

The West and Russia are continuing their worn-out Cold War dance routine, argues Eric Walberg

17/3/8 -- As antagonists United States President George W Bush and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin both begin ceding power to others, one would expect new political horizons to open up. Bush already looks more like a footnote than a leader, with the US focussing on McCain vs Clinton/Obama, leaving the failed president a classic lame duck. Putin is introducing his successor Dmitri Medvedev to the subtleties of power politics, with Western analysts slavering over hints in his biography of liberalism and even a rejection of Putin's clear anti-imperialist foreign politics. But this appearance of change belies the reality.

As the recent anniversary of the US debacle in Iraq underlined, the US is in its sixth year of a brutal and illegal occupation and will remain there for years to come, no matter who is president, and in its seventh year in an even worse nightmare in Afghanistan, which no president can afford to abandon despite the obvious failure there.

Things are a bit different in Russia. No electoral chaos and public linen washing. And despite the wishful thinking of pundits, its foreign policy appears to be continuing the independent, self-assured path that Putin gave it: no to US missile bases in Eastern Europe, no to a war against Iran, no to Kosovo.

There are nuances though; notably, a flurry of talks in Moscow between US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and their Russian counterparts prior to the 2-4 April NATO meeting in Romania. They rushed to Moscow to negotiate a "strategic framework" on policy issues such as trade, counter-terrorism and nuclear proliferation. This looks suspiciously like window-dressing, as there has been no movement on the key disagreements over US missile bases and the fate of Kosovo. Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov made it very clear: "In principle our positions have not changed." Interestingly, the Americans discretely limited their talks with opposition figures, bypassing the likes of Gary Kasparov and even Human Rights Watch activist Tatyana Lokshina, whom Rice met with last year, and who said, "I can't say why she didn't meet us this time, but frankly it's very disappointing. It sends a signal to the Russian government." Very much so.

As for NATO, according to US Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns, it is

suffering an "existential crisis", which Jean-Paul Sartre might find amusing. Bush has pushed seven ex-Socialist bloc states into NATO during his tenure and is eager to make this a metric dozen with Albania, Croatia and Macedonia. It also has "roadmaps" for Ukraine and Georgia to get them on a quick entry ramp into this peculiar alliance. But Europe is having trouble digesting all these new dishes -- Greece doesn't want Macedonia for purely Greek reasons, Germany doesn't want Ukraine and Georgia for very good Russian reasons. It's not at all clear that anyone besides Bush really wants basket-case Albania among the big boys. Many argue that the alliance has actually become weaker with all the new members, as individual states -- with the notable exception of the US -- quietly reduce their own defence spending. Gates warned recently that NATO was becoming a two-tiered alliance, with some brave stalwarts and a lot of cowards.

Meanwhile, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Social Democratic foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, is publicly calling for the EU to take on its traditional role of mediator between America and Russia. French President Nicolas Sarkozy now shows his concern for Russian "sensibilities", and his Socialist foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, insists that Moscow must now "have the place that belongs to it." Even Russophobe Merkel realises the folly of inducting Ukraine and Georgia into NATO. As if to draw a line in the sand, the Russian Duma just voted unanimously (440-0) for the recognition of Georgian provinces Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

As for hopes that Medvedev will abandon Putin's legacy, a careful reading of his record shows that he is actually taking the Putin revolution to its logical conclusion, with his intent on streamlining the government, promoting rule by law, supporting business through infrastructure development and market-friendly policies, emphasising the need to nurture NGOs to replace Soviet-style state provision of all services.

Complementing the words of Steinmeier, he has proposed that the EU look to its own experience in the early post-WWII period of reconstruction, when the European Coal and Steel Community laid the vital ground work for the EU itself, bringing enemy states together. He has offered an "asset swap" that will guarantee energy security for the entire continent as "the best form of partnership". Russian investment in refinery and distribution in Europe in exchange for European investment in oil and gas extraction in Russia would create a "virtuous cycle", engendering economic efficiency and security throughout the continent. Medvedev's message is clear, and irrefutable: security is enhanced when countries share risk, not when they build walls and rattle missiles.

This is day to the night of US "might makes right" that unfortunately seems to infect anyone

## Russia-US: Plus ca change

Written by Eric Walberg

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who gets near the White House these days. So while the superpower dance of death continues, there is that other Cold War partner -- détente -- waiting in the wings, if only the US can remove its neo-con blinkers. Europe is already waiting for its tune to change. And we can only hope such a détente will be followed by a perestroika -- this time in the US.

Perhaps all this is best encapsulated in the respective attitudes of the US and Russia towards the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) expressed during its recent meeting in Senegal. For the first time, the US sent a PR envoy, Sada Cumber, a smooth Pakistani-born businessman from Texas, to promote understanding with Muslim countries. Rice explained: "the notion that the US is at war with Islam is simply propagated by violent extremists who seek to divide Muslim communities against themselves." Cumber admitted that he hadn't made much headway in Dakar.

In contrast, Russia actually wants to join the OIC -- its Muslim population is larger than that of several Asian and African Muslim states -- "to enhance cooperation with Islamic nations", according to Russian Ambassador at Large Veniamin Popov. Russia continues to work within international bodies and observe international laws, while the US continues to bully and schnooze the world to follow one of its many "roadmaps".

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/890/in3.htm>