

Courting the bear

Written by Eric Walberg

A flurry of meetings in November 2008 -- in Nice, Brussels and Sharm El-Sheikh -- show the changing face of Russian-Western relations, says Eric Walberg

20/11/8 -- Russia's struggle to become a respected player in world affairs moved forward tentatively with a Russian-European Union summit in Nice in November 2008. Participants said Friday that the meeting underlined improved relations. The European trade commissioner, Catherine Ashton, said talk had been "robust, but very open. Presidents Sarkozy, Barroso and Medvedev were very direct with each other in the spirit of having a dialogue." European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, using rather "robust" diplomatic language, ridiculed the Russian threat to station missiles in Kaliningrad, made just hours after Obama had won the US presidential election last week: "If we start with the idea that there are missiles on one side or the other, we come back to the Cold War rhetoric which is, I would even say, stupid."

President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, who was host of the Nice meeting between Russia and the 27 member-nations as EU president, helped Medvedev back off. He made it clear that the US should reconsider its missile defence plans in Poland and the Czech Republic. "Between now and then," referring to talks on a new security architecture for Europe -- a Russian proposal -- to be held by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which includes the US and Russia, next June, "please no more talk of anti-missile protection systems," Sarkozy said. The deployment of a missile defence system "would bring nothing to security in Europe". The Russian leader welcomed Sarkozy's conciliatory approach, saying that all countries "should refrain from unilateral steps" before discussions on European security take place. "If we share one home, we should get together and make agreements with one another," meaning the Russians will not follow through with their threat if the US agrees to a "Zero Option" with regards missiles in Europe.

Although he holds the rotating presidency of the EU, Sarkozy was actually moving beyond his official mandate, since the bloc has little power over defence matters. The Czechs, who take over the EU presidency in January, and Poles were furious with Sarkozy. "We hope that the project will continue," Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski said after meeting his Czech counterpart Karel Schwarzenberg. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk huffed Thursday that Russia was not part of the plan. "The anti-missile shield is the subject of contracts between Poland and the United States, and other countries are not -- and will not -- be participants in these negotiations." Alexandr Vondra, the Czech deputy prime minister, said he was "surprised" by Sarkozy's comments, which, he said, contradicted French statements at the NATO meeting in Bucharest, and exceeded Sarkozy's purview as EU president. "There was nothing in the EU mandate to talk about missile defence."

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This is a fine example of Sarkozy at his hyperactive best, one where he used his antennae well, sensing the shifting weather patterns and attempting to divert a needless and destructive storm, which, he would no doubt add in his own defence, would hit the Poles and Czechs even harder than the rest of Europe. This whole episode shows the weakness of the EU: pipsqueaks are vaulted into the diplomatic big leagues and can pursue petty grudges which leave the EU helpless to pursue a sensible agenda. French president Jacques Chirac was undermined in 2003 by these parvenus who slavishly hung on every lie coming out of the US concerning Iraqi WMDs, preventing a strong European resistance to the criminal invasion of Iraq. Good for the Sark.

The French leader's nod to the Russian proposal for a new European security structure also elicited jibes. The Euro fans of America and foes of Russia see the Russian president's proposals as a direct attempt to undermine NATO. And so what? This senseless Cold War relict merely raises hackles and sticks its imperial nose where it doesn't belong. The EU and Russia are already working together on peacekeeping -- through the UN -- as seen with the current EUFOR mission in Chad, which includes 320 Russians. Who needs NATO to police the world? Good for Medvedev.

Overriding squawks from Lithuania, Europeans also agreed Monday to resume talks with the Russians on a long-term EU-Russia pact on the economy, energy and security matters. Negotiations were suspended after the Russian war with Georgia in August, but since then the financial crisis has underlined the need for rapprochement. "We don't need a Cold War. We need cool heads," said Barroso. Even Russophobe German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, "I think it is better to talk with each other than about each other."

While Russian and European leaders were extending olive branches to each other in Nice, their foreign ministers were chattering at a NATO meeting in Brussels about their latest pet project -- putting pressure on Turkey to deploy permanent NATO navy forces in the Black Sea and the Bosphorus, one of the most strategic waterways of the world and located in Turkish territorial waters. Turkey is rightly concerned that such move would violate the 1936 Montreux Convention, which limits the total weight of the warships that a country which does not border the Black Sea can deploy to 45,000 tonnes, and eventually harm its sovereign rights over the straits, not to mention its booming economic ties with Russia. Turkey has long opposed the deployment of NATO navy forces on the Black Sea, saying the region is perfectly safe and the Black Sea countries' joint patrol missions are more than sufficient.

But these Euro and NATO intrigues are far less important than the behind-the-scenes activities now going on in US conference rooms, where President-elect Barack Obama's political plans

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for accommodating Russia are now in high gear. Relations with Russia are the cornerstone to the empire's success during Obama's presidency. The world, certainly Europe and NATO, is now holding its breath, waiting to see what Obama will do about the missiles and the Georgians, with the ball firmly in his court.

Unfortunately, he can't hit it back for another two months. In the meantime, the discredited Bush regime is doing its best to dig potholes in the court and make Obama's task doubly hard. A fine example took place last weekend in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, with yet another of the pointless meetings that Bush has sent his beloved Condoleezza Rice on. It took barely an hour for Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to dismiss the supposedly new set of proposals she brought concerning START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) and missile defence. "The current US proposals are insufficient because the Bush administration is seeking to make the decision [on the deployment of the missile shield] irreversible," a Russian source said. Lavrov insisted that any new discussions on the European missile shield should involve Russia, the US and the EU and must be based on respect for common interests rather than on a unilateral decision made by Washington. But absolutely no one is fooled by Bush anymore as his 76 per cent disapproval ratings show. If anything, such tired attempts at covering the empire's tracks merely give Obama more food for thought.

The tone Obama sets in relations with Russia will be vital to the success of his presidency. Medvedev, like Obama, is still an open book. In his state of the union address the same day as Obama's stunning victory, Medvedev revealed ambitious plans to strengthen Russian democracy, condemning state interference in elections, mass media, civil society and the economy -- all of which gives birth to corruption in the bureaucracy. He proposed that those parties falling below the seven per cent threshold in parliamentary elections, yet reaching more than five per cent, should be represented with at least one or two deputies in the State Duma, increasing diversity, that only elected deputies should become governors of Russia's regions or members of the Federation Council, and that local governments and non-governmental organisations have greater say in the legislative process. He called for less state control of the media: "Freedom of speech should be secured by technological innovation. Experience shows that it is practically useless to 'try to persuade' bureaucrats to leave mass media alone. One should not try to persuade, but extend as broadly as possible the space for the Internet and digital television."

If Obama wants to make any progress in the empire's affairs abroad, be it in Afghanistan, Europe, Iraq, Iran, he will have to wrestle the Cold Warrior Washington establishment into submission and make peace with Russia. This will have the truly wonderful side-effect of strengthening Medvedev's hand in his own struggle with statist authoritarians.

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This is the way for America to encourage democracy around the world -- by refraining from threatening other countries and interfering in their affairs. If American is not perceived as a threat by Russia, constantly intriguing and pushing its European allies into "stupid" Cold War stand-offs, Russia will be able to continue its halting, democratic transformation.

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