

Editorial: Full Spectrum Overreach

In May 2002 the headlines are full of the new relationship between Nato and Russia. This had been coming along quite promisingly, even before the attacks of September 11th. Did not President Bush himself inform the press after the Ljubljana meeting that he had looked Putin in the eye, and contrived thereby 'to get a sense of his soul'. Mr. Putin has not put on record any discoveries he may have made about the soul of George Bush. But wise voices have been heard in Russia, wondering whether over-cordial personal relations between consenting statesmen may cloud their dispassionate judgement.

Meantime, the new relationship is to be institutionalised with the formation of a Nato-Russian Council, widely proclaimed as the final end of the Cold War. We seem to be fated to end the Cold War at recurrent intervals. So the latest 'ending' might not be the last.

But it seems clear that a serious effort is underway to explore the possibilities of a new relationship between the United States and Russia, solidifying an accord on Eurasian security, whilst opening a number of doors to economic 'co-operation'. How co-operative this might prove in reality will evidently influence the durability of the entire relationship. But if the Nato-Russian Council cannot be taken for granted, neither can Nato itself. The events of September 11th are putting some real stresses on the old Alliance.

In the shock of sympathy for the victims of the destruction of the Twin Towers, public opinion in Europe ran very warmly towards the Americans. Nato solemnly resolved to invoke Article Five of the Treaty deeming the events of the September 11th attack on the United States to be an attack on the Alliance as a whole. So activated, the Alliance awaited the call to action. But the United States proved quite unready to involve the institutions of Nato in its war of reprisal against Al Qaeda and the Taliban, or even in its wider war on terrorism. Lessons had been learnt from Yugoslavia, where it had not been unknown for lesser allies to obstruct the will of the principal partner. The Alliance found itself all but stood down: 'Don't call us, we'll call you' being the dominant message. Some individual calls were sent. Indeed, some were not received with enthusiasm. A careful analysis of the behaviour of the Alliance in the face of this emergency is likely to reveal stresses which may come to seem as important as the new accord with Mr. Putin.

All the while, the American war has been widening. President Putin has endorsed a conflict which sees the arc of terror stretching all the way from Chechnya or Georgia, around to the Philippine Islands. American troops are already engaged in Georgia, and in the Philippines (660 of them) and American bases are dotted around at many points in between. Thirteen locations in nine countries near to Afghanistan have mushroomed within the last year. Sixty thousand American personnel are deployed within them. What the Chinese think of the new deployments in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and the others

foreseen in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan is not on the record, but it is not difficult to imagine their response.

The horrific repression in Palestine is also multiplying tensions all across the Middle East, and bringing the American bases there into the eye of controversy. And all this is set within a fearful context of George Bush's war on the axis of evil, nominating old American adversaries as prime candidates for the next round of the war against terror. The projected war against Iraq is opposed by almost every state within the region, and threatens some of the long-term allies of the United States quite directly. A war on Iraq would destabilise Iran, and very possibly spread there.

True, Nato had conveniently redefined its scope, at the Jubilee meeting in Washington in 1999. But in those far off days, 'out of area' might be taken to mean Kosovo or Serbia. Now, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran are already squarely in the centre of the new area. And North Korea? Cuba? Wherever next?

It is doubtful whether Nato can survive so drastic an enlargement of its appetites. In truth, the appetite in question is that of the dominant right wing of the Republican Party in the United States, and it is shared by very few others in the rest of the world.

In the past, a major reason for the Americans to maintain the Alliance was the maintenance of their influence over the European partners. Will this influence survive the melt-down that is impending? Wars promised, wars threatened, and wars in prospect, will profoundly disturb the pattern of interests which aligned the members of the Alliance into a block. The defection of Putin from the role of first public enemy will remove more of the cement of the Alliance.

How far must the price of petrol rise before Europe discovers a radical divergence of interests from the erstwhile American protector?

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