

One U.N. Diplomat's Frustration, c. 1991

Giandomenico Picco was one in a long line of skilled diplomats to leave his post as a special envoy with nothing to show for his efforts. Below is an excerpt from his recent memoir that describes his fruitless foray into Cyprus negotiations.

Decisions to deploy peacekeeping forces were made by the Security Council, but managing their deployment fell to the secretary-general and the Office of Special Political Affairs, which had a fair amount of freedom for maneuver in diplomatic activities. That was its major attraction: I knew by then that the deskbound bureaucracy of the United Nations in New York was not for me. This most independent arm of the secretary-general's office, I thought, offered me the chance to have it both ways - - to make a political and intellectual contribution as well as to get involved more directly in conflict resolution at ground level. My expectations did not go unmet.

Cyprus was my first assignment in the field, my introduction to the manual labor of mediation. Not only did it teach me how to use the hand tools of diplomacy by the kind of luck that makes careers, it also placed me under Javier Perez de Cuellar, a Peruvian diplomat then serving as a UN special representative for Cyprus at the request of Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim. The mandate on this issue given by the Security Council to the secretary-general allowed him to exercise his own diplomacy through his representatives and to make his own proposals. Since Cyprus' independence from the British in 1960, the island's Greek and Turkish communities had had a difficult coexistence. Greek Cypriots outnumbered Turkish Cypriots by four to one. The Cyprus Constitution of that time was aimed at creating a functioning executive branch that would protect the rights of the smaller community but not be tyrannized by it. It was not to be so. The two concepts clashed, and the story of Cyprus evolved into a series of attempts to right one wrong with another. Today, thirty-eight years after independence, thirty-five years after Greek Cypriots sought to modify the original Constitution in their favor, and twenty-four years after the Turkish Army intervened to protect the Turkish Cypriot community, the island remains divided. **As in other cases, the Turkish side in 1974 won the battle but lost the peace.** Turkish Cypriots are now free from possible Greek Cypriot pressure or control, but they get only a fraction of the economic benefits received by the Greek Cypriot community, whose per capita income is higher than that of some Western European nations.

I landed in Cyprus on a very hot day at the end of September 1976, for what was supposed to be a two-year tour of duty. Instead, I would remain involved in the problem of Cyprus until January 1985. Cyprus provided me with a lesson in the value of pride over money, right over might, and the indomitable hope for justice no matter how faint the prospect. But my exit from the scene would not be honorable.

The line that has separated the two sides in Cyprus since 1974 is called the Green Line. It runs through the capital city of Nicosia and from east to west across the treeless fields of the central plain and the foothills of the mountains. (In the wide space of the Mesaoria plain, the trees were cut down by the Venetians in the 1500s during their brief century-long stay on the island to better observe the approaching Ottoman Army. It did not help much.)

The UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) was deployed along the Green Line. In addition to a military contingent of about seven thousand soldiers separating the two sides, there were a press officer from Iraq and two political officers, one from the East (Poland) and one from the West (myself).

Most of my duties consisted of mediating minor problems between the opposing military forces and solving the daily problems of the population. Many problems stemmed from the military partition itself, which had cut family farms in half and divided schools from their students, hospitals from their patients, workers from their businesses.

Only diplomats and UN officials were allowed to cross the Green Line freely. For Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots to do so, negotiations had to be conducted by a UN official. These minor mediations were hardly noticed anywhere else, but they made daily life more bearable for those Cypriots affected by the war. Still, nothing in Cyprus was easy. Harvesting a field across enemy lines was a sensitive political matter that became a battleground for power plays. The easiest way to show power was to destroy something or to refuse cooperation. That is pretty much what happened in Cyprus in those days. Saying no, to show power? Why anybody derived pleasure from making somebody else's life more difficult was, and is, beyond me. My job was essentially to convince Turkish Cypriot or Greek Cypriot officials that they would look more powerful by saying yes. I was just learning how important a role a mere individual can play in complex political events. In that vein, it was essential to develop personal relationships with the individuals involved on both sides. One-on-one conversations proved essential in breaking through official positions. I learned how to personalize every matter, which frankly isn't all that hard for an Italian.

It became our job to help protect the remaining Greek Cypriots in the north and Turkish Cypriots in the south. We helped children cross military lines to go to school, the elderly to receive health care across checkpoints, farmers to attend to their fields that were under the control of an enemy army. As we arranged to satisfy both sides through a series of reciprocal gestures, the ledgers became more complicated. A demand for water to irrigate parched crops on one side might be made in recompense for restoring a power outage that had occurred several months earlier.

Keeping the accounts was the task that fell to the United Nations' "good offices" if demands could not be matched at a precise point in time. In Cyprus, the Turkish Cypriot side always appeared uncompromising. The Greek Cypriot side, by contrast, projected an image of flexibility on almost any issue. These initial positions, it turned out, were not useful in predicting outcomes, since the Greek Cypriots would often discuss ad nauseam rather than decide and the Turkish Cypriots would reverse course without a hint of advance notice.

Negotiations were also complicated by unwritten rules from the UN Secretariat; we had to take the position of each side at face value, New York suggested, without saying so directly, to ensure impartiality. This was, and remains, a guiding principle in UN circles. I did not realize at the time that impartiality is not a useful concept. Any side to a conflict would necessarily accuse the mediator of partiality to test him, both on his principles and on his commitment to his mandate. Impartiality applies only to mirror-image situations, which rarely exist in nature or negotiations. Only later did I come to realize that what both sides of a conflict want from a mediator is not impartiality but credibility - - the ability to deliver the goods.

The impact of individuals in a place like Cyprus is magnified, and I began to see in the faces of the island's people that my work was making a difference - - not a huge difference, certainly, but a change for the better. The gratification was tremendous . . .

When Ambassador Samir Shihabi of Saudi Arabia was elected president of the General Assembly in 1991, it was a window of opportunity for me and my desire to get the word "peacemaking" into an official UN resolution. Ambassador Shihabi had been a good friend and supporter. He had always believed in me and my work. Samir understood the predicament and agreed to help. We needed a third plotter and found one in Nitya Pibolsougram, the Thai ambassador to the United Nations and another friend, who was then serving as chairman of the Special Politics Committee. The plan was to slip the word "peacemaking" into a draft resolution the committee was debating. It did not matter where such a word appeared; the objective was simply to include it in a document on which the membership of the United Nations would vote. The deed was done with an incidental reference to "peacemaking" in the draft of a long resolution dealing with "peacekeeping" - the latter effectively becoming midwife to the former. Later, Samir made sure the resolution would sail through the General Assembly unchallenged. In early December 1991, fewer than twenty days before Perez de Cuellar left the United Nations at the end of his second term as secretary-general, the peacemaking work he had done was finally recognized by name.

But there was more to come. On January 30, 1992, during the first meeting of Security Council heads of state, perhaps the most solemn occasion in the history of that body, a declaration was adopted defining the new roles and functions of the United Nations and the secretary-general in the future. Among those major functions, peacemaking appeared in its own right in capital letters. The draft, originally prepared by the British, became one of the most important UN documents of the 1990s. My battle for peacemaking was over.

Cyprus was the first important test of our peacemaking efforts. The United Nations had first become involved in Cyprus in 1964, when peacekeeping troops were dispatched to restore calm after Turkish Cypriots reacted violently to constitutional changes engineered by Archbishop Makarios III, the Greek Cypriot leader. Ten years later, the island was physically divided after the Turkish Army intervened following a Greek Cypriot coup. Perez de Cuellar and Cyprus had a long mutual history dating back to 1974, when he had been president of the UN Security Council, and 1975, when Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim had named him special representative for the island. When he became secretary-general in 1982, everyone expected him to take a direct hand in helping to find a solution to the crisis. By that time, I had worked on the Cyprus case, on and off the island, for seven years. As I took up my new duties in his private office, it was clear that if experience, knowledge, and commitment meant anything, we were better positioned than anyone else to find a way through the fog of suspicion and animosity separating Greek and Turkish Cypriots. We could see the big picture. Cyprus would probably remain somewhat divided geographically, but its constitutional structure needed to reflect a unitary state. The hard part would be finding a formula to achieve this without one side or the other considering itself a loser.

The gap between the two sides was then, and is now, enormous. For Turkish Cypriots, the "motherland" is sixty seconds away by jet fighter and is a big political and economic supporter. For Greek Cypriots, the motherland is five hundred miles away and less well off economically. Greece is a member of the European Union; Turkey is not and resents its exclusion. But Turkey has more clout in international affairs as the southern bulwark of

NATO during the Cold War and the frontline state neighboring Iraq and Iran today, and having a military "entente" with Israel.

Negotiations, when they finally began, would take place on two tracks. The principal officials in the Office of Special Political Affairs were conducting their regular discussions, overseeing the UN force in Cyprus, issuing political guidelines, and generally doing business as usual. Separately, the secretary-generals private office worked to develop new ideas and proposals that, we hoped, might point to a solution to the overall problem. We kept one set of files that we shared in meetings with the entire team. But access to files on the confidential plans, trips, and meetings I held with the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish government was strictly limited to Perez de Cuellar and my assistant, Judith Karam. The Office of Special Political Affairs realized something was amiss, and Brian Urquhart, who ran the office, took it up with the secretary-general. He didn't get much satisfaction.

We were, in fact, taking an unconventional approach. Standard diplomacy called for negotiations with representatives of the two communities on the island, with their national benefactors in the background. But Turkey was much closer to the emotional fault line in Cyprus than Greece was. So in 1984, we conceived a very undiplomatic plan to strike a deal - but not with Rauf Denktash, the leader of the Turkish Cypriots. Instead, we went after the president of Turkey, General Kenan Evren. Denktash had always played domestic politics in Ankara to his favor. However, with a general now holding the presidency, we thought we could bypass Denktash and go to the Turkish capital. Our objective was to strike a deal directly with Ankara, then "convince" Denktash to accept it. We hoped we could use an intermediary, Turkish General Ertugrul Saltik, to negotiate with Evren. I had met him years earlier and knew he had been part of the military coup that had brought the army to power in 1980. He had since been placed in charge of the Turkish Army in the Aegean, was rumored to be the next chief of staff, and was even said to be a possible successor to Evren some day. If anyone could get the word to Evren and speak with authority for the military junta, it was Saltik. We arranged a meeting between him and Perez de Cuellar.

Saltik listened to our suggestions but said he needed time to consult his government, which we understood to mean President Evren. For a variety of reasons, however, communication through Saltik proved to be too slow. We needed another channel. Fortunately, I found one. Tugay Uluçevik, a Turkish diplomat I had befriended when I was posted in Cyprus, had risen in the Foreign Ministry over the years and was much more involved now at the decision-making level. He was also the son of an important general in the Turkish Army who before his death had been a close friend of Evren. With Perez de Cuellar's permission, I began a series of negotiations with him in the autumn of 1984; he would fly to New York from Ankara, and we would talk in the privacy of my home over the weekends. The contents of our discussions were relayed directly to the president. Simultaneously, I was maintaining a secret dialogue with Ambassador Andreas Mavrommatis of Cyprus, mostly in Geneva. Once the groundwork was laid, the idea was to convene a summit meeting between the leaders of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities to discuss all the other details and, we hoped, reach an agreement.

By the end of November, General Evren had accepted the proposal. It called for a geographical division of Cyprus along these percentages: a bit more than 29 percent for the Turks, a bit less than 71 percent for the Greeks. The Turks would agree not to lay claim to the presidency, but there were many constitutional protections of their interests. The formula became known as "the 29 percent-plus."

From December onward, I met several times with Mavrommatis without ever getting a clear-cut indication that Greek Cypriot President Spyros Kyprianou would accept the deal. Still, we were reasonably optimistic - - and in any event, now that Evren had bought in, we had to move quickly or risk a leak that would almost surely bomb everything. A meeting was convened on January 17, 1985. In his memoir, *Pilgrimage for Peace*, Perez de Cuellar noted, "I had reached the conclusion that enough progress had been made to justify the convening of a high-level meeting of the two sides." That conclusion was based largely on my conversations with Mavrommatis. I was wrong. The two Cypriot leaders finally sat face-to-face in the presence of the secretary-general, in what was referred to as the Security Council Consultation Room in New York. Things didn't go well; in fact, they didn't go at all. Kyprianou did not clearly indicate that he was accepting the plan, which put Denktash in the comfortable position of not having to respond. Denktash was obviously upset that the operation had been planned without his knowledge and was delighted that Kyprianou had effectively refused to play.

In one of the first breaks during the meeting, Denktash asked me to join him alone in a small room that adjoins the Security Council Hall and serves as the secretary-general's office when he attends Council meetings. He closed the door and let me have it with both barrels: "You tried to go around me, Picco, and you almost succeeded, but the person that will make me sign an agreement on Cyprus is not born yet." We had known each other for many years, and he had defended the Turkish Cypriot community with determination and courage. Denktash never budged from his vision of an independent state, despite the cost to his people. His ability to work the levers of Turkish domestic politics made him extremely popular and impossible for the Turkish Cypriot opposition to unseat or the government in Ankara to undermine. He believed that eventually the world would recognize him; he once reminded me that even East Germany had been recognized after twenty years. But twenty years after the Turkish invasion he was still there, and his people still had no recognized passports.

Cyprus was a failure, and I was partly to blame. I told Perez de Cuellar that perhaps it would be best if he took me off the case, which would also provide him with some political cover from those critical of our handling of the Cyprus affair. He agreed. I had miscalculated, and I had to pay the price. It was time to move on to other things.

From Man Without a Gun: One Diplomat's Secret Struggle to Free the Hostages' Fight Terrorism, by Giandomenico Picco (Times Books, Random House, 1999), pp 16-19, 44-48.