

2013: The Year Russian Diplomacy Ascends to the Grand Master's Level

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Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Global Research, December 24, 2013

Geopolitics is at times compared to a chess game of sorts. And the globe is a giant chessboard in a way. Based on such metaphorical terms, President Barack Obama had a horrid year on the world stage. By contrast his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin had a brilliant one (1). Let's look at the scoreboard. Earlier this year, Obama's dismal performance in the Middle East exposed his weaknesses and indecisiveness as "commander in chief", with regards to his dealings in Syria . His constant prevarications enunciated with the so called "red line" warnings are an example. The US 's sabre- rattling which could have resulted in another regional war in this volatile part the world, turned out in the end, just to be a damp squib. Thankfully a conflagration was prevented in large part due to Putin's adept diplomacy.

His immensely suave and skilled foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, deftly stole the thunder away from the Washington based warmongers, known as the "neo-cons". His team arranged (using I am sure, very persuasive measures) for the Assad regime, to comply with the "international community's" demands calling on Damascus , to renounce all chemical weapons. A diplomatic coup if there ever was one; that's worthy of the Austrian grandmaster of diplomacy Clemens von Metternich, or the French gray eminence, Cardinal Richelieu of yesteryear. Now before I get carried away with praising Russian diplomacy to the hilt, there have been some setbacks. For example, the inability of Moscow to reign in one of its main and very unruly client states: North Korea (2). Its erratic behaviour both domestically and regionally, continues to threaten stability in the Far East .

Yet back on the plus side, Russia has also played a constructive if not pivotal role in seeing that Iran puts the brakes on its nuclear programme. The deal is now signed despite Israel 's misgivings and the outraged outcries from the U.S Congress. For all intents and purposes, Moscow has been instrumental in averting a war between the west and Iran . Another feather in Lavrov's cap... so bravo!

For most of 2013, Obama for his part has been in damage control mode since Edward Snowden's revelations concerning the gargantuan NSA surveillance system which spies on Americans and allies with Stasi (East German security apparatus) like zeal. The NSA affair has done incalculable damage to trans-Atlantic ties, especially with Washington 's closest European ally, Germany . In Berlin , where once President Obama was considered almost a superstar or a semi-deity, he is now mistrusted if not disdained (3). Putin by contrast has shined in the international arena. By this I mean meeting with "Time" magazine's "Person of the year" Pope Francis (4). Who knows if Putin keeps it up at this pace, he might be nominated "Person of the year", next time.

In this vein, it seems the top man at the Vatican and the Kremlin (besides a certain measure

of popular esteem) have more in common than we may think. By this I mean the ability to restore faith in their respective authoritative roles and the institutions they represent, which may have been discredited over the years by past wrongs (abuses of power and violations of human rights) and morally damaging misdeeds.

Finally, the recent amnesty given to Putin's dissenters and other Kremlin bugbears is all gain and no pain for the Kremlin. The release of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and the members of the rock band "Pussy Riot" along with the Greenpeace activists caught meandering in the Russian arctic were both timely and good-will, end of the year, gestures, which Putin is sure to capitalise on ahead of the Sochi winter Olympics. No matter how much Putin's detractors dismiss this as a cheap public relations stunt, the move is undoubtedly another coup for his presidency.

The ball is now in Washington's court. Will President Obama rise to the occasion and also show clemency for those individuals the US considers to be its traitors, or enemies of the state? Meaning, will it provide a presidential pardon for the NSA leaker Edward Snowden and the wiki leaks whistleblower Private Bradley Manning? Something tells me that only time quickly running out of Obama's lame duck presidency will answer this question. In other words it could happen sooner than we might think.

Notes

- (1) http://rbth.ru/international/2013/12/16/2013_russias_year_of_diplomacy_32623.html
- (2) <http://thediomat.com/2013/12/the-significance-of-russias-frustration-with-north-korea/>
- (3) <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/nsa-spying-fallout-majority-of-germans-mistrust-united-states-a-932492.html>
- (4) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/the-pope/10474191/Vladimir-Putin-holds-first-meeting-with-Pope-Francis.html>

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