

THE CONCEPT OF 'PROVENTION' APPLIED TO CYPRUS

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This essay attempts to share some insights (emanating from my ongoing research and readings of numerous scholarly works and case studies) on both the concept and practice of conflict resolution and/or prevention. The focus is on the ongoing UN-sponsored negotiations on Cyprus and efforts to break the seemingly stubborn stalemate; the analysis draws largely from relevant ideas discussed in John Burton's *Conflict: Resolution and Provention* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990). It aims at injecting some fresh deliberations, i.e. moving beyond resolution and prevention towards 'provention' on previously debated and highly contemplated issues such as military occupation, maintaining rights of intervention, moving to a new 'European' paradigm, establishing a mutually accepting and reinforcing bi-zonal federation, and breaking from the past both in regards to history and language, i.e. meaningful communication aimed at cooperation. In brief, this essay considers certain concepts and practices relating to social and political life and evaluates their potential impact on the negotiation outcome and beyond.

Moving from Resolution and Prevention to 'Provention'

At the outset, it is worth noting, as we examine the UN-sponsored Cyprus negotiations, that Burton's work stretches the concept of commonly accepted practices of conflict resolution and prevention, as we know them in many corners of the world, to what he terms 'provention'. He argues that the former have a negative connotation, as their primary aim is to remove sources of conflict, while the latter goes a step further as it aims to create conditions that lead to cooperative relationships. This approach is both legitimate, in the context of Turkey's EU accession process, and desirable, in the sense that a mutually beneficial solution is presumably sought by both communities on the island.

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To be sure, conflict at the international level has been the result of violence which "has always been the arbiter when matters of important 'national interest' have been at stake" (p. 66). In this respect, and as a consequence of outcomes emanating from violent behavior at the state level, the past effectively dictates our patterns of thought. Subsequently, when "societies accept such traditions [of power structures and authority] it is unlikely that there can be a [...] basis for an understanding of the nature of conflict and how to resolve it" (pp. 71-2). Therefore, in divided states like Cyprus "contending" views inevitably prevail, effectively reflecting "a continuing resistance to change..." (p. 110).

Realist perspectives of international relations (i.e. those following Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz) are based on the idea that "man is aggressive", which has "the effect of distracting attention from any further consideration of the nature of human behavior [and] of placing the blame for conflict on persons and groups, thus eliminating from policy considerations any alterations to institutions and policies" (p. 73). Language in itself presents a number of problems. Ambiguous terms are used to justify policies, leading to confusion. The term "national interest," for instance, "may not reflect the views and opinions of other advisers or of people generally, still less the longer term interests of the nationals." By contrast, it is often used to suggest obligation to some cause, whatever its implications.

Need for a Value Neutral Approach

Burton posits that conflict resolution is often equated with some sort of value-laden approach, be it "justice" or "pacifism", or "liberalism", which is often counter-productive (pp. 21-22). He proposes that, in the search for a lasting and viable solution, "The only value orientation that is inherent in a study of conflict [...] is the goal of resolving and preventing conflict." In other words, it is not productive to try to convince a party that it "'should' or 'ought' to treat the other party in some particular way dictated by value considerations"; rather the aim is to explore a pragmatic approach with vision, new thinking and less influence from tradition.

At the bargaining table, there needs to be a clear distinction between negotiable and non-negotiable issues (p. 78). This is perhaps to state the obvious. Yet it is not always clear whether this dichotomy of choices and interests, of values and needs, as it were, has been sufficiently delineated and adequately elaborated in the process of defining the national interest, on either side. There is, so to speak, a need to find commonality. For example, as Burton recalls, "Greek and Turkish Cypriots discovered that neither wanted 'Enosis' or 'Double Enosis' (that is union with Greece or Turkey) but wished to identify with the island of Cyprus [...] once it is discovered that goals are held in common, (and) the stage is set for a search for means that satisfy all parties to a dispute" (p. 42).

In a great number of multi-ethnic nations, divided societies present a case of non-legitimation (p. 137). In this ambiguous political landscape, power-sharing often "creates more problems than it solves [...] it underlines, if anything, the minority status of the smaller ethnic community and [...] leaves the majority with a sense of threat and injustice," as the case of Cyprus illustrates (p. 141). Yet the aim is to move forward. Indeed, it is ultimately "adequate educational and development opportunities in a social framework that provide separate security until there is identity with a wider society" (p. 146).

How Do We Move On, and What Do We Propose?

A number of policy-relevant options are in order. First, language could just as well be a useful tool with a view to breaking the stereotypes and fears of the past and, subsequently, creating the needed discourse for a mutually beneficial cooperation and win-win relationship, in the context of the EU. Indeed, as Burton argues, political thinking is largely "influenced by language," hence the need to cultivate a new discourse that promotes 'provention' and cooperation, and avoids "perpetuating" past practices and policies (p. 74). For instance, the idea of the "national interest" often represents and "reflects the subjective judgment of decision makers" (p. 76).

Secondly, more often than not, and relative to the ongoing stalemate, there is also the implication that lack of support for the "national interest" is equivalent to disloyalty. This is a mistaken notion, as it not only perpetuates divisions between and within the communities, but it mainly prevents creating thinking from enriching the communication landscape in transitional societies like Cyprus, that undergo significant social and political transformation.

Lastly, there are a few concepts in social and political life, like the "national interest", which, in spite of their important political implications, they cannot "be defined in any precise way" (p. 75). This makes meaningful communication all the more difficult and, consequently, it renders any solution all the more elusive. Thus, there is clearly a need to redefine the national interest in both Cyprus and Turkey, in a transparent way that recognizes and respects both their own interests at the nation-state level, and those of the two Cypriot communities at the state level, in the broader context of the EU. This is a prerequisite, first, for a common ground and a commonly accepted language that in and of itself will facilitate the search for a mutually beneficial solution in Cyprus, and secondly, for a forward looking policy that pro-actively embraces 'provention' and cooperation. Both of these objectives presuppose, in turn, less classical realist or power calculations and territorial ambitions and more post-modern, liberal approaches in promoting one's national interest.