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REVISITING RELATIONS BETWEEN CYPRUS AND THE UK IN AN ERA OF UNCERTAINTY

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Introduction

On 27 April 2026, the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs and the Centre for Geopolitics at the University of Cambridge convened a panel discussion at the UNESCO Amphitheatre of the University of Nicosia. Professor Brendan Simms, Founder Director of the Centre for Geopolitics, brought historical depth; Ambassador Nicholas Hopton, Director of its Mediterranean Programme, geopolitical range; and Professor Andreas Theophanous, President of the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs, direct analytical focus on the Cyprus Problem. The panel was chaired by Mary Varda, Research Fellow at the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs.

While important differences of emphasis emerged throughout the discussion, a broader consensus nevertheless became apparent: relations between Cyprus and the United Kingdom retain strategic significance for both sides. There was also a shared recognition that these relations require not merely reassessment in light of evolving geopolitical realities, but also meaningful renewal and upgrading. The discussion repeatedly returned to the argument that the contemporary regional environment, characterised by geopolitical fragmentation, persistent instability and shifting security configurations, renders a more structured, forward looking and mutually beneficial Cyprus–United Kingdom relationship increasingly necessary.

I. History as the Present: The Contribution of Professor Brendan Simms

Professor Brendan Simms, Founder Director of the Centre for Geopolitics at the University of Cambridge, opened the discussion with a proposition that was

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deceptively simple in its formulation and far-reaching in its implications: history is not background context but an active component of present political reality.

Professor Simms' intervention rested on the premise that the genealogy of political arrangements shapes their present character in ways that cannot be understood if history is treated as prologue rather than as substance. Applied to Cyprus and to the broader eastern Mediterranean, this commitment produced a reading of the current moment that was both analytically rigorous and practically urgent.

The genealogy of British involvement in Cyprus, Professor Simms observed, stretches from the Cyprus Convention of 1878, through which Disraeli secured the island as a place of arms in exchange for a guarantee of Ottoman Asiatic territory, to the post-independence arrangements of 1960, in which British sovereignty over the Sovereign Base Areas at Akrotiri and Dhekelia was retained as part of the agreement for the creation of a Cypriot state. That genealogy, he argued, continues to shape the strategic and institutional architecture of the island today. The Sovereign Base Areas, the Treaty of Guarantee obligations and the legal architecture within which the Cyprus Problem continues to reside are all products of that history. They are not historical residues awaiting resolution. They are active determinants of the present.

The significance of this observation, Professor Simms suggested, extends beyond the bilateral relationship between Britain and Cyprus. It raises a broader geopolitical question that is increasingly central to contemporary analysis of the eastern Mediterranean and the wider Middle East: whether sustainable regional order can emerge in the absence of stable arrangements reconciling sovereignty, security and external power projection. Cyprus represents a particularly concentrated expression of these tensions. According to Professor Simms,the island embodies overlapping sovereignties, competing legitimacies, external guarantor structures, unresolved territorial division and asymmetrical international recognition. In this sense, the Cyprus question is not simply a localised dispute. It reflects many of the wider contradictions that continue to shape political order across the eastern Mediterranean.

Britain's relationship with Cyprus, Professor Simms noted, emerged within a strategic logic that viewed the island primarily through the prism of Mediterranean access, imperial logistics and the regional projection of power. While the surrounding geopolitical environment has transformed substantially since the late nineteenth century, the underlying strategic significance of Cyprus has endured. The question that the current moment presses upon both governments is not whether that strategic logic remains relevant, but whether the institutional arrangements through which it has historically been expressed remain adequate to the demands of a changing environment.

II. The Mediterranean as a System: The Contribution of Ambassador Nicholas Hopton

Ambassador Nicholas Hopton, Director of the Mediterranean Programme at the Centre for Geopolitics, University of Cambridge, introduced a complementary analytical register. Where Professor Simms had drawn attention to the constitutive force of historical genealogy, Ambassador Hopton emphasised the systemic character of the contemporary regional environment.

His central argument was that Cyprus does not exist in isolation from the wider region surrounding it and that Mediterranean politics cannot be understood through compartmentalised frameworks that separate Europe, the Levant, North Africa and the Gulf into distinct strategic theatres. The regional environment, he observed, increasingly functions as an interconnected political and economic system in which crises emerging in one part rapidly generate implications elsewhere through migration flows, energy markets, fiscal pressures, security dynamics and political instability.

Ambassador Hopton identified four compounding crises that are reshaping the eastern Mediterranean and the wider Middle East. The first is a humanitarian emergency of considerable scale, driven by mass displacement. The figure of an estimated four million Iranian nationals who have sought refuge in Turkey represents not merely a welfare challenge but a structural shift in the political economy of the Anatolian interior and the Aegean. The second is a deepening security crisis, characterised by the erosion of state authority across the Levant, the persistence of terrorism and the increasing involvement of non-state actors in conflicts that defy conventional diplomatic resolution. The third is an environmental crisis, encompassing desertification, water scarcity and the energy price volatility that has accompanied regional instability. The fourth and in certain respects the most consequential, is the progressive erosion of the rules-based international order that has provided the normative framework for regional diplomacy since 1945.

The eastern Mediterranean, Ambassador Hopton observed, consequently reflects a broader crisis of regional order. Older assumptions regarding equilibrium, external guarantees and institutional stability are increasingly under strain. Sovereignty across the region remains unevenly exercised, whilst governance structures designed under earlier geopolitical conditions are struggling to absorb newer forms of instability. Cyprus reflects these tensions with particular intensity precisely because it sits at the intersection of European institutional order and Middle Eastern geopolitical fragmentation.

Ambassador Hopton's most analytically productive provocation was an inversion of the conventional question that has framed much of the discussion about Cyprus's regional role. We have grown accustomed, he suggested, to asking how Cyprus can serve the region: as a humanitarian corridor, as a platform for diplomacy, as a stabilising presence at Europe's eastern limit. The more searching question, he proposed, is how the region can help Cyprus. This inversion is not merely rhetorical. It marks a recognition that the strategic environment is changing in ways that alter the terms on which Cyprus can act and that the distributional question of who benefits from the island's geographic and institutional position, and on what terms, has become as important as the security questions that have historically dominated the analysis.

The situation, Ambassador Hopton concluded, demands both immediate crisis management and a long-term strategic vision. The status quo is not a stable resting point. It is a deferred reckoning. The political and diplomatic tools that have managed the Cyprus question for the past half-century are unlikely to be adequate to the demands of the next.

III. The Cyprus Problem and British Obligations: The Contribution of Professor Andreas Theophanous

Professor Andreas Theophanous, President of the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs, brought the Cyprus Problem into direct and explicit focus, situating it within the broader historical and geopolitical framework that his fellow panellists had established.

Professor Theophanous described Cyprus as a meeting point between East and West, North and South, positioned historically at the intersection of trading routes, energy routes, and of three major religions. Cyprus, he observed, has always been influenced by the strategic calculations of dominant regional and international powers. This is not merely a feature of the distant past. It remains a defining characteristic of the island's contemporary situation, expressed most acutely by the ongoing occupation of its northern part that has persisted since 1974 and in the structural tensions that this situation creates for Cypriot sovereignty, security and economic development.

Britain's arrival in Cyprus in 1878, Professor Theophanous argued, was part of a broader struggle for influence in the eastern Mediterranean that continues in different forms today. The fettered independence established in 1960 institutionalised this reality through the guarantor system involving Britain, Greece and Turkey, whilst simultaneously preserving the British Sovereign Base Areas on the island. Britain did not fulfil its obligations in 1974. At least, following the collapse of the Junta in Greece and the putschist regime in Nicosia on July 23,

1974, Britain ought to have acted accordingly. The Bases, in his analysis, are not a neutral inheritance.

Professor Theophanous stressed that the implications of these arrangements are not merely historical. They remain politically active in the present. The Treaty of Guarantee was intended, in theory, to connect Britain and the other guarantor powers to the protection of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Cyprus. In practice, this obligation was not fulfilled during the events of 1974, the repercussions of which continue to shape the Cyprus Problem today. The gap between the obligations the Treaty creates in text and the actions it has produced in practice is, in his assessment, the central credibility question in the bilateral relationship between Cyprus and Britain.

Professor Theophanous also connected Cyprus directly to the wider security crises unfolding across the Middle East. The Sovereign Base Areas have repeatedly been used in regional conflicts by Britain and the United States. To the extent that the Republic of Cyprus does not wish to become directly implicated in those conflicts, this creates an enduring structural tension. The March 2026 drone attacks on RAF Akrotiri, which occurred only weeks before the panel discussion, crystallised this tension with unusual clarity. Cyprus hosts infrastructure that makes it a potential target in conflicts over which it exercises no formal influence, in a framework established not by bilateral consent but as a condition of decolonisation.

His intervention concluded with a claim that has direct implications for the future of the bilateral relationship. Cyprus retains the legitimate expectation that Britain and Greece, as guarantor powers, will actively support the restoration of its territorial integrity. That claim is grounded in international law and in the original terms of Cypriot independence. Connecting it to the economic, strategic and institutional dimensions of the relationship is not merely a matter of historical justice. It is a prerequisite for any durable and credible settlement.

Conclusion

The panel discussion of 27 April 2026 brought together historical scholarship, diplomatic practice and geopolitical analysis in a manner that illuminated the deeper strategic foundations of the relationship between Cyprus and the United Kingdom. What emerged from the exchange was not simply a reflection on the bilateral relationship in its present form, but a broader examination of how historical legacies, regional instability and geopolitical transformation are reshaping the environment within which that relationship now operates.

Professor Simms demonstrated that the history of British engagement with Cyprus cannot be understood as a closed historical chapter. It remains embedded in the institutional arrangements, strategic assumptions and geopolitical logics that continue to shape both the island and the wider eastern Mediterranean. Ambassador Hopton showed that the contemporary Mediterranean increasingly functions as an interconnected geopolitical system in which humanitarian pressures, security crises, environmental stress, migration flows and political fragmentation interact in mutually reinforcing ways. His intervention also challenged the conventional framing through which Cyprus is often viewed, shifting the discussion from how Cyprus may serve wider regional interests to how changing regional dynamics should shape a more sustainable and strategically coherent future for Cyprus itself. Professor Theophanous, meanwhile, brought the discussion into direct engagement with the Cyprus Problem, arguing that unresolved tensions surrounding sovereignty, security, territorial integrity and guarantor obligations remain central to the future of the bilateral relationship.

Taken together, the contributions converged on a broader strategic conclusion. Relations between Cyprus and the United Kingdom retain substantial significance for both sides, particularly within an increasingly unstable and fragmented regional environment. Yet the geopolitical context within which those relations operate has changed profoundly. The eastern Mediterranean now occupies a position of renewed strategic importance shaped by regional conflict, shifting security configurations, migration pressures, energy politics and the wider erosion of the post-Cold War international order. Within this transformed environment, the discussion repeatedly returned to the argument that the existing framework governing the relationship requires not only reassessment, but also meaningful renewal and upgrading. The strategic logic underpinning the relationship has endured. The question increasingly confronting both sides is whether the political and institutional frameworks through which that relationship operates have adapted sufficiently to contemporary geopolitical realities.

The eastern Mediterranean does not simply confront a proliferation of crises. It also confronts the challenge of constructing frameworks of cooperation, institutional trust and long-term strategic thinking capable of responding to them. In this respect, the continuation and deepening of dialogue between institutions such as the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs and the Centre for Geopolitics at the University of Cambridge constitutes a meaningful contribution to broader regional reflection and policy engagement.