GlobalResearch
Center for Research on Globalization

The US' Impending Nord Stream II Sanctions Support the Three Seas Initiative

By Andrew Korybko
Global Research, December 18, 2019

Region: USA
Theme: Intelligence

Trump is expected to sign into law the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) 2020 which mandates the imposition of sanctions on companies involved in Nord Stream II's construction, but while this crafty move isn't expected to seriously impede the project since it's already in its final stages, its importance derives in the fact that it signals extremely strong support for the interests of the US-backed "Three Seas Initiative" whose Polish leader has objected to this game-changing pipeline on geopolitical grounds.

The US Senate's approval of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) 2020 means that Trump will likely sign it into law very soon, which is troublesome for Trans-Atlantic relations because it mandates among its many sometimes unrelated provisions the imposition of sanctions on companies involved in Nord Stream II's construction. This crafty move isn't expected to seriously impede the project since it's already in its final stages after Russia secured Denmark's permission back in October to construct a crucial segment of this pipeline through its maritime territory, which will facilitate the project's completion and thus strengthen Russia's strategic partnership with EU-leader Germany. That outcome will likely accelerate the ongoing rapprochement between Russia and the bloc's Western European members that became obvious to all after Macron's successful visit to Moscow in late August, but which is in turn compelling the US to double down on its commitment to the Polish-led "Three Seas Initiative" (TSI) that it envisages functioning as its wedge for retaining influence in the strategic Central European space between those two.

The impending NDAA 2020-connected sanctions should therefore be seen as an extremely strong signal of support for this trans-regional integration structure because they satisfy the demands of its Polish leader for the US to impose costs upon Germany for its reinvigorated strategic partnership with Russia. Barely reported on at the time, it's significant to mention that a bipartisan resolution was submitted to the House of Representatives at the end of October shortly after Russia secured Denmark's support for Nord Stream II mandating that Congress prioritize its support for the TSI in the aftermath of that development, with a specific focus on energy and physical connectivity projects. The grand strategic goal that the US is aiming to achieve is to create a so-called "cordon sanitaire" that would serve to divide Russia from Western Europe by exploiting the preexisting animosity that the many states between them have towards Moscow, and it will likely end up being one of the main drivers of American foreign policy towards the continent for the foreseeable future.

In pursuit of that objective, the US is also making strategic outreaches to Belarus, knowing very well that its wily leader Lukashenko is more than willing to "balance" between the West and Russia in a risky attempt to extract more (mostly economic) "concessions" from each of them. It goes without saying that this policy will probably ramp up now that Nord Stream II is a fait accompli and the “cordon sanitaire” is more significant than ever in the current context. That former Soviet Republic, however, is unlikely to engage in a decisive “pivot” against Russia, though from a zero-sum standpoint, the gradual moves that it’s making towards the West can indeed be interpreted as being “mildly” against Russia’s long-term interests. Still, there isn’t much that Russia can do since it must avoid the perception that it’s putting overwhelming pressure on Belarus or even plausibly considering doing so since that notion would only accelerate the very same trend that Moscow wants to reverse. Minsk, it must be said, recognizes how geostrategic its position is for both the Russian-led Eurasian Union (EAU) and the Polish-led TSI, so it’ll try to play them off against the other, all with the US’ passive support.

The US isn’t the only Great Power spreading its influence through the TSI, as China is also rapidly on the ascent there too. The Balkans are becoming more important of a destination for Chinese foreign direct investment than ever through the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), most visibly manifesting itself in Beijing’s plans to construct a high-speed railway from the Hungarian capital of Budapest to the Greek port of Pireaus (the “Balkan Silk Road”). It also holds yearly meetings with the leaders of the TSI countries and others in this region through the 17+1 format that was recently expanded to include Greece (having been the 16+1 previously). In addition, Belarus is a key node on the Eurasian Land Bridge, with China investing in the “Great Stone” industrial park that it envisages becoming a major export center along that route. None of this is to imply whatsoever that China is “teaming up” with the US to “contain” Russia in Central & Eastern Europe, but just to point out that China’s infrastructure investments will greatly help to connect the region along the north-south axis, after which the US will likely exploit these apolitical and purely economic projects for its strategic ends vis-a-vis Russia.

Even so, while the TSI space is certainly geostrategic, its economic importance pales in comparison to Western Europe’s. The German economy alone is larger than all of those states’ combined, so Russia isn’t exactly losing out in the economic sense as a result of the US’ TSI plans. It is, however, at risk of this “cordon sanitaire” being used as its rival’s trans-regional platform for putting military pressure upon it, which has already been happening ever since most of its states joined NATO and then doubled down on their commitment to it after the onset of the New Cold War in 2014 following Crimea’s reunification with Russia in response to the US-backed coup in Ukraine. Poland and increasingly Greece bookend this pro-American military structure, while Ukraine and possibly soon even Belarus could ultimately become its eastern-most appendages by proxy. Russia still has instruments of influence that it can leverage in an attempt to keep this trend under control, though it’s seemingly on the defensive in recent years and appears unable to gain any successes on this front, instead choosing to concentrate on Western Europe through Nord Stream II and other measures.

Looking forward, the rise of the TSI as the US’ preferred continental proxy is all but assured, though it’s unclear whether or not it’ll succeed with its fundamental purpose of keeping Russia and Western Europe apart. Classical geopolitical thought suggesting that it would doesn’t take into consideration the much more complex nature of contemporary International Relations whereby a conventional military clash between the TSI states and Russia is unlikely for reasons of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) stemming from many of the former’s memberships in NATO, and their other memberships in the EU mean that a successful EU-Russian detente would force them to facilitate trade between Western Europe and Russia if even a single state vetoes the continuation of sanctions in the future.

Altogether, it can therefore be said that Russia's successful completion of Nord Stream II would flip the strategic dynamics by once again returning Moscow to a position of strength whereas Washington would then be the Great Power on the defensive instead. Still, the TSI's potential shouldn't be underestimated either since it might lead to some surprises for both Western Europe and Russia if its American patron has a few tricks up its sleeve that it's wiling to teach its regional partners.

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above or below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

This article was originally published on OneWorld.

Andrew Korybko is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Featured image is from OneWorld

Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page

Become a Member of Global Research

Articles by: Andrew Korybko

About the author:

Andrew Korybko is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.