

Guns and Gunboats: How to resolve the Cyprus hydrocarbons dispute

Colin Irwin, University of Liverpool

In 1997 the Unionists would not enter into negotiations with the Republicans in Northern Ireland because they would not give up their guns before the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement. Now, in 2018, twenty years later, history seems to be repeating itself in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Greek Cypriots will not enter into negotiations with the Turkish Cypriots unless Turkey withdraws their warships that are interfering with the Greek Cypriot drilling operations in their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). In Northern Ireland we found a formula to solve this problem of decommissioning either before or after the negotiation of a peace agreement. Perhaps a similar approach can solve the problem of gunboat diplomacy and hydrocarbon extraction in the Eastern Mediterranean?

In Northern Ireland we resolved what was called the ‘Government and Guns’ problem by putting the various options on the table to the people of Northern Ireland in a public opinion poll. The Unionists wanted decommissioning before negotiations; the Republicans wanted decommissioning after a settlement was reached and agreed; while the Alliance party and Women’s Coalition put forward compromise proposals of dealing with the decommissioning problem during negotiations, not before or after. Inevitably the compromise got the greatest support from both the Catholic and Protestant communities so that is what was done and peace was made. Here is the result of that poll published in the Belfast Telegraph on the 7th of April 1997.

Protestant	Preferred	Acceptable	Tolerable	Unacceptable
Fixed timetable for the “Talks” followed by decommissioning	20%	18%	23%	40%
Fixed timetable for the “Talks” and simultaneous decommissioning	22%	34%	27%	18%
Flexible timetable for the “Talks” and simultaneous decommissioning	15%	36%	33%	16%
Fixed timetable for decommissioning followed by the “Talks”	50%	22%	17%	11%
Catholic	Preferred	Acceptable	Tolerable	Unacceptable
Fixed timetable for the “Talks” followed by decommissioning	52%	22%	15%	10%
Fixed timetable for the “Talks” and simultaneous decommissioning	21%	37%	29%	14%
Flexible timetable for the “Talks” and simultaneous decommissioning	22%	32%	27%	19%
Fixed timetable for decommissioning followed by the “Talks”	14%	23%	24%	39%

Similarly in Cyprus the Turkish Cypriots want a hydrocarbon deal before the Turkish warships withdraw and this can be tested against public opinion. The Greek Cypriots want to carry on with their hydrocarbon explorations, for the Turkish warships to withdraw now and only then to start negotiations again. But there are also a number of compromise solutions being proposed such as the establishment of a UN bi-communal Committee for Hydrocarbon

development or for the negotiation of a hydrocarbon agreement to be part of any new negotiations from day one of those negotiations, not before or after an agreement, but within and part of an agreement.

No doubt other creative solutions can be tried and tested as well but the point to make here is that these kinds of apparently insolvable problems can be put to the people in a poll and their opinion registered. It is not a referendum. The result is not legally binding, but for politicians looking for a way out of a corner they may have painted themselves into, it can be very helpful indeed. It saved the negotiations in Northern Ireland and should at least be tried in Cyprus. There is nothing to lose and everything to gain.