

Russia, Afghanistan and Star Wars

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Russia's accommodation of the US and NATO continues apace, with new support of the Afghan war and even missile defence, notes Eric Walberg. The Atlantists are on the ascendant these days in Moscow. Russian President Dmitri Medvedev's hamburger lunch with United States President Barack Obama during his visit to Silicon Valley last month apparently left a pleasant taste in his mouth. Now relations with NATO are on the mend, as Russia plans to send 27 Mi-17 helicopters to Afghanistan, NATO Military Committee Chairman Giampaolo di Paola said after a meeting with Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Nikolai Makarov last Friday. Rosoboronexport has even offered to throw in the first three helicopters for free.

Makarov went further, telling di Paola that Russia was now ready to work with NATO "to pool efforts to find solutions to contemporary challenges and threats to international security". Di Paola welcomed the Russian general's offer, assuring him that NATO views Moscow as a "strong strategic partner, not as a threat or an enemy". He spoke vaguely about new members having to "meet NATO standards", avoiding the U(kraine) and G(eorgia) words during their press conference. Russian and NATO experts will draft a joint action plan for 2011 within the next few months, he said.

Russian NATO Ambassador Dmitri Rogozin recently boasted that "Russian helicopters will ideally fit Afghan conditions: they are easy to operate, reliable, efficient and known by Afghan pilots." He offered to train Afghan pilots in addition to the Afghan police Russia is now helping train. Makarov even offered "consultancy in military and combat training based on our Afghan experience, including our mistakes". The deal is estimated at \$300m though Rogozin hinted that a discount beyond the three free copters was possible and that Russia could kick in another 19 in 2012. So, if I understand this correctly, Russia's Afghan communist allies from the days of Soviet occupation are now going to man the same old Russian helicopters to kill yet more Afghan patriots, the only difference being the language the occupiers speak and their capitalist pedigree.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is also feeling the chilly wind of Russia-US detente these days. The Russian state-owned NTV, watched by millions of Belorussians, broadcast a scathing two-part documentary "The Belarusian Godfather" last week as the Kremlin was hosting leading Belarusian opposition figures, in a campaign to unseat their troublesome ally in the presidential elections next February. The Russian ire peaked last month over unpaid gas bills, disagreements over the proposed new customs union with Kazakhstan, and Lukashenko's refusal to recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as it, like Russia, seeks to curry favour in Brussels. Upping the ante, a sympathetic interview with Russian nemesis Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was broadcast on Belarusian TV and Lukashenko is currently hosting deposed Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Bakiyev's overthrow was approved if not abetted by Moscow, and the comparison of Lukashenko and

Bakiyev in “The Godfather-II” is a stark warning to Lukashenko that his days are numbered.

What accounts for this sudden effusion of East-West friendship, after years of complaining about NATO encirclement and missile bases in Poland?

Obama’s more accommodating tone and NATO’s pause in its eastward march has clearly mollified the Russians. It also looks like disagreements over Ukrainian/ Georgian membership in NATO and South Ossetian/ Abkhazian independence are all on the backburner now as the US sinks deeper and deeper into its Afghan quagmire. Russia backs the losing war there because it is very worried about the prospects of a Taliban victory. Better a pro-US dictatorship than another Islamic neighbour. Besides, the helicopter deal (and who knows what else?) will replace its \$1 billion loss on Iranian missile sales.

But Afghanistan is not Belarus, and rather than moving forward and trying to reach an accommodation with Afghanistan’s popular resistance movement, Russia is ignoring the lesson it learned with such pain two decades ago, gambling that the US can produce a miracle where it failed. It is also gambling that the US and NATO are too preoccupied — and grateful to a newly nice Russia — to try to pull off another colour revolution in Belarus, where Russia is counting on a largely pro-Russian nation finding a replacement to Lukashenko who will not cause the headaches that he, the orange, rose and tulip revolutionaries have caused.

Whatever happens in Afghanistan and Belarus, Medvedev’s two greatest wishes now are to get SALT through the US senate and to pave the way for Russia to join Europe. To clinch this westward reorientation, there are now signs that Russia will do the unthinkable: work with the US on missile defence. In a New York Times oped, ex-Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov and ex-German US ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger, co-chairmen of the Euro-Atlantic Security Initiative Commission, joined former senator Sam Nunn in calling for “North America, Europe and Russia to make defence of the entire Euro-Atlantic region against potential ballistic missile attack a joint priority”. They propose the creation of a “more inclusive and better-defended Euro-Atlantic community ... what national leaders in their moment of hope at the Cold War’s close spoke of as a ‘Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals whole and free for the first time in 300 years’.”

Acceding to US plans for missile defence will kill Medvedev’s two birds with one stone. The NYT oped panders to Russian self-image by calling for the US, EU and Russia to “undertake as equal parties to design from the ground up a common architecture to deal with the threat”. It soothingly assures us that a joint Starwars will “aid progress in bolstering the nuclear nonproliferation regime”. Left out of the equation is the glaring fact that a world encircled by hair-trigger missiles is more likely to be a trigger for war than peace, that the whole point of Starwars is to create facts-on-the-ground for the US empire which will allow it to dictate just what kind of world order is acceptable. As for boosting the NPT, the only way to discourage countries from emulating the nuclear powers is for them to give up their deadly weapons and stop threatening the world with them. It is naive of Russia to think it will be able to veto, say, a war on Iran or some other “offender” of what the US deems to be OK, or that countries threatened by US invasion will stop trying to acquire weapons that will make the US think twice.

This new accommodating Russia is very much in the US global interest and Obama is sure to keep courting Medvedev, despite attempts by Cold Warriors to undermine the budding

friendship, as witnessed in the mock spy scandal last month. Given the new westerly wind blowing out of the Kremlin, geopolitical logic could mean an end to Brzezinski-like plans to encircle Russia. Much better to leave the problems of a remote Kyrgyzstan to a friend. Let it deal with complex ethnic and economic problems which Americans can't hope to understand or solve, using a Russian (NATO?) military base as the occasion demands rather than maintaining an unpopular US one. Ukraine? Georgia? Bela-who? Afghanistan is what's important, if it can be secured in the Western fold, with Russia in tow. And Starwars.

The goal of Obama's imperial team is to rally Russia to the US (oops, I mean NATO) flag and push on. Ivanov et al explain that if all goes well, soon along with China, we "can explore cooperation on the role and place of missile defense in a multipolar nuclear world." It looks like Medvedev has opted for US empire even as it implodes. Will Hu get the hint? ***

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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