

## Putin: Defining diplomacy

Written by Eric Walberg

---

Time's Man of the Year will have the world hanging on his every move in 2008, muses Eric Walberg

24/1/8 -- There are several irons in the East-West fire these days -- Kosovo, Poland, NATO, pipeline routes through Eastern Europe, to name just the most obvious bones of superpower contention.

Yes, Russia is back in the big league again, after two decades of chaos and restructuring, and the US imperial constellation is not at all happy. As if to prove the point, President Vladimir Putin recently appointed Dmitry Rogozin, former head of the vigorously nationalist Rodina party his new ambassador to NATO.

Stating the obvious, Rogozin commented that Russian relations with NATO were "at their lowest point", no doubt having in mind NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and the Baltics, the US missile bases planned for Poland and the Czech Republic, the dispute over the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty, and Kosovo's planned independence.

Western observers, whether in desperation or with tongue in cheek, tried to downplay this appointment -- the equivalent of US President George W Bush appointing UN-basher John Bolton as ambassador to the UN, saying the appointment of such a high-profile figure suggests an upgrade in relations. Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of Russia in Global Affairs, dryly said, "I don't think he will conduct himself as he would at a rally in Moscow." True, Rogozin served as chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the Duma and as Putin's envoy for talks with the European Union on the status of Kaliningrad. In fact, it puts paid to any lingering hope that Russia will turn a blind eye to NATO's attempts to act as window-dressing for the US imperial agenda. Rogozin told Ekho Moskvyy that while he doesn't consider NATO hostile, Russians have good grounds for feeling that NATO and the US are direct threats to Russia. Read: he does consider NATO hostile and will do his Pioneer's best to scuttle their nefarious plans. Recall the anecdote about what defines a diplomat: if he says "yes" he means "maybe", if he says "maybe" he means "no", and if he says "no" he's not a diplomat.

The recent electoral upset of the hysterically anti-Russian prime minister Jaroslav Kaczynski and his Law and Justice Party in Poland was very much due to sensible Poles coming out in droves (the highest turnout since the heady days after the Communists lost power), realising his slavish pro-Americanism -- Polish troops in Iraq and free US missile bases at home -- was very, very foolish. Kaczynski's defense minister, Radek Sikorski, had tried to talk some sense into him, only to be summarily dismissed. The new prime minister, Donald Tusk of the Civic Platform Party, immediately promoted Sikorski to foreign minister, announced the US base was

## Putin: Defining diplomacy

Written by Eric Walberg

---

on hold and he would have Polish troops out of Iraq by the end of the year. Poland had got nothing in return for providing thousands of troops for the US folly in Iraq, and Kaczynski didn't even ask for US funding for upkeep of the proposed US missile base. Tusk wasted no time in calling for a meeting with Putin -- in February -- to discuss the base. The first high-level meeting with Russia has already taken place, with Witold Waszczykowski, the vice foreign minister, meeting his Russian counterpart, Sergei Kislyak in Warsaw a few weeks ago.

Furthermore, Tusk made the Czech Republic one of his first state visits "to coordinate our steps and proceedings in the course of negotiations" concerning the US bases planned for the both of them. The London-based Centre for European Reform director, Tomas Valasek, predicts that any missile base would necessitate "the US putting boots on the ground in Poland and helping Poland to upgrade its air defenses." If a deal is in fact struck, Tusk wants no less than Patriot missiles as part of a US-funded modernisation of Poland's air defenses, supposedly so that "its troops in Iraq and Afghanistan have better protection," Valasek reasoned, in a truly brilliant Polish flourish. Yes, a peaceful Poland, with no enemies in sight, will, with the selfless aid of the US, be armed to the teeth, prompting Russia to aim missiles at it.

Not to worry. Valasek is sitting pretty in London, far from Kaliningrad, where Russian missiles will probably be stationed. And Sikorski's "maybe" will only come into effect after the US presidential elections. With the unenthusiastic Democrats poised to continue their erosion of Bush's imperial madness, this could well be diplo-talk for "no". And is "coordinate" diplo-speak for "let's both scuttle this insanity"?

The pot that's about to boil over very, very soon, however, is in Serbia. Yes, Kosovo is still legally a province of Serbia, despite the presence of tens of thousands of UN troops. Albanian nationalists have been chomping on the bit for months now, and were just barely reined in by the US and EU, angrily agreeing to put off their declaration of independence till after Serbian elections 3 February, supposedly to avoid playing into the hands of Serbian nationalists. How clever and restrained of the Kosovans. However, the Serbs were not fooled, and look like they will opt for Tomislav Nikolic, the nationalist presidential candidate, in next month's run-off election. And the new EU president, Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, in a delightful gaff, said, "Serbia belongs to the EU and can't join the US or the Russian Federation. It is absurd to think otherwise, and we should do our utmost to push Serbia toward the EU." Counting on the lure of filthy lucre, Rupel noted that Serbia's per-capita GDP is \$3,000 vs Slovenia's \$23,000. "Coming closer to the EU will help change that." No mention of how Slovenia was always far ahead economically of the rest of the former Yugoslavia, or why Serbia might be such a basket case -- the EU/US-abetted disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the subsequent sanctions and bombing by NATO. But compared to Iraq, I suppose Serbia got off lucky. In any case, it is unlikely that the plucky Serbs will give up their ancient lands without a

## Putin: Defining diplomacy

Written by Eric Walberg

---

fight, and sell their souls for some EU crumbs. This is one NATO pimple that will not respond to Clarisol.

This US scheme to create yet another nominally Muslim client state is being enthusiastically supported by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has brought France, the UK and Italy onboard. "The cake has been baked because the Americans have promised Kosovo independence, and if Washington recognises Kosovo and the European nations do not follow, it will be a disaster," said a senior EU official. So by implication, it won't be a disaster if Europe refuses to cave in to US imperial policy and create another illegitimate offspring? Can we hope that these diplomatic "yeses" are really just "maybes"? And perhaps the reluctant "maybes" of Spain, Slovakia, Romania and Cyprus, fearful that such a move would spur secessionist movements on their own territories, are not so shortsighted. A tiny, absurd, "independent" Kosovo will give pause to jingoists in Scotland, Sicily, Basque, Turkish Cyprus, even Bavaria. Watch out what you wish for, Angela. You just might get it. In spades.

Finally, there is the issue of energy supplies from Russia to Europe. Much as the Merckels would love to give Putin the finger, they must continue to bite their tongues because they are hopelessly addict to Russian oil and gas. And Gazprom's march west continues unabated, with Putin's visit 17-18 January to Bulgaria, a country that depends almost entirely on Russia for its energy. Putin chose Sofia, Bulgaria, as the destination of his last official foreign visit as president, to start the Year of Russia celebration and observe the 130th anniversary of Bulgaria's liberation from the Ottoman Empire. "We reached agreement on a number of important projects; this would not have been possible if we were not trusted partners," he said.

His visit finalised the contracts on the construction of two nuclear power plants at Belene, the Bourgas- Alexandroupolis oil pipeline and the South Stream natural gas pipeline, putting the final pieces into the Euro-Russian energy jigsaw puzzle, by clinching the participation of Bulgaria and Greece. Gazprom and Eni signed a memorandum of understanding last June to build the 900-kilometre leg of the South Stream pipeline from Russia to Bulgaria via the Black Sea. Despite disapproval its new Euro-friends, Bulgaria is delighted, since such a project would weaken Gazprom's dependence on its age-old foe Turkey, which is now a major transit country for Russian natural gas. Bulgaria is also a member of the Nabucco natural gas pipeline consortium, so Putin's visit could mean the beginning of the end for this attempt by Europe to wean itself from Russian energy, and by implication Russian political pressure.

Gazprom is also poised to take control of the state-owned Petroleum Industry of Serbia, which controls the bulk of Serbia's refining facilities and distribution networks for oil products. The \$400 million contract -- which energy experts contend is underpriced as part of the price of

## Putin: Defining diplomacy

Written by Eric Walberg

---

Russia's continued veto of Kosovo's independence -- would give Russia a big advantage over the EU in the region. The deal would allow Gazprom to build a pipeline across Serbia, making it a key link in its South Stream plans, and turning the western Balkans into a hub for Russian energy. It coincidentally would further weaken the EU's goal of building the stalled Nabucco pipeline.

What a turn-around. The anti-Russian troubled waters once raging in the likes of Poland and Bulgaria have now been transformed into a sea of peace and cooperation -- almost as if the Soviet Union had never collapsed at all. Is there nothing the iconic president-who-came-in-from-the cold can't turn to Russia's advantage? Will Time have to make their last Man of the Year their next Man of the Decade, joining the troubled 1990s candidate, the first (and last) Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, in their pantheon?

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/881/in6.htm>