

The Second Cold War

Foreword

When considering cooperation and conflict in the international arena, it is conflict which is prevailing today due to the systemic crisis of the world balance of power. While the current situation has stressed the institutional limitations of the EU crisis management capabilities, an open conflict between US and Russia has not taken place due to the changed attitude of US (“Lead from behind” and “Asia Pivot”) and to the Russian defensive posture (indirect support to Ukrainian separatists).

In such scenario Europe, a bit player sheepishly following the US, is absent due to the structural weakness of its depoliticized and acephalous integration, thus marking the end of its moral exceptionalism.

Since 1999 Putin is determined to get Russia back up on the superpower stage together with the US. After the massive backlash of Iraq invasion in 2003 Putin, ridiculing the US claims about Iraq's WMDs, increased Russian military capabilities while avoiding in 2008 a war when the US threatened to intervene in Georgia. After the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 Putin, enraged by the NATO intervention in Libya, responded by increasing pressure against the US and threatening to retaliate militarily if the US attacked Iran or Syria. This can be considered the beginning of the Second Cold War.

Russia, US, NATO and the EU

According to the Russian standpoint NATO, after the URSS collapse, is practically a US-led intervention force which, against all gentlemen agreements between Gorbachev and the West, has expanded eastwards to the Russian border. Its new mission is to control the world and the global energy system.

Over the last twenty years the US targeted countries close to Russia, including Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya and Syria. In Yugoslavia it was the US to fire nationalism and sponsor separatists in order to break up the country: what is now doing in Ukraine.

Washington is particularly angry that Putin has opposed US plans for regime change in Syria (so as to break the alliance between Syria, Hezbollah and Iran) while getting rid of oligarchs (such as Berezovsky and Khodorkovsky) whose role was to help Western plutocrats get control of Russia's natural resources.

Ukraine is where the US neocons seek revenge through the US sponsored regime change in Kiev and the sanctioning of Russia. Getting tough with Putin (and demonizing him) has finally become the official policy of US and,

consequently, of the EU.

The neocon plan is for Russian economy to be weakened by sanctions, which they hope will lead to reduce support to Putin, destabilize the country and bring about a regime change in Moscow. They want a compliant Kremlin who will make available Russia's huge natural resources and allow them to get rid of President Assad, an essential prerequisite before any attack on Iran.

In his speech at the Valdai Club in Sochi (24 October 2014) Putin did maintain that the US, the so-called victor of the Cold War, is trying to reorganize the world according to its own interests. Putin said Washington is responsible for the rise of Islamist terrorism as well as the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Libya. Whereas the US cavalry intervenes around the world, Washington reproaches Russia for doing exactly that in Ukraine. Putin did quote the Latin saying "Quod licet Iovi non licet Bovi" ("What Jupiter is allowed, the Ox is not."), stressing the US double standard. He went on maintaining: "But the Bear will not ask for permission, he is the master of the taiga and will not cede it to anyone."

As for the Balkans, Moscow is exerting pressure, in particular with Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria, so that they either back away from EU membership or that, once they become members, influence EU resolutions in a pro-Russian manner. Bulgaria, for instance, could well accept Russian pressure and block future EU foreign policy initiative.

Putin appears prepared to promote Russian interests in his neighborhood economically, politically and, if necessary, militarily. The West doesn't have much to offer in response, and it is completely unwilling to go to war for Ukraine or Moldova. Even the economic sanctions are controversial in Germany and elsewhere in the EU.

The significance of Orthodox Christianity

The consequences on Russian society of the sanctions against Russia and the attack on the ruble are not understood in the West, thus putting Europe at a significant disadvantage in negotiating an end to the crisis.

Whereas in the past the Russians considered themselves European, they now realize that they are a distinct civilization subject to concerted Western efforts to destroy it. The birthplace of their Orthodox Christianity is Crimea, their ancient capital is Kiev, with Moscow being the "Third Rome" (after Rome and Constantinople).

Russians are not fighting for territory, they are fighting for Russia as a concept. Donetsk is considered a sacred city and around 1,000 Russian fighters are ready to fight for it, like Crusaders fought for Jerusalem centuries ago, in the name of the chivalrous ideals of Christianity: purity and defending the defenseless, the

citizens of Eastern Ukraine under attack by the Kiev government intent on wiping them out culturally, or even physically.

A holy war of the Russian people for its own future, its own ideas, its own children and the country that 25 years ago was divided into pieces.

Some of these fighters are retired professional soldiers, hardened by the Chechen war, some citizens and youngsters who have never served in the army. Their cultural reference points are eclectic: but what unite most of them is a belief that they are in Ukraine not to support a rebellion against the legitimate government there, but rather to defend Russia itself against Western forces that want its total destruction. They do not blame the Kiev government but the West. The idea that Russia – and the wider Orthodox, Slav world - are surrounded by enemies dates back to at least two centuries. In the 1990s Russian volunteers - some of them fighting now in Ukraine – took the same road, joining the Orthodox Serbs against the Catholic Croats and Bosnian Muslims in the Yugoslav War.

The current situation in Ukraine

Eastern Ukrainian forces supported by Russia want to create a more integrated and clearly defined area out of the small parts of the country already under their control. Putin surely welcomes a land bridge between Russia and Crimea. Currently missing from the equation, after conquering Donetsk airport, is the land access to Crimea through the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol: the current offensive launched by the separatists to gain control of the city could complete the geographical map of Eastern Ukraine.

Within the EU the interests of the 28 Member States are diverging: taking a tough stance against Russia is generally less important to Southern Europeans than it is to Eastern Europeans. In the past, the German government had sought to serve as a bridge between the 2 camps. But in Berlin itself significant differences in the assessment of the situation have emerged within the coalition government. German Foreign Minister Steinmeier, after traveling to Moscow to visit his Russian counterpart Lavrov, urged for “more restraint in public statements, so as not to eliminate Western chances of contributing to the easing of tensions and to the mitigation of conflict.”

Officials are worried in the EU capitals about the differences between the Chancellor and the Foreign Minister. It is clear that “only Berlin can negotiate on equal footing with the Russians.” Meanwhile, officials in the Baltic states and Poland worry that Steinmeier has warned that there cannot be a military solution for the conflict in Ukraine

If separatists divide Eastern Ukraine the West will have to resign itself to that development. If that happens, then Russia will have succeeded with its strategy

for the third time since the end of the Soviet Union. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, breakaway republics of Georgia, are under Russian control, as is the Transnistria region of Moldavia. The consequences being that neither country is able to join NATO because any candidate member state must have previously resolved all border disputes with its neighbors prior to accession.

The current situation in Russia

The US has been waging economic, financial, trade and political war against Russia. Russia is facing a very large set of financial and economic problems as a result of the low oil prices together with associated consequences for the ruble and raising yields on the sovereign debt.

From the Russian standpoint the US is responsible for such situation: so, no surprise the Russians are unwilling to negotiate with the West, in particular with the US. As a consequence, Russia is withdrawing from additional dialogue with the US and Europe, while drawing even closer to China, India and Turkey. On 15 January 2015, after Poroshenko signed a decree mobilizing 50,000 new servicemen, Russia announced that Europe will have to have gas via Turkey as the Ukrainian route is being shut down.

In December, the US approved a bill envisaging \$ 350 million dollars' worth of military gear and hardware to be delivered to Ukraine from 2015 to 2017. But only 27% of Russians believe that their country should pay attention to criticism from the West (eight years ago this figure was 46%). Around 87% believe that the West is pursuing a hostile policy towards Russia, 46% are afraid that the West intends to seize Russia's natural resources and 49% state that Moscow should strengthen relations with China, now perceived as a counterweight to the West.

Considerations

Russians are tired to see US, its media (sometimes referred to as prostitutes), and European vassal states using the same propagandistic lies/accusations against Russia and Putin as were used against Iraq and Saddam Hussein, Libya and Gaddafi, Syria and Assad, Afghanistan and the Taliban, and Iran. Washington is fearful of the rise of Russia and China, of the leadership demonstrated by Putin, of the formation of new organizations independent of Washington such as the BRICS.

Washington knows that Russia cannot be turned into a vassal state as long as Putin is in office. Therefore, the demonization of Putin and plots against him will continue.

Russia decision to redirect the South Stream (SS) project toward Turkey came as a shock to many European nations. The EU attempts to bargain more concessions from Russians had the opposite effect.

The idea to empower other crucial regional states to create a multipolar world has long been on Russia global agenda, and it has recently signed milestone deals with China, India and Turkey during visits by President Putin.

By outsourcing SS project, a Russian master stroke of geopolitics, it is Turkey that is now becoming an energy superpower without having vast energy resources itself. If the deals to increase supply to Europe by purchasing gas from Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan go through, Turkey will be Europe's primary energy hub. This will make Turkish influence on the European energy market equal to that of Saudi Arabia on the global one.

Eventually, the deal will win Russia a fast-growing consumer market and the income it needs for its economy, while Turkey gets gas, influence and power.

After the announcement of the deal with Russia, Erdogan has indicated that he is giving up on having Turkey enter the EU, and that Turkey is not happy with the EU or with Turkey's membership in NATO. Turkey is scheduled to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a full member soon.

At this stage, the only other much more expensive options the EU has for gas supplies are hydraulic fracturing or LNG imports. LNG facilities in the EU are inadequate to replace the SS gas volumes, and additional facilities will be expensive and take years to build. Hydraulic fracturing has many problems, including high cost and serious environmental damage issues.

Conclusions

Russia has no illusion that Europe is capable of an independent foreign policy. Putin has publicly stated that diplomacy with Europe is pointless because European politicians represent US interests, not Europe's. The new Military Doctrine approved on December 26 states that the US and NATO constitute a major military threat to the existence of Russia as a sovereign independent country.

The Russian and Chinese governments both understand that their existence is threatened by US hegemonic ambitions. In order to defeat US plans to marginalize them, US and China, the Bear and the Dragon, could decide to unify their economies into one and possibly join their military commands, moving together on the economic and military fronts.

With Russia, China, and other countries moving away from the use of the dollar to settle the international accounts, with Russia developing an alternative to the SWIFT financial network, the BRICS developing alternatives to IMF and World Bank, it is very likely that the US Dollar along with the Yen and the Euro

could experience a serious drop in exchange value.

As a last resort, Russia could refuse to sell natural gas to NATO members (causing much damage to European industry and bank failures) while China, holding a very large amount of dollar-denominated financial assets, can dump the equivalent of Quantitative Easing (QE) in a few minutes thus causing the dollar to collapse.

Putin does not see any prospects for partnership with the West: limited agreements, compromises and negotiations are still possible, but no serious mutual interaction.

Russian natural resources are essential in the West for keeping lights on and houses heated, for flying airliners and a lot of other things: a quarter of the light bulbs in the US light thanks to Russian nuclear fuel, whereas a cut-off of Russian gas to Europe would be a catastrophe (freezing out the Europeans similarly to the Armies of Napoleon and Hitler which had to withdraw defeated and frozen).

The US is opposing a divided Ukraine, but the US would have reacted badly had Moscow helped overthrow a Washington-friendly government in Mexico. Ukraine will matter much more to Russia than to the US, just as Mexico will always matter much more to Washington than to Moscow. Putin acted to defend what he saw as Russian interests, not to challenge US security. It might shock some Americans, but not everything that happens in the world is about the US. This is not a serious security threat for US: Moscow's intervention in Ukraine was all about Russia.

Russia is not the Soviet Union and Moscow wants respect and border security. The US has no reason to deny the first or challenge the second. Yet from expansion of NATO to dismemberment of Serbia to treatment of Georgia and Ukraine as allies, the US and Europe have increased Russia insecurity.

A compromise is the best outcome achievable through: the end to military actions, a peace agreement policed by outside observers, a federal system with a very high degree of autonomy, commercial relations with all countries, military relations with no one else, particularly NATO. Ukraine could thus become a true bridge between East and West.

Bottom line: the US desperately needs foreign-policy leadership willing to set priorities, able to distinguish between vital and minor interests, willing to acknowledge US failures and limitations.

As for the EU, it appears at once impotent, alarmed and perplexed. Europe needs Russia more than vice versa. The question is whether the other side hasn't already long since bolted the door.