

Russia-India-China: The Bush Curse

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Moscow is trying to draw India and China closer to put out the flames now flaring across the continent, from the Caucasus and Central Asia, to Iran and Pakistan

United States President Barack Obama has shown a flicker of independence in shaping US Eurasian politics. To secure transit routes through Russia to Afghanistan, he loudly proclaimed the end to US missile base plans for Poland and the Czech Republic, and downplayed any further NATO expansion in Russia's backyard. He resisted jumping on the Gates-Clinton-McChrystal escalation bandwagon, insisting that it would be counterproductive to blindly back the thoroughly discredited Karzai, and hinting that negotiations with the Taliban and Iran could mean an about-face on the Bush strategy of total war in the region.

Obama's strategy is now described as focussed on securing the main cities in Afghanistan, while abandoning most of the country to the Taliban. This can only be a holding measure while attempts are made to lure moderate elements in the Taliban away from their comrades to join the Karzai clique. In talks with former Taliban foreign minister Mullah Wakil Ahmed Mutawakkil brokered by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, US negotiators supposedly offered governorship of six provinces in the south and northeast, a senior Afghan Foreign Ministry official told IslamOnline.net – if they accept the presence of NATO troops in Afghanistan and eight US bases.

But the latest is he will bow to McChrystal's demand for up to 40,000 more troops, US drone attacks continue apace in AfPak with his blessing, and the US is urging Pakistan on in its civil war against its frontier provinces of Baluchistan and Waziristan, pouring in massive military aid.

And missile and other plans in Eastern Europe are proceeding apace, with or without Obama's blessing. US officials have gone out of their way to assuage the Poles and Czechs with assurances that the bases were not really cancelled. Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs Ellen Tauscher recently said the command centre for the new version of anti-missile defence could be stationed in the Czech Republic.

Now Poland is asking not only for missiles, but US troops, apparently "alarmed" by military exercises conducted by the Russian army in Belarus. "We would like to see US troops stationed in Poland to serve as a shield against Russian aggression," Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski was quoted by Interfax. "If you can still afford it, we need some strategic reassurance," he added sarcastically. When asked to comment, a Russian Foreign Ministry official told Kommersant, "It is better to ask the World Health Organisation for an assessment of Mr Sikorski's words." Estonia, which has sent a hefty 10 per cent of its armed forces to Afghanistan, is also asking for US troops.

NATO assurances to Georgia and Ukraine about joining up are still a dime a dozen. Georgia's army is being armed by the US, Israeli and Ukraine, according to Alexander Shlyakhturov, head of Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate, encouraging Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in his plans to reincorporate South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

All this can only mean that talk of real cooperation with Russia is an illusion, as is vague talk of accommodation with Iran. Obama may mean well, but the inertia of US empire is hard to stop.

Russian politicians are not blind. Nor are the Chinese. Both Russia and China refuse to accede to US fiat on Iran, and are cooperating on many fronts these days looking for ways to ease the world towards a "multipolar world".

This is the backdrop to the 9th meeting of the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral meeting which took place in Bangalore in late October, attended by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Indian External Affairs Minister SM Krishna and Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi. Said Lavrov after the meeting, "RIC is a group of countries that are integrally needed to mobilise regional efforts. But they are not enough. All of Afghanistan's neighbours are needed. The US, the main supplier of troops is needed. Iran is needed. The Central Asian countries are needed." He politely refrained from saying that it is only because of the US invasion that the US has any role at all in the region.

As Lavrov rightly points out, it is the regional countries China, Russia, India and Iran that are the ones left to pick up the pieces in AfPak after the US finally packs its many bags. Russia has the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Russia and China have the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Even Iran has initiated its own trilateral format with Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, as MK Bhadrakumar writes in Asia Times, so far Lavrov's efforts to fashion the three mini-superpowers into a united front on regional issues have been fruitless. Bad karma between the two most populous countries in the world lingers on; namely, the India-China frictions over borders and the Dalai Lama.

It is not only its Chinese neighbour that India can't get along with. Deriving from its perennial distrust of anything to do with Pakistan, Delhi refuses to acknowledge the fact that the Taliban are an Afghan political reality and are part (let alone "all") of any solution. Having drifted into the US orbit (curiously, along with its rival Pakistan), India risks being left behind, as the US-inspired war in Afghanistan continues to go nowhere, Pakistan descends into anarchy, China surges ahead, and the Russians and Chinese intensify their cooperation.

Of course, this and RIC's inability to address Afghanistan suits the US just fine. Regional powers working together independently of the US to solve their problems would leave the US and its many SEATOs and NATOs out of the picture. Japan would like to fashion an East Asian community no longer subservient to Washington, but, according to President of the Japan Foundation Kazuo Ogoura, "It is intolerable [for Washington] to see Asians considering their relations among each other in a form that excludes the US."

Obama is visiting Beijing and Tokyo this week. Oblivious to Asian disinterest in marching to US orders, Mark Brzezinski (son of Zbigniew) advised him in the New York Times to include in his "China List" establishing a formal mechanism among the leaders of the US, China and Pakistan – China is after all Pakistan's oldest friend as counterweight to India. This pointedly leaves out Russia and India and ties China to US plans for the region. Good luck, Mr Obama.

Surprisingly, Moscow hasn't given up entirely on Obama. Lavrov told Russian journalists in Bangalore, "Obama has announced a different philosophy – that of collective action, which calls for joint analysis, decision-making and implementation rather than for all others to follow Washington's decisions. So far inertia lingers at the implementers' level in the US, who still follow the well-trodden track. This is a process which will take time before the president's will is translated into the language of practical actions by his subordinates."

However distasteful US actions are, the Russian leadership cannot risk closing the door completely on US efforts to end the war in Afghanistan, considering it was on the losing end against the Afghan resistance 20 years ago and is less than enamoured by an avowedly Islamic state there. But it is unlikely that China will join India and Pakistan as a US client state, and if India buries the hatchet with China and reconsiders its position on the Taliban, the situation for the US – and Afghanistan – could yet change dramatically. There is small reason for any of the RICs to be haunted by Bush's curse – the US-inspired wars and subversion in their backyard.

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