

THE SOVEREIGN BASE AREAS AND THE CYPRUS PROBLEM

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With the exception of a brief period in the 1970s, when the Ministry of Defence United Kingdom (MODUK) considered, in its defence review, the possibility of reducing its operational costs in Cyprus and even abandoning its military bases on the island, the question of the Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) never arose again in Whitehall.

Their strategic operation – and particularly the use of their critical facilities by the United Kingdom and the United States – has been tactfully achieved, through a silent understanding between MODUK and the Republic of Cyprus (ROC). Despite the political murmurs on the island – mostly by communist AKEL, socialist EDEK, and the green party – their presence or operation was never seriously questioned; since the internationally recognized existence of the Republic, after the creation of the Turkish-Cypriot armed enclaves in 1963-64 and the Turkish invasion of 1974, was directly linked to the 1960 Treaty of Establishment that included, among other, the formation and operation of the SBAs and Retained Sites. Similarly, while the Treaty legally safeguarded the existence and operation of the British bases in Cyprus, Whitehall wisely acknowledges that their effective strategic use – although such as clause is not provided by the Treaty – *depends on the silent consent of the Republic and a neutral or non-hostile local public perception.*¹

Under this unusual arrangement, the Republic silently provided safe conditions and support² for the unobstructed operation of the SBAs and Retained Sites, and MODUK reciprocated by gradually surrendering its user rights, over many sites and training areas on the island, to the Republic,³ as well as closer cooperation of the Sovereign Base Area Administration (SBAA) with the Government of Cyprus. But, beyond the British lure of offering almost half of SBA soil to the Republic, the negotiations for a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus Problem revealed, since the early 2000s, a new unnegotiable reality, and a paradox in international law, that has never been challenged by the negotiating parties. That, independently of the form of a Cyprus solution and the fate of the Republic – the continuation (constitutional evolution) or dissolve of the ROC – British strategic presence on the island would

¹ Since the SBAs and the Retain Sites are located in the free areas of the Republic, and not in the occupied areas, the question of their existence has concerned mostly the Greek-Cypriots rather than the Turkish-Cypriots.

² The Republic provides unconditionally electricity and fresh water services to both the SBAs and the Retained Sites.

³ Such as the Cape Greco station (A6), the Akamas field firing and Royal Navy bombardment range (B), the Koshi field firing range (A), and many others.

remain unaffected. Peculiarly, while the Treaty of Establishment provided for the formation of both the ROC and the SBAs, its abolition, in a potential solution, will affect only the former but not the latter. Although this unusual exception, until recently, was abstractly perceived as an *understanding* between two EU members with a special historical relation,⁴ the recent decision for BREXIT has begun unveiling political and legal questions about the continuation of British military base sovereignty by a non-EU country over a EU member state.

Furthermore, the discreet US strategic retreat from the Middle East after the Iraq debacle of 2003 and the Obama doctrine of 'leading from behind', has multiplied the strategic importance of the SBAs and Retained Sites for Whitehall. The use of RAF Akrotiri, in the Western Sovereign Base Area (WSBA), for combat air missions – for the very first time since its establishment in 1960⁵ – against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, is not irrelevant with Whitehall's re-emerging strategic ambition of projecting British influence and power in global affairs. The recent transformation of RAF Akrotiri – under Operation *Shader* – to a Forward Operating Base (FOB) for the 903 Expeditionary Air Wing (EAW) and the extensive works for its refurbishment, that were further augmented by extraordinary internal security and air defense measures,⁶ reveal the increasing significance of the island for Whitehall, independently of the solution of the Cyprus Problem.

Uncoincidentally, the recent openings of MODUK towards ROC are directly related with the increasing importance of British military presence on the island and Whitehall's *need* of Cypriot cooperation on critical issues – such as terrorism, internal security, air-defence, anti-ballistic defence, etc. – that directly affect the security of British military (and intelligence) operations in Cyprus. Expectedly, the decision of BREXIT will increase the vitality of British military presence on the island, particularly in supporting Whitehall's capability of influence projection in the Middle East, after the US strategic retreat from the turbulent region. It will also enhance British *willingness* for closer cooperation with ROC, which, until today, silently accommodated the strategic use of the SBAs and Retained sites without questions. But Whitehall is also starting to realise that the elimination of the unthreatening and friendly Republic, in a potential solution under the extremely complex scheme of a Bizonal Bi-communal Federation, may contain unpredictable risks over the unchallenged use of the SBAs and Retained Sites.

⁴ Cyprus is a member of the Commonwealth and has been a former British colony (occupation 1878-1960).

⁵ Until September 2014, RAF Akrotiri was used solely for combat support missions in the Middle East and North Africa (such as Operation *Telic*, Operation *Ellamy*, etc.).

⁶ See the transfer and stationing of British Army AH-64D Longbow Apache attack helicopters at RAF Akrotiri as well as the deployment (since the summer of 2016) of a RAF air defence radar at Olympus and of Eurofighter Typhoons in an air defence role at Akrotiri.