various high-level talks were mainly held abroad, rarely on the island.

These features are generally viewed by EPON interlocutors as outdated, contrary to what the UN would encourage in any other conflict setting, and leading to inconclusiveness. Some thus say that the UN has become part of the Cyprus problem. The two sides wanted to maintain a particular type of process – elitist, exclusive, male-dominated and leader-led – which the UN had to agree to but with which it became stuck. Instead of building up, the negotiations have brought increasing division because their setting has not fundamentally changed, they have lacked inclusivity, and failed to create common ground. During EPON interviews, interlocutors suggested a “healthier process” be devised. They advocated for an incremental approach, focusing more on the conditions for the talks before any comprehensive solution is negotiated and agreed upon, and with the introduction of deadlines and benchmarks that would eventually bring an end to the process.

The division of labour between the UN peacekeeping and peacemaking elements is hard to distinguish as interlocutors assess the effectiveness of the peacekeeping element in relation to

the success of parallel political negotiations on the future of Cyprus. The inconclusiveness of peacemaking processes has contributed to the ineffectiveness of peacekeeping efforts. And the successful maintenance of stability has hampered the peacemaking aspect of the UN mandate. Therefore, one could question whether the political element really freed up the peacekeeping mission from the burden of mediation, facilitation, or shuttle diplomacy between the parties. If the UN has been a successful facilitator in keeping the peace, it has been unsuccessful in breaking down the status quo. The absence of a viable peace process since July 2017 has resulted in numerous substantial changes on the ground and increased tension between the two sides, moving them further apart. One could thus conclude that the leverage provided with the presence of a UN peacekeeping mission alongside a political mission has been under-utilised, given the lack of urgency in finding a resolution to the Cyprus problem, particularly in the Security Council.

Realistic Mandates and Matching Resources of Interposition and Mediation

The mandate of UNFICYP is viewed as adapted to the context and circumstances, despite the lack of a definition for what a return to “normal conditions” would look like, as mentioned in Resolution 186. The two sides have not been able to agree on the meaning of “normal conditions”. UNFICYP’s prevention role has been efficient in that Cyprus has often been referred to as “a conflict without casualties” (since 1996), a “comfortable conflict”, and “difficult to solve but easy to manage”. It is so comfortable that the presence of UNFICYP has made “people forget that no cease-fire agreement exists between the parties or the belligerents.” With a very small contingent, UNFICYP has stabilised the security situation on the ground. Beyond interposition, some interlocutors have advocated for high-impact reporting on human rights, as Cyprus suffers from serious domestic violence and has received the highest number of migrants per capita in Europe.

A number of interlocutors view the UN as a mere facilitator, with the process always remaining in the hands of the parties. They are critical of the UN special envoys selected, while acknowledging that they were often mistreated, especially by the Greek Cypriots. Overall, the UN has had difficulties in explaining its actions and managing expectations. The UN is considered too timid in its approach towards the sides and in pointing out those who have been unconstructive during the various talks held. The lack of will from the parties to engage in a meaningful political process has limited the UN’s effectiveness.

Legitimacy and Credibility of the UN Presence in Cyprus

The legitimacy and credibility of a UN mission is the result of combined action by various organs of the UN and its main stakeholders: the Secretariat, Security Council, contributing countries, and host country. A UN mission cannot be credible if it operates in a vacuum and

without any support from the permanent Security Council Members (P5), regional actors, Cyprus' Guarantors, and its host country, even with a sound mandate.

The Security Council has spent little time on the "Cyprus problem" with, on average, two resolutions per year, mainly to renew UNFICYP's six-month mandate, support ongoing negotiations, or reiterate the lack of meaningful progress on the political front. Cyprus is considered "a low-intensity issue on the Council's agenda", reflecting the lack of urgency on the part of the "international community" towards a conflict that has no victims. In the Council, the UK, France and Russia seem to have had a special interest in Cyprus. They follow the issue in the Council more closely than other Members. The UK is the penholder for all resolutions on Cyprus. France and Russia are considered the main defenders of the RoC and the Greek Cypriot community in the Security Council. Russia is the only permanent Member that has used its veto power (three times) on a resolution on Cyprus. The US and China have been more distant Members of the P5 on the Cyprus issue.

Apathy has affected the Council chamber and the Members have not taken any initiative on the Cyprus problem. Several countries view Cyprus in terms of their policy towards Turkey, which obstructs the functioning of the Good Offices. Overall, an effective solution to the problem has been a distant secondary concern for the key international actors.

A number of interlocutors point out how regional tensions can have an impact on the situation on the ground, in the buffer zone, even indirectly. These tensions de facto ended the decoupling between the Cyprus problem and the bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey. As a result, Cyprus is becoming part of a broader dispute. Analysts often view long-term operations as victims of a lack of strategic P5 interest in the regions and countries where they are deployed. UNFICYP is a counter-example of this. It receives intense strategic attention internationally, which has led the P5 to avoid bold initiatives in Cyprus that would change the status quo, making it very difficult for the rest of the UN to operate in the area.

Unlike other peacekeeping missions, UNFICYP has generally enjoyed legitimacy from both sides, although over time, the Turkish Cypriot community began to raise concerns over the impartiality of the UN in Cyprus. Greek Cypriots and RoC authorities are the main supporters of the UN presence in Cyprus, as the status quo is a reassurance to them, and they feel that being an agenda item of the Security Council prevents Turkey from going too far in its domination over the island and the region. Turkish Cypriots consider the UNFICYP mandate imbalanced as they are not party to the "consent" of the host state, and they mainly see UNFICYP as part of the status quo they wish to challenge. The peculiar and unique mode of UNFICYP financing, with a third of its budget covered by one party to the conflict (RoC) and one Guarantor (Greece), is considered another source of partiality of the UN Mission by the Turkish Cypriot community.

EPON recommends that a new discussion be initiated by the Security Council and Secretary-General on the UNFICYP budget to align it with other peace operations, i.e. to be financed

by the peacekeeping budget. This would help counter any accusation of partiality increasingly directed at the UN Mission.

Despite their length, the two Missions are not very well known among Cypriots, except by those crossing the Green Line or involved in intercommunal activities. When they do know about the UN Missions, people have a fairly global and positive view of its actions and want it to do much more. Nevertheless, they lack confidence in the effectiveness of the UN as they connect the work of the peacekeepers to the state of the negotiations. In cooperation with NGOs and researchers, funding should be granted to UNFICYP to conduct a major opinion poll on its work and the model of operations since 2007 to help prioritise some of its activities and develop a targeted communication strategy.

People-Centred Approaches: Acting as Connectors and Conveners Towards a Stronger Role for Civil Society

Both UNFICYP and the Mission of Good Offices have worked as “connectors and conveners” among civil society actors and local community representatives in an environment where those involved in promoting a culture of peace in Cyprus enjoy little political space or institutional support, which has also limited the work of the UN in this context. The difficulty in reaching out to civil society actors outside the Nicosia bubble and the fragmentation and weakness of civil society have been additional impediments to the UN’s interactions with actors in civil society in an effort to influence peace negotiations.

Interviews with civil society members have clearly highlighted that the leaders on both sides have overlooked their role in preparing the ground for a solution in Cyprus.

The UN Missions should work in partnership with the two sides to devise a Track II process that could be activated when negotiations resume so that the voice of civil society on both sides is better heard. New consultations could be undertaken to improve the functioning of the technical committees and/or to create new ones, such as a committee on Cypriot diasporas, as one interlocutor suggested. Some interlocutors have pointed out the limited funding at the disposal of the UN to strengthen civil society. In addition, the UN Missions in Cyprus could take the lead in suggesting the building of a new “Home for Cooperation” and helping NGOs find the necessary funding for these in Pyla and Varosha/Maraş. These cities can be considered places of cooperation leading a process of rapprochement between the two communities.

Women, Peace and Security (WPS)

UNFICYP has often been highlighted as a champion of WPS among peacekeeping missions, in large part due to the high levels of women’s representation across the Mission. Notably,

UNFICYP has had the only three women that have served as Force Commanders of any UN peacekeeping mission in its more than 70-year history. Furthermore, women represent 43.2% of the police component, which is higher than in any other current peacekeeping mission. However, this progress around women's participation in the peacekeeping mission has meant that there has been a lack of attention to other challenges and areas of progress by different stakeholders when highlighting the Mission's efforts to progress WPS.

Cypriot civil society has had a central role in efforts to progress WPS on the island on both sides, although their efforts continue to be marginalised. Efforts by the UN to increase women's participation in the peace process have made minimal progress due to a lack of willingness by the two leaders and political elite to include women in the peace process meaningfully. Diplomatic missions and the Security Council should continue to put pressure on the leaders to increase women's representation and engagement substantially in any formal peace negotiations.

The frozen conflict has meant that women's security needs have not been prioritised. For women on the island, there are high levels of structural violence, including domestic violence and human trafficking. However, there are no provisions in the peacekeeping mandate for UNFICYP to address institutional issues related to sexual and gender-based violence. The delay in finding a settlement to the Cyprus problem also has an impact on the economic livelihoods of women across the island, even though finding a solution to resolving the problem could uplift women and their communities economically. The Security Council should acknowledge the broad spectrum of issues that contribute to women's insecurity on the island and explore mechanisms to protect them (e.g. in response to sexual and gender-based violence). Furthermore, the Council should encourage the UNFICYP and the Good Offices to share information about the economic benefits of reunification—particularly for women in terms of gender equality—as part of their strategic communications with local communities.

Coordination and Partnerships

The presence of two UN Missions in Cyprus does not help with the overall visibility of the UN on the island. Often, the presence of the Special Adviser has attracted the most attention; in their absence, the SRSG has focused attention. Interlocutors have talked about “fuzziness” in the Missions' activities, and at times, there has been some rivalry over who takes credit for success in the technical committees or elsewhere. However, in the past few years, integration has greatly improved between the two UN Missions and among UNFICYP's three main components. Still, there is a need for more joint work between the two Missions, drawing on various expertise, and for them to strategise together. Taking advantage of the dimensions of the Mission, the political-military integration should be further strengthened, and internal sharing of information should be improved. UNFICYP leadership and staff have pointed to the absence of a Mission Planning Unit or Mission Planning Officer as a crucial deficit. EPON considers

that such an asset should be granted to UNFICYP, as with other ongoing peace operations where one is not present.

Impact and Constraints over Effectiveness of the UN Presence in Cyprus

A peacekeeping operation can be effective in various ways, but it cannot enforce a solution on a country. If the UN Mission has an impact on the ground in preventing a recurrence of the conflict, the impact has been limited by several factors and constraints that need to be taken into account. As one ambassador in Nicosia explains: “It is hard for the UN to overcome all this unwillingness,” and at the same time, “it is the task of the Secretary-General or of the UN more generally to never give up.”

Strategic Impact of the UN Presence in Cyprus

The majority of EPON interlocutors believe that the UN has prevented more bloodshed from happening since it was deployed in 1964. Opinions vary according to which side of the island people are on. Cypriots in the South tend to find UNFICYP a necessary evil acting as a buffer between them and the Turkish army. Cypriots in the North tend to think that the Mission is part of the problem and is biased because it was legitimated in 1964 by a government without Turkish Cypriot representation.

On the political front, the mere presence of the UN has sustained the dialogue between the two sides. The UN has prepared the ground for a future settlement by facilitating dialogue between the two sides and observing the ceasefire line, even if major constraints have prevented a comprehensive settlement. The UN presence has kept the idea of reunification alive, even if facts on the ground have moved the island towards division.

UNFICYP has been very effective in preventing a relapse in the conflict (except in 1974, as no peacekeeping operation can ever engage in fighting at the strategic level against a military intervention of the State). At very low cost, it has kept the security situation stable and prevented any significant loss of life or legitimated flare-ups. It has ensured that the situation around the “Green Line” does not negatively impact higher-level negotiations between the sides.

However, this success on the peacekeeping side has become part of the problem in peacemaking by creating a comfortable status quo that is not conducive to conflict resolution. This status quo has become normalised, “an imperfect reality” in which the parties refrain from seeking change, and which becomes synonymous with risk and uncertainty. In the long run, this situation has become a trap for the Cypriots and the UN.

Constraints on the UN Missions in Achieving their Mandate

In implementing their mandates, UN missions evolve under political restrictions with constraints that, over time, limit or undermine their actions or activities, something that their partners and outside commentators tend to overlook. Despite all its achievements, the UN has stepped on three main stumbling blocks: the issue over recognition, the (un)willingness of the parties to make compromises and to reach a solution, and the lack of inclusivity in the peace negotiations that have, over time, disconnected them from Cypriot society.

On the first issue (recognition), EPON is of the view that the Greek Cypriot authorities need to depart from an excessive emphasis on recognition and allow space for the Turkish Cypriots, whom they should consider as partners, to break the vicious circle of mistrust and to set the peace negotiations on a new, healthier footing. Such an attitude would also curb the increasing reliance of the Turkish Cypriots on their patron. Recognising the existence of the people living on the other side does not mean allowing their political recognition as a state. The Security Council should encourage, or even put pressure on, the authorities of the RoC to work on the idea of “engagement without recognition” to resume negotiations on a sounder basis and to have them move forward. The advice of Jean Monnet, who said that in order to solve intractable problems, it is sometimes necessary to change the context, may be helpful here. The Security Council should think of a change in attitude as a prerequisite for negotiations to resume.

On the second issue (consent), the starting point for the parties to a conflict, and in particular the host state, is often to consider that the UN should first and foremost support the policies and positions of the government in place. Cyprus is no exception to this trend that can flourish when the Security Council is divided or does not invest political capital in driving the parties towards a resolution. In such a context, the only protection of the UN is its impartiality and its ability to ensure that its initiatives are balancing acts between preserving the legitimacy of the RoC and engaging the Turkish Cypriot community on equitable terms. This policy can be interpreted as too timid. A number of interlocutors have questioned why the UN has not been more vocal or forceful after the failure of successive negotiations and more hands-on in a number of initiatives. They have also expressed a wish for more engaged action from the UN. However, the consent of the parties and their unwillingness to move forward on the peace process has often been a constraint for the UN. Moreover, the UN on the ground in Nicosia has certainly been limited in its boldness by the apathy of the Security Council in New York. Nevertheless, devising benchmarks and an accountability mechanism attached to the negotiations could be a way for the Security Council to exit the comfortable status quo.

The Way Forward for the UN Presence in Cyprus: Recommendations to Move From Keeping the Peace to Building it

During EPON's more than 80 interviews, a number of interlocutors have highlighted the contradictions of the different UN mandates in Cyprus and the missing element: keeping the peace, making the peace, but forgetting to build peace. The interlocutors consider that the status quo is not static and, in fact, generates instability. The Cyprus frozen conflict is considered one of the ten security challenges for the UN in 2021-2022 by the International Crisis Group.

After almost 60 years on the island, the time has come to reconfigure the UN presence in Cyprus. EPON considers that UNFICYP could at least change its name to the UN Observation or Monitoring Mission in Cyprus (UNOMIC or UNMMIC), a name that would better reflect the civilian nature of its leadership. The Mission of Good Offices could close and transfer its political advisers to the "new" UN mission. Such restructuring would strengthen elements that are viewed as important by interlocutors within and outside the current Missions: monitoring and political analysis. In parallel, the Security Council should put more pressure on the Greek Cypriot side, in particular, to establish a military commission around the UNFICYP Force Commander representative of all parties, including the Guarantors, as it has called for in past resolutions. Such a commission would help defuse daily tensions and build a military-to-military relationship between stakeholders that do not currently know one another.

Beyond the restructuring of the two UN Missions, the Secretary-General, Security Council, and Peacebuilding Commission could initiate a reflection on how to help the Cypriots build a culture of peace and work towards reconciliation. A review of the "peacebuilding pillar" present in Cyprus could be envisaged to rationalise the various activities already undertaken in that field, enhancing their visibility and emphasising their structural dimension to elevate the Cypriot peace process.

The UN has been a stabilising element in a divided, militarised and polarised island. Stability has been the main achievement of the UN presence acknowledged by the majority of EPON's interlocutors. However, in order not to waste those gains and avoid a comfortable status quo slowly transforming into an unstable regional dispute, as well as having a UN mission operating a line of effective permanent partition, the various stakeholders of the "Cyprus problem" should now look at it more seriously compared to the past few decades. Cypriots on both sides are still hopeful: 85.5% of Greek Cypriots and 67% of Turkish Cypriots wish to end the Cyprus problem in a way that assures political equality for Turkish Cypriots and security for Greek Cypriots from Turkish influence. In order to meet these hopes, the UN has to move towards a more structural approach to (re)solving the conflict through peacebuilding and sustaining peace

through which the relationship and ties between the two communities would improve and past disputes can be settled.

There is a need to create dependency on peace, and not on the comfortable conflict, to develop trade rapprochement that eases the relationship, devise transformative initiatives, bring the negotiations back to Nicosia, be more transparent, and create a Track II that includes civil society, and give a more dynamic turn to renewed negotiations. For this to work, there needs to be willingness to move forward and for the parties to view each other as partners. The alternative could only be a hard border in the middle of an island too small to be divided.



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This report assesses the extent to which the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) along with the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary- General on Cyprus (OSASG) – also called the mission of the Good Offices – is achieving its mandate enshrined in Resolution 164 of March 1964. In 2024, the UN Missions in Cyprus will celebrate the 60th anniversary of their presence in the country, and it seems timely to analyse their impact and effectiveness over the years.

The EPON report looks for the first time at what the peacekeeping research community has called “legacy operations”, those born during the Cold War and still in place today. UNFICYP is the eighth peacekeeping mission created since 1948. The report looks also at the interaction between peacekeeping and peacemaking in the context of a frozen conflict, often referred to by researchers and scholars as the “Cyprus problem”. Cyprus is a unique case in international relations and peace operations. Its capital city is the only remaining divided capital in Europe and in the world. Cyprus is the only country in the world to have “Guarantors” with a right to intervene and station troops on a permanent basis.

The report acknowledges the role of prevention of UNFICYP to the extent that the people in Cyprus tend to forget that no cease-fire agreement exists between the parties. Peacekeeping has been successful at creating a comfortable status quo that peacemaking has yet been unable to break down. In this context, the lack of will from the parties to engage in a meaningful political process has limited the UN’s effectiveness.