

**PERCEPTIONS OF US FOREIGN POLICY  
IN CYPRIOT MEDIA**

When Richard Holbrook first visited Cyprus as Presidential envoy, he rounded up his talks on the island with what was termed as "bicomunal press conference". In his opening remarks, he apologised for his country policies back in 1974 at the height of the Cyprus crisis with the coup against President Makarios and the consequent Turkish invasion. By doing so he in fact recognised or acknowledged at least, some moral American responsibility for Washington's role in developments that precipitated the 1974 tragedy on the island.

I remember I was sitting on the front row at the press conference. And I could not resist the temptation to ask him whether his mission then was to redress the situation that resulted from the 1974 crisis and the US role. It was very disappointing to hear Mr. Holbrook dismiss the question as irrelevant with his mission. However, it helped to underline the great truth that everybody is very much aware of these days. That foreign policy, and especially as applied by the strong and powerful in this world, is in fact the manifestation of the national interests as they are perceived by their leaders.

National interests are determined according to the system that prevails in each country and, more importantly, they depend on what sort of internal (social, political but mainly economic) interests are represented on the highest echelons of power in the country concerned. It therefore follows that if one is to examine the perception of the American, for example, policies in the region, one has to develop an understanding of the American national interests in the region, as they are determined every time by the rulers in Washington and which interests determine, in fact, the American policy.

Washington's perceptions of the American national interests in our region vary depending on who is in power. There are those of course who would argue that there isn't much difference in those perceptions between the two main political parties, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party and therefore there isn't much difference in their foreign policies. There is, they argue, some sort of coherence in the general foreign policy philosophy as a result of a strong bureaucracy in the two main pillars of American foreign policy, the State Department and the Department of Defence. Recommendations for policy decisions, after all, are prepared and submitted by this bureaucracy. Without, of course underestimating the influence that special interest groups, or lobbyists for foreign interests can exert on the decision making process.

Lip service of course is regularly paid to various general principles and values, of international law and international relations, but only to the extent that policy options can appeal more readily to an ill informed public opinion.

It is more than obvious that the ultimate criteria for the United States policy in the region are Iraq and Washington's plans for its future. A future which is, more than the Americans are willing to admit, intertwined with the situation in the entire Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The American aim remains to compromise the need to retain unhindered access to the rich energy resources in the region and at the same time, to establish a new regional security and stability system. The success or failure of the American effort depends almost entirely on whether Washington would be able to pacify Iraq and open the way for a democratic process that would lead to a situation which would allow for the withdrawal of the American troops from Iraqi soil, but retain, at the same time, American influence on Baghdad and more importantly on whether the United

States will be able to establish as an all around acceptable new security and stability system in the region that would guarantee American interests. This inevitably means settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, establishing some kind of sustainable order in Afghanistan and compromising all the conflicting interests and objectives of the various factors that make up this region. And in settling these outstanding conflicts, the same considerations and prerequisites are also applicable.

Unfortunately though even prominent Americans like *Zbigniew Brzezinski* consider the war in Iraq "a *historic strategic and moral calamity undertaken under false assumptions*", which "is *undermining America's global legitimacy, is tarnishing America's moral credentials and is intensifying regional instability*", as he recently wrote in an article. So the American stereotype as followed by other countries is not, apparently, morally or otherwise for that matter, very sound.

The big question however is what happens if and when American national interests in the region contradict, or even worse, are in confrontation with the national interests of countries in the region? Is compromise in a situation like this, possible? If it is not, what can settle the dispute, war? -in which case the question of whether might is the ultimate law in international relations is raised?

The degree of consensus between the United States and actors in the region also determine the possibilities of convergence of their separate objectives. For this to happen you have to have convergence of national interests –as defined by those concerned- as well. The big question for Washington is how to deal with problems between the actors in the region. Especially when both parties to a local conflict are needed by Washington to promote the American plans in the region. How does the American establishment deal with such a problem? Does it avoid taking sides, thus running the risk of alienating both sides? Does it identify with the stronger side? Does it make a value judgment, deciding that at that point in time, some of the regional actors and allies are expendables and others are not? And what is the measurestick used, what are the criteria used to decide that? Size? Geopolitical and strategic importance of each country? The rules of international law? The principles to which the United States often declares that it adheres to?

I am sure that everyone in the room can come up with their own answers to these questions. However, we have experienced these kind of situations in the region on several occasions and I am sure that if we take a look at the way Washington handled these kind of situations in the past, we will be provided with authentic answers. All we have to do is take a look at how the United States dealt with the many crises that we had over the last 50 years or so in this region.

Take for example Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The United States had set up an alliance to repel the invaders, citing international law and the UN principles. And, rightly so. However, when this is mentioned to the Americans in relation to their position on Cyprus, their answer is that the two problems are not the same. The Cypriots often complain in that respect about double standards. To their mind, the problems are certainly different, but the principles involved are the same, both in relation to the act itself, the act aggression, and also in terms of redressing the situation created by the invasion.

Take another example. Both Greece and Turkey are US allies. However, Washington's assessment is that Turkey offers greater strategic advantages to the American policy makers than Greece. And in that respect, one can actually identify a different kind of treatment of these two countries by Washington.

It is a well known fact that Turkey receives the greater part of its military assistance from the United States. The Turkish army's equipment is in fact of American origin. It was American arms, airpower and sea vessels that were used during the Turkish invasion, in violation of American law. The Turkish army

presently occupying the northern part of Cyprus uses American made military equipment to sustain this military occupation. All that in violation of American legislation, that's why the embargo on arms sales to Turkey was imposed in 1974. The American government however tolerates this situation; I would even allege that it pretends not to see reality, while at the same time it challenges Cyprus' right of defence against a superior power.

I deliberately chose these two examples because I think they reflect accurately the mood of Cypriot public opinion and their perceptions of American foreign policy practices. That of course does not prevent the Cypriots to develop fallacies about objective American perceptions of problems like the Cyprus problem. Suffice it to remind you of how the Greek Cypriots received the news of Jimmy Carter's electoral victory back in 1977. The results were received with church bells ringing everywhere, because of the pre-election promises Jimmy Carter regarding a positive Cyprus policy he would follow if elected. The arms embargo imposed by the Congress on arms sales to Turkey because of its invasion of Cyprus was ended during Carter's presidency and on his initiative. Of course, it must be added that after the triumphant church bell rings the British magazine *The Economist* felt it imperative to remind the Cypriots that the promises of a presidential candidate are one thing and the policies of an elected president another.

These examples do not negate, on the other hand, the fact that the United States did seek to act as an honest broker of peace, either by facilitating contacts between the two communities on the island, especially during periods when bicomunal contacts were considered outright betrayal, especially by the Turkish Cypriot leadership of Mr Denktash. And those efforts by the Americans are appreciated by many Cypriots on both sides of the divide as they proved to be very valuable in establishing lines of communications between important parts of both communities.

However, this appreciation was negated by the way the Americans were unable to handle the results of the referenda on the Anan plan. Their response to the G/C no was seen as vindictive aiming at punishing the G/C for their no. And naturally, one has to ask whether the United States and the United Nations had supported the Anan plan and the referenda, on the condition that the result was the one they wished to see. As far as it is known in any referenda, there usually two legitimate answers. And there can never be guarantees for the outcome. So, one cannot blame those voting against the wishes of the United States but refuse to see the reasons behind this behaviour. Wishing to punish those that refused to vote the way the Americans expected, amounts to a continuation of the mistakes that led those people to do so in the first place. What is interesting is the Cypriot deep belief that the Americans were more interested in satisfying their own anxieties which had nothing to do with what is good for Cyprus, rather than in what led the G/C to vote the way they voted and whether there were any grounds in what they were saying about their vote.

This brings me to another feature of American foreign policy as perceived by Cypriots. That of selective tolerance. The issue of human rights violations incorporated in the Turkish administrative, political and social structure is a subject that is constantly raised, especially during recent years, by Turkish journalists, activists and foreign observers. Apart from the occasional reference by usually some junior official, the Americans seem to lose the sensitivity they usually exhibit in other instances, perhaps not as serious as the Turkish record. And it is more than obvious that the Americans are quite willing to close their eyes and ears on this subject, not because of lack of substantiated information, but because of their own political expediencies. Washington seems to be prepared to go to any length to provide cover for Turkey and use its influence to deter any detrimental to Turkey response to such violations. This may sound rather odd,

given today's problems in the Turkish American relations. But even this bad state of affairs is, more than we realise, the result of the inability of the Americans to understand and appreciate that what causes this bad blood in their relations with Turkey is the fact that Turkey wants Washington to recognise that Ankara's demands are formulated on American practices. If the Americans can come from thousands of miles away to Iraq in pursuit of terrorists, why can we not go after terrorists across our border with Iraq, say the Turks. In the same manner, Turkey incited by Washington, wishes to be recognised as the regional power whose word should be abided by all. "The rights of a non-neighboring country in Iraq cannot be compared with ours as a neighboring country", Tayyip Ertogan, the Turkish Prime Minister said recently, according to Cengiz Candar in Referamce.

It is this attitude (copying American dogmas) that created the belief in Ankara that whatever the Turks say, goes. Take for instance the recent agreement between the Republic of Cyprus and Lebanon and Egypt on oil exploration in the sea between them. Turkey reprimanded the government of Lebanon for signing such an agreement without securing first Ankara's consent. It also protested to Cairo for signing such an agreement. Turkey may not recognize the Republic of Cyprus, but the rest of the world does and that's what counts and therefore the Republic of Cyprus has rights in international law which make these agreements legal and valid. In that respect the question is whether Cyprus followed all relevant international law and regulations in concluding these agreements or not. What is also important is the fact that Ankara has decided that islands like Cyprus have no continental shelf and therefore the shelf in the area is shared by Turkey and Egypt and Lebanon. This "logic" leads to the Turkish belief that Cyprus lies in fact on Turkish continental shelf and therefore the rights that Cyprus claims, in fact belong to Turkey. And we are talking about an area south of the island. In that respect and with such "logic", Turkey has rights anywhere in the Mediterranean sea. And I am sure you can see where this can lead to.

It is not my intention to discuss here Turkish behaviour. If I consider this example important it is only to underline certain deficiencies in American practices. The United State should have had no problem in condemning such dangerous Turkish approach to the issue of oil exploration. All they had to do was to turn to international law and practices. They could not have missed the ultimate Turkish intentions regarding Cyprus, neither could they have missed the timing of the incident and that Turkish noises were directed towards Washington rather than Cyprus. It was in other words, some people believe, a Turkish message to Washington which had to do with the issues currently discussed between the two sides, in relation to energy resources in the Iraqi region of Kirkuk and contradicting planning by the two sides.

Washington's position was contradictory to say the least. It was also confused because again Washington was trying to balance between appearing to support international legal order and appeasing Turkey. If there is one thing that history teaches is that appeasement has never deterred any threat, nor did it ever yield positive results. May I remind you, that British, mainly, appeasement never deterred Hitler from his onslaught on humanity? And unfortunately, one basic feature of US policy towards Turkey is appeasement, concerning Turkey's obligations to the European Union, where the United States instead of pressing Turkey to abide by the European norms and prerequisites and thus make its negotiations with the EU and its accession easier, it presses the European Union to bend its rule in favour of Turkey. The United States itself discovered that appeasing Saddam Hussein in the past did not prevent the developments that led to the present day slaughter grounds in Iraq.

So, these are more or less the facts as public opinion in Cyprus understands them that determine the parameters of its perceptions of American Foreign Policy. The fine details of each one of the issues mentioned earlier may not reach or touch public opinion. They never do actually, anywhere. But what reaches public opinion is sufficient to formulate a general climate and a general approach towards the United States and its policies. And it is within this framework that the media in Cyprus present American policies on Cyprus and the region. This has been the case for years, a fact that led to the general belief that Cyprus and its interests are for the Americans expendable because of the island's and its population's size. I suppose communications experts may sight a communications problem for the Americans in this case. But it will take much more than a communications exercise to reverse the present situation. More so since the attitude of many of the diplomats –not just Americans- serving in Cyprus has never been a very flattering for the Cypriots. On the contrary, I think at some points it reaches the fine line dividing it from an almost neocolonialist snobbish approach. Things have improved over the last few years. I remember when the Americans actually refused to talk to Cypriot journalists or bother to find out what they thought of American policies.

In my experience there is, to start with, a deficient knowledge of the history of the Cyprus problem. Usually this history is dismissed with the very risky view that what should concern us is the future not the past. However, unless one knows the history of a problem, unless he can establish facts, which usually are the reasons of the parties' present views, how can one avoid falling into traps that may prove of catastrophic consequences for the Cypriots? Should the need arise, I can give you several examples. Therefore, it is imperative that diplomats serving in Cyprus and who wish to contribute in efforts to solve the problem or present themselves as honest brokers of a solution, should be able to distinguish facts from fibs in anybody's arguments about what led to the sides' present positions.

Another problem is these diplomats' assumption that what they have been told by their foreign ministries about Cyprus represents the only absolute truth. When they are presented with a different kind of truth, they become defensive if not confused and inevitably almost part of the problem. The fact that they share distaste for Cypriot journalists does not help much. Until very recently foreign diplomats, especially those from the stronger countries, assumed to know better than the Cypriot journalists what questions the latter should ask. And the first advice to any newcomer to Cyprus they would give would be not to take seriously Cypriot journalism. In some cases they turned any reference to Cypriot journalism into jokes. In this way, they failed to convey clear messages by Cypriot media concerning perceptions of American, for example, foreign policy and in particular American policy in the region and therefore on Cyprus as well. The government analysts were prevented from access to such important briefings, irrespective of whether these briefings could alter decisions or approaches and situations.

However, it is true that over the last few years attitudes have changed, if not towards all Cypriot journalists, at least towards some of them. This has helped in better mutual understanding, in better perceptions of each other and has led to improved journalism. Because it is also true that in some cases, weaknesses or deficiencies in Cypriot journalism have blown up issues and contributed to a confusion around positions and decisions that affected policies in the region and on Cyprus in particular. This underlines the importance and the need for all those involved in formulating policies to be in touch with ordinary people. And they can do that through journalists irrespective of how they assess their performance, or their attitude towards the Americans. It is an anachronism to separate journalists into friendly and hostile ones. If anything, one has to approach the hostile ones

much more systematically than the friendly ones who need no convincing, as they are already convinced.

In concluding I would put my final question as follows: What is the purpose and the need to analyze perceptions of the American foreign policies in Turkey, Greece or Cyprus? Is it to find out how the peoples of these countries feel about American policies? Why is this important? Will the analysis of the perceptions be taken into consideration and perhaps lead to corrective action on American policies? Is this feasible? Is this a practical expectation? Or is the purpose of such analysis to see what need to be done to change the perceptions as a result of a public relations exercise rather than as a product of more fair and transparent and of course acceptable to the countries in region policies?