The Cyprus Problem: The International Dimension*

I want to offer a somewhat different, more comprehensive perspective of the Cyprus problem, as seen from Cyprus itself. Representing Cyprus abroad, one learns that the problems of Cyprus may not rank among the major global issues in many minds, nor command the media attention accorded to other regional issues. Yet it nonetheless remains a test case of the effectiveness of the United Nations, and of the application of the basic rules of international law. It is also a tragic anachronism, as has been pointed out, in today’s post-Cold War world. It continues to affect adversely the security situation of the whole area, and hence must be addressed as part of the larger effort to build new peace and security structures in the eastern Mediterranean.

It is now nearly twenty-two years since the invasion and occupation of a large part of Cyprus by the Turkish armed forces in 1974, with all its disastrous consequences of human suffering and its deplorable implications for the international legal order of, and peace in, a volatile and strategically significant region. It is neither necessary nor possible here to review in detail the history of the problem. I will simply assert that, in its basic dimensions, the issue of Cyprus presents questions that are straightforward, simple, and properly of universal concern.

Although it has its constitutional, internal, and inter-communal aspects, the Cyprus problem in its essence is an international problem of invasion, occupation, and systematic violations of human rights. Turkey’s illegal actions in Cyprus have received universal condemnation, from the United Nations and virtually all other international fora. On numerous occasions, the United Nations Security Council has called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Cyprus, the voluntary return of refugees to their homes, the cessation of all interference in the internal affairs of Cyprus, and respect for its sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and unity. Turkey has chosen to ignore the decisions of the international community with impunity.

Now, over two decades later, the situation on the ground is no different. In fact, it has deteriorated through the massive infusion of Anatolian settlers, the systematic destruction of the cultural heritage of Cyprus, and the attempted secession of the occupied part of the island – while nearly 40,000 heavily armed Turkish troops continue to occupy 37 percent of the territory of the Republic of Cyprus, posing a serious threat to the security and well-being of all Cypriots and to peace and stability in the region.

Despite Turkey’s failure to comply with UN resolutions, the Cyprus government showed its good will, its sense of pragmatism, and a genuine wish for a peaceful solution by entering into negotiations with the Turkish-Cypriot side, acting from the conviction that there is much more uniting all Cypriots than dividing us. The Cyprus government and the Greek-Cypriot side made a number of significant concessions, including the acceptance in 1977 of a biregional, bizonal solution (for which no geographical basis had existed prior to 1974), in the hope that the Turkish side would respond with reasonable proposals and thus reach a solution.

What we have sought is the establishment of a viable and genuine federation based on democratic principles, as can be found in other federal systems such as the United States, with special provisions to meet the particular circumstances of Cyprus. We continue to maintain this position. The demand from the other side has been all along the establishment of, in effect, two separate states with separate sovereignties, separate armies, separate treaty-making capacities, and separate economies. In short, while paying lip service to the idea of a federal system, the Turkish objective has always been a partitionist solution through the legitimization of an internationally condemned invasion.

This Turkish intransigence has consistently frustrated all efforts to reach a negotiated settlement in Cyprus. In his May, 1994 report to the Security Council, the UN Secretary-General reached conclusions that accord with what we and many observers have been saying for years: “The Security Council finds itself faced with an already familiar scenario; the absence of agreement due essentially to a lack of political will on the Turkish-Cypriot side.”

No progress towards a negotiated settlement can be expected unless the Turkish side finds the necessary political will to engage constructively. The necessary political resolve will not be found unless the factors that sustain Turkish intransigence are removed. Primary among these is the continuing presence and overwhelming military strength of Turkey’s occupation force on the island – which prompted the Secretary-General to describe the occupied area of Cyprus as “one of the most highly militarized areas in the world.”

The answer to the entire question of security lies in the proposal of the president of Cyprus, Glavkos Clerides, for the demilitarization of the Republic of Cyprus. This proposal was formally submitted to the UN in December of