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Obama's Secret Weapon Against Putin's Crimea Vote?

In a Soviet-style election, 97% Crimeans voted to join Russia yesterday. Ethnic Russians make up only 58% of Crimea. The lopsided vote is determined by two factors: many ethnic minorities, especially Muslim Tartars and Roman Catholics, stayed home and there was roughly one Russian soldier or sailor for every 20 eligible voters. For many, voting “no” didn't seem like a safe option.

The White House immediately announced that it wouldn't formally recognize the election results. Ukrainian activists told me that the Obama Administration's response was “toothless.”

Yet, behind the scenes, the White House seems to be developing a unique strategy to counter Russian adventurism.

Hours after he left a National Security Council meeting on Tuesday, the foreign minister of Cyprus, Ozdil Nami, sat down with me. “There is a [new] sense of optimism” regarding Cyprus, he said.

Perversely, Putin and energy are the reasons. Russian premier Vladimir Putin has raised natural-gas prices on the Ukraine and implicitly threatened to do the same to America's European allies, mainly France and Germany. Western Europe depends on Russian natural gas to supply more than one-third of its power and heat.

As a result, Europe is skittish about confronting Putin. Higher energy prices would anger voters and slow its economy.

Making NATO nations less dependent on Russia—the nation alliance exists to defend against—has become a new priority for the Obama Administration. Yet, the Administration wants to move paper, not ships or tanks.

That's where Cyprus comes in. The eastern Mediterranean island has discovered vast new fields of natural gas off its shores. Israel made a similarly large offshore find in its waters near Cyprus. Given its proximity,

the Israelis will locate much of their hydrocarbon recovery infrastructure in Cyprus. Taken together, Cyprus is poised to become a major energy producer.

So weaning Western Europe (and Ukraine) off Russian gas means bringing Cyprus' energy on line as soon as possible. And that means reuniting the Turkish and Greek parts of that divided island—a process that has been underway since 2004 and has accelerated in 2009—is now a much higher priority for Washington and Brussels.

The foreign minister, who played a key role in 2008-2010 reunification talks, champions a \$1 billion pipeline project to deliver natural gas to Turkey and onward to Europe. Bringing Cyprus' natural gas fields on stream “would be a welcome development,” he said, that would lower the island's sky-high electricity costs, create well-paying jobs, and spur foreign direct investment. A water pipeline linking Turkey and Cyprus traces a route similar to the planned gas pipeline. That water pipeline begins delivering fresh water to Cyprus later this year.

When asked about foreign policy implications, he stressed that energy and economic inter-dependence would promote peace between Israel and Turkey as between the European Union and Turkey. What about Russia?

Wouldn't Cyprus natural gas undercut Russia's pricing power and make Europe more energy independent? Foreign minister Nami didn't want to talk about those geopolitics, though he conceded that the Crimean crisis “may have increased interest” among diplomats in Washington and Brussels.

The Russian invasion, he said, caused “great concern and disbelief...There was no bloodshed [in Crimea] and no U.N. resolutions” authorizing Russian auction. It was a bolt from the blue.

He dismissed any parallels between Cyprus and Crimea. There were United Nations' resolutions calling for peace keepers for almost a decade before the Turkish army invaded Cyprus in 1974. Greek and Turkish speaking Cypriots were actually killing each, burning public buildings and houses of worship. Then, in what the foreign minister called a “coup d'etat” brought in a new government that threatened to disenfranchise Turkish speakers and forcibly transfer the sovereignty of the nation island to Greece. Only then, he pointed out, did the Turkish army arrive.

In Crimea, he added, there were none of these things. Ukrainians of all tongues and faiths (the Crimean Tatars are overwhelmingly Muslim) were peacefully coexisting until the Russian troops left their bases less than a month ago.

Though he didn't touch on the subject, some intelligence analysts are now concerned that Crimea could become another Kosovo—with Russians covertly encouraging attacks on Ukrainian speakers and Tartars living in the Crimea. Such attacks could touch off a wave of ever-rising reprisals and counter-strikes. That would give Russia an excuse to devour the rest of neighboring Ukraine.

Meanwhile, back in Cyprus, political and religious tranquility is more strongly felt than any time since the 1950s. Greek Orthodox, Maronite Christian and Muslim leaders recently issued a joint statement supporting unification, peace and mutual respect. Churches are re-opening in the Muslim-majority Northern Cyprus and mosques once again host prayer services in Greek Orthodox-majority southern part of the island.

We are seeking “problem-free exploration of hydrocarbons,” the minister said. He hopes for unified Cyprus that is prosperous and peaceful. There is every sign that Cyprus is on track to become a united, fully integrated member of the European Union. Its currency will be the euro and its hydrocarbons will make Europe less dependent on Russia.

And Cyprus' rise help punish Putin aggression? The Minister is too professional to take the bait—but the Obama Administration seems to have stumbled on a winning strategy.

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