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Westernism is giving way to Orientalism in Moscow's outlook, if the past week's happenings are any guide. As Russia's ties with the West deteriorate, an upswing in its strategic partnership with China becomes almost inevitable.

The resumption of Russia-NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) dialogue has gone awry. And the nascent hopes regarding a "reset of the button" of the Russian-American relationship are belied. With Moscow under multiple pressures from the West, two top Chinese officials have arrived in the Russian capital to offer support - Defense Minister Liang Guanglie and Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi.

Foreign Ministers Sergei Lavrov and Yang Jiechi

Moscow angrily reacted to NATO's expulsion of two Russian diplomats on Wednesday. In exceptionally strong language, it called the NATO move a "crude provocation" and an "outrageous action". The Foreign Ministry alleged that certain "completely unscrupulous ... forces" in the West were "hectically" creating pretexts for obstructing Russia's dialogue with Europe.

The two diplomats to NATO headquarters in Brussels are the Russian mission's senior adviser and political desk chief Viktor Kochukov and mission attache and executive secretary Vasily Chizhov. They were accused of espionage "incompatible with the diplomatic status".

The Russian mission to NATO went a step further to allege an attempt to "disrupt a reset in relations between Russia and the US". In immediate terms, the scheduled Russia-NATO foreign minister-level meeting on May 19 in Brussels appears problematic. Hardliners have prevailed.

NATO expansion

Unsurprisingly, Moscow has also ratcheted up its condemnation of NATO's 27-day military exercise in Georgia, due to start this coming Tuesday. President Dmitry Medvedev called the exercises "an open provocation" and warned that there could be "negative consequences for those who made the decision to hold them". He accused the alliance of encouraging Georgia's "re-militarization". Russia seems to estimate a larger plot to corner it in the Caucasus.

In a pre-emptive move, Moscow on Thursday signed five-year border defense agreements with Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia whereby the two regions will delegate their border security (including the maritime frontiers) to Russian forces.

Rivalries over control of Caspian oil provide the backdrop to these rapid developments involving Georgia. Conceivably, the hardliners would exploit the spiraling tensions to brand "revanchist" Russia at the summit meeting of the European Union (EU) in Prague this coming Thursday, which is expected to take a view on the two rival pipeline projects that aim to transport Caspian and Central Asian gas to Europe - South Stream, sponsored by Russia, and Nabucco, supported by the US.

At the Prague summit, Europe's dependence on Russia for its energy supplies will come under scrutiny. There is mounting frustration among the proponents of Nabucco that Moscow is steadily advancing South Stream. Yet, leading European countries like Germany, France and Italy are at ease with Russia. US attempts to stall South Stream have been of no avail.

On April 28, Russia's Gazprom and the Bulgarian gas utility Bulgargaz initialed a cooperation agreement on a feasibility study for South Stream. But the Bulgarian side cannot formalize the South Stream agreement before the EU summit meeting of May 7. Washington hopes that the parliamentary elections in Bulgaria due in early July may postpone the agreement. It will be a close call.

All these factors are at work in the current tensions between NATO and Russia. But that isn't all. NATO, with active US support, is once again making a determined effort to pitch its tent in Central Asia. The latest Western attempt to establish a NATO regional centre on terrorism in Tajikistan comes on top of the US's agreement with Tajikistan regarding a basing facility for NATO operations in Afghanistan. The US has secured similar facilities in Uzbekistan and negotiations are underway with Turkmenistan.

However, no matter the criticality of the Afghan situation, the US is insisting that NATO should sidestep offers of help from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In effect, the US's containment strategy of the George W Bush era still remains intact at the operational level in Central Asia, no matter President Barack Obama's promise to revamp US regional policy.

China's People's Daily recently featured a commentary broadly estimating that while Obama's diplomacy was characterized by "soft power", that was merely tactical, since "the US will not give up its dominant role in world affairs ... Wrapping a big stick in a layer of soft sponge or putting a carrot at the front and a big stick at the back, the US has never given up its powerful military force ... Diplomatic policy is also a kind of political game. One of its fundamental principles is to obtain the largest benefit at the least cost. The adjustment of Obama's diplomatic policy notably predicates a reduction of cost, without any change in their goal to obtain the most benefits."

The commentary likely had Central Asia in mind. Both Russia and China will take note that US regional policy cuts into their core interests. Russia's state television, Rossiya, showed a documentary last week accusing the US of using its air base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan, for running intelligence operations. Rossiya showed clippings of a windowless two-storey building in the Manas base, which it said was the hub of a major US radio-intelligence unit. (Manas is close to China's missile sites in Xinjiang.) There are signs that Moscow and Beijing will invest the SCO as a key instrument to counter the US moves to expand NATO into the Central Asian region. The SCO conducted war games in Tajikistan recently, simulating an attack by al-Qaeda from Afghanistan, in which terrorists seized a chemical factory and took its workers hostage.

Medvedev has called for a stronger role for SCO in stabilizing Afghanistan. Arguably, by prevailing on Bishkek to evict the US from Manas, Moscow signaled that it was reviewing the rules of the game in Central Asia. A cat and mouse game is going on. Washington kept up an appearance for weeks as if it was reconciled with the closure of Manas, while Moscow (and Beijing) put on an air of indifference. But now it transpires the Pentagon is seeking a reversal of the decision by the Kyrgyz government. "We are still engaged with the Kyrgyz ... They have given us notification and they want to end the presence of the US basing abilities in Kyrgyzstan, but the story is not over there yet," a US official was quoted as saying.

On April 29, Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell said, "I think there's actually progress in dealing with the Kyrgyz on Manas ... And I think we see reason for hope there, that that can be worked out ... We hope we're getting closer." On the other hand, Bishkek keeps affirming that its decision is irrevocable. Kyrgyz Prime Minister Igor Chudinov insisted, "Not a single government official has been authorized to hold such negotiations. No one. I have no information about such negotiations."

At any rate, Russia plans to increase the number of military aircraft at the Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan. "It is in line with the situation in Central Asia and Afghanistan," CSTO secretary general Nikolai Bordyuzha said. There is also a concerted attempt on the part of Moscow to rally the CSTO. Moscow will host a CSTO summit meeting on June 14, which is expected to formalize the creation of the alliance's new rapid reaction forces. To be sure, Moscow is

reasserting its role as the guarantor of security for Central Asia.

But Moscow also regards the SCO as a forum within which it has the unique opportunity to coordinate with China. While receiving the SCO defense ministers who gathered in Moscow this week, Medvedev said, "Overall, the region in which the SCO operates is a complex one, and so we have to take into account the reality that surrounds us, and the need for our countries to jointly coordinate efforts on a wide range of issues, including security and the defense capability of our countries on a collective basis."

The defense ministers' meeting in Moscow on April 29 saw a strong affirmation by China on enhanced SCO cooperation to confront regional challenges. In an oblique reference to the US, Liang called for the eschewal of "antagonism, clique politics and unilateralism" and underlined that the SCO has a role to play in the entire Eurasian region. Russia and China separately agreed on an intensified program of bilateral military cooperation that includes as many as 25 joint maneuvers in 2009 in a demonstration of the strengthening of strategic ties.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also expressed similar sentiments earlier in the week after his talks with his visiting Chinese counterpart. Lavrov said Moscow and Beijing favored the "comprehensive strengthening of the SCO as a key factor of the promotion of stability and security in the Central Asian region". Lavrov summed up that two chief principles lie at the core of the "dynamically evolving" Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation. One, the two countries share a common perspective on the contemporary world processes.

Two, the two countries will "always support each other on concrete issues" that directly affect their national interests. Carefully choosing his words, Lavrov added that Russia and China agreed during consultations in Moscow that "such comradely mutual assistance" is only going to be strengthened.

Ambassador M K Bhadrakumar was a career diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service. His assignments included the Soviet Union, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Germany, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kuwait and Turkey.

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