

ISSN (online): 2547-8702

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN POLICY NOTE

May 2026, No. 123b

CYPRUS AND THE BRITISH BASES: A STRATEGIC REASSESSMENT

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Cyprus has long been regarded in strategic thinking as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” in the Eastern Mediterranean. The phrase captures a hard reality. Today it carries a more troubling implication: growing vulnerability.

The British Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) at Akrotiri and Dhekelia form part of the architecture of independence established by the 1960 Treaty of Establishment, which created the Republic of Cyprus (RoC). It defined the RoC’s territory as comprising the entire island, with the exception of the two SBAs amounting to nearly three percent of its total area. The bases were not incidental to the settlement. They were a central part of it.

Initially, Cyprus was acquired to safeguard the Suez Canal and secure India—the jewel of the British Empire. The turning point came in the aftermath of the 1956 Suez crisis. British strategic doctrine shifted decisively. Cyprus was no longer to be retained as a whole, but reduced to what was deemed essential: the preservation of military facilities. The objective, as reflected in internal thinking of the time, was no longer Cyprus as a base, but bases in Cyprus. The 1960 arrangements were the product of that critical shift by London.

During the Cold War, Cyprus served as a forward platform for power projection into the Middle East and the Gulf as a strategic communications monitoring base. Nuclear weapons were deployed at Akrotiri so that UK Vulcan bombers could target the southern Soviet Union. The Americans were also present, operating sophisticated over-the-horizon radar systems on Troodos. The nuclear weapons were withdrawn, after the deployment of the Polaris nuclear submarines in the Eastern Mediterranean, but the strategic logic endured. From Iraq to Syria, from surveillance to rapid deployment, Akrotiri has remained a linchpin of the region’s security architecture. Cyprus sits at the crossroads of energy corridors, trade

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routes and regional instability—where geography confers both reach and risk. In military terms, it offers what no aircraft carrier can: permanence.

Yet Cyprus has never reconciled with the presence of the SBAs. The bases remain a vestige of a colonial past. The 1960 settlement, while legally binding, reflected the geopolitical realities of its time and was widely regarded less as a freely shaped outcome than as a condition of independence. Its provisions have not been immune from contestation, nor from the tensions and enduring consequences that emerged in their application.

The sovereignty exercised within the base areas is of an unusual character. It is not sovereignty in the classical sense, but a functional and purpose-bound authority, limited to military use and embedded in a system of legal and operational interdependence with the RoC, and anchored in a wider treaty framework. Nor is the British presence confined to the base areas themselves. The arrangements extend across the island through access, ancillary facilities, and operational rights, reinforcing a broader system of strategic integration. This interdependence—ranging from infrastructure to access—remains essential to the effective functioning of the bases. Notably, this extensive system of support and access is not accompanied by any form of rent or direct payment by the UK to the RoC.

The base areas are not merely military zones. They are *sui generis* and a highly unusual post-colonial arrangement. They are home to thousands of Cypriot and European citizens whose rights, livelihoods, and daily life are intertwined with the surrounding state, while remaining subject to a UK legal regime. Even when both Cyprus and the UK were members of the EU, the bases remained outside the Union's legal territory—an anomaly that required intricate arrangements. After Brexit, this hybrid status has been preserved through specific protocols, confirming their exceptional character.

March 2026 has stripped away any remaining ambiguity. The drone strike on RAF Akrotiri and the manner in which it was managed, made clear that Cyprus has entered the operational theatre of regional conflict against its will. In an era of drones and long-range missiles, geography no longer provides distance. It defines exposure.

The paradox is now stark. The bases enhance the strategic value of Cyprus. They also increase its exposure. The RoC contributes to regional security. Yet it does not determine how that security infrastructure is used. In law, the authority exercised within the bases lies beyond the control of the RoC. In reality, the risks do not.

This does not negate the value of the bases. They have contributed—and continue to contribute—to regional stability, intelligence gathering, and operational reach in a volatile neighbourhood. Nor is the UK an adversary. It is a partner. But value does not eliminate risk. And partnership does not absolve responsibility for ensuring that national security is not compromised by decisions taken elsewhere.

It is therefore a profound misreading to suggest that developments affecting the bases do not concern Cyprus. They do. The bases are not external to the state in any meaningful sense. They constitute a legally distinct but operationally integrated strategic space whose consequences extend well beyond their perimeter.

The legal framework is clear. The status of the bases cannot be altered unilaterally. It rests on binding international agreements and, today, also on arrangements within the European legal order. Any change would require negotiation, consent, and new legal arrangements. Practical adjustments in their use can be pursued through such engagement. This is not a question of slogans. It is a matter of statecraft. What has changed is the strategic environment.

The European Council's conclusions of March 2026 also mark a quiet but decisive shift. For the first time, the question of the British bases has been explicitly brought within a European security context, with the EU signalling readiness to support Cyprus in discussions with the UK. What was once a bilateral arrangement is now unmistakably a European concern.

London, too, is adjusting to this evolving reality. In recent exchanges with Nicosia, the UK has emphasised that the security of Cyprus is fundamental and stated that the bases would not be used by US forces for offensive operations. The legal framework has not changed. But its exercise is no longer insulated from political constraint. It is a gradual adjustment driven by strategic reality.

Cyprus is no longer a peripheral observer. It is a credible, predictable and dependable security enabler in a turbulent region. It lies at the intersection of energy corridors, trade routes, migration flows, and regional instability. It is a frontline state in the Eastern Mediterranean and therefore of the EU. Its security is inseparable from that of Europe.

Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union reflects this reality. It provides that if a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, other Member States have an obligation to provide aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with the UN Charter. It is not identical to NATO's Article 5. But it signals an expectation of collective responsibility.

The present moment is therefore a test for the EU. Strategic autonomy cannot remain a slogan. It must be demonstrated in practice, above all in regions where European security is directly engaged. Recent developments have shown that such solidarity is not merely theoretical. Greece, followed by France and Italy, moved swiftly to support Cyprus during the recent crisis with Iran. Article 42.7 was not formally invoked. Yet the political message was unmistakable. As President Macron put it, when Cyprus is attacked, Europe is attacked. President von der Leyen was equally clear: the security of Cyprus is the security of the European Union.

The question for Cyprus is not whether the bases once served a purpose. They did. And they do. The real question is whether the current arrangements remain fit for today's strategic realities. This does not call for rupture. It calls for recalibration.

A serious, structured dialogue with the UK—situated within a broader European security framework—is both legitimate and necessary. Not to revisit the past for its own sake, but to ensure that the balance between strategic utility and national security reflects current realities. Practical adjustments in the use of the bases can be pursued through such engagement.

For decades, Cyprus has been treated as an unsinkable aircraft carrier. The events of recent weeks have made one thing clear: aircraft carriers are designed for war. States are not – and cannot be treated as such.