
Gunboat diplomacy in the Black Sea

By Linda S. Heard
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When it comes to the deteriorating relationship between Moscow and the West over Georgia, traditional diplomacy has been thrown over for the gunboat variety.

American and Russian warships are milling around the Black Sea while both sides are spewing threats and uttering belligerent rhetoric.

Britain's politicians are being particularly antagonistic. Leader of the Tories David Cameron wants to punish ordinary Russians with restrictions on visa issuance. "Russian armies can't march into other countries while Russian shoppers carry on marching into Selfridges." (He neglected to add "armed with wads of cash to help prop up his country's faltering economy.")

The British Foreign Secretary David Miliband has been trying to create a European anti-Russian alliance and isn't averse to whipping up 1940s sentiments. "The sight of Russian tanks rolling into parts of a sovereign country on its neighbouring borders will have brought a chill down the spine of many people," he rather luridly told the BBC.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown has threatened "a root and branch review" of Britain's relationship with Russia and advised Europe to find alternative oil and gas supplies rather than allow Moscow to hold it to ransom. In turn, Russia warns it may look to Asia for new customers.

As usual, European nations are being asked to take sides regardless of any interpretation of right and wrong. To them it matters little whether the initial aggressor was Georgia or Russia or whether South Ossetia and Abkhazia have a genuine case for secession. They're behaving like a mafia, whose members are obliged to rally around one of their own regardless.

Russia was initially seduced into becoming a member of this global democratic fraternity led by Washington. Moscow relinquished its empire in hopes of being embraced by its new best friends as an equal. Instead, it was initially perceived as toothless, corrupt and economically defunct.

Disrespected

Unaccustomed to being disrespected as a comparatively puny world player, the Russian leadership determined to rise up like the Phoenix from the ashes of its humiliation; a goal that was fuelled by soaring oil and gas prices. Almost overnight, a sleeker, more sophisticated and much wealthier Russia emerged.

But instead of welcoming this newly confident entity into the fold, the fraternity made no serious effort to invite Russia to become a member of NATO, the European Union (EU) or both, while its attempts to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO) were hampered. At G-8 gatherings it was tolerated by the world's wealthiest nations like a poor relation.

In the West, the old Cold War mentality still prevailed. The Soviet Union was no more but even though Mother Russia had a makeover she was still treated, at best, as a nation of little consequence and, at worst, as a potential foe.

The fraternity turned a deaf ear to Russia's arguments against invading Iraq and has been heaping pressure on Moscow to join with it in punishing Iran, both countries in which Moscow had or has financial interests. It also ignored Moscow's opinion on Kosovo's independence.

In the meantime, NATO broadened its mandate and instead of shrinking into oblivion with the end of the Cold War, it began expanding by absorbing former Soviet bloc countries and republics and widening its field of operations to theatres outside Europe.

When the Bush administration began interfering in the internal politics of Russia's neighbours, Georgia and the Ukraine, while encouraging NATO to sign them up, it's no wonder that the Russian leadership interpreted those moves as an existential threat. Then to add injury to insult, the US appoints Poland and the Czech Republic to respectively host its interceptor missiles and radar bases, irrespective of the reduction in Russia's deterrent capabilities.

In short, Russia is not the bad guy here. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin believes the US was behind Georgia's recent aggression in South Ossetia. If so, then Moscow had no choice but to send a clear message that Georgia and Ukraine may be independent and democratic but geographically they fall within Russia's sphere of global influence.

The Russian government is right not to want NATO peering over its borders. This problem could have been averted had Moscow been welcomed into the organisation or had the US kept its promise to former Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev, who said "the Americans promised that NATO wouldn't move beyond the boundaries of Germany after the Cold War but now half of central and eastern Europe are members."

Last Monday, EU leaders met in Brussels to discuss the crisis and adopt a united front although that may not be a simple task. Some member countries led by Britain are keen to hurt Russia with sanctions or isolation while others, including France, Germany and Italy, are reluctant to sever links. "Old Europe" is thus far acting wisely.

The more that Russia is engaged within the global marketplace and its economy is intertwined with others, the more it will be obliged to listen to the concerns of the international community. On the other hand, should Moscow be ostracised, it may decide it has little to lose by forming new alliances and strategies harmful to Western interests.

Either way, Reagan and Yeltsin must be turning over in their graves. They believed the Berlin Wall had collapsed forever, never imagining that less than two decades later, another potentially greater and more dangerous divide would take its place.

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