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Towards a New World Order in Eurasia? The Role of Russia and China

By James M Dorsey

Synopsis

A new Russian-led, China-backed Eurasia-centred world order may be in the making against the backdrop of alleged Russian cyber warfare against the US and Europe. Analysts see a pattern in Russian moves that could serve China's interests should US president-elect Donald Trump adopt a more confrontational approach towards Beijing.

Commentary

SUGGESTIONS THAT Russian President Vladimir Putin is bent on creating a new Russia-led and China-backed Eurasia-centred world order by undermining Western democratic institutions may be a crackpot conspiracy theory. Yet that may not be so far-fetched against the backdrop of US allegations of Russia's waging cyber warfare against the US, German intelligence sounding the alarm bell, East European leaders having their fears confirmed and Moscow and Beijing reaching out to Western supporters of the idea.

Whether conspiracy theory or not, western intelligence agencies and many analysts see a pattern in Russian moves that would serve Chinese interests, particularly if US president-elect Donald J Trump adopts a more confrontational approach towards Beijing. The analysts believe that the sum total of Russian activity amounts to an attempt to undermine trust in democratic structures and manipulate elections.

Turkish Approach to Eurasia

Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly subscribed to conspiracy theories alleging Western backing for the failed coup attempt in July against his

government and a mysterious international financial cabal seeking to undermine the Turkish economy. In response, Erdogan has applied for Turkish membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) that groups Central Asian states with China and Russia.

Bent on enhancing his personal power, Erdogan is not about to fully rupture relations with the West but is happy to play both ends against the middle by publicly aligning himself with concepts of Russian-backed Eurasianists.

A left-wing secularist, Dogu Perincek, who spent six years in prison for allegedly being part of a military-led cabal to stage a military coup, was long a fringe voice calling on Erdogan to break ties with the West and align himself with Russia and China. Perincek's worldview -- one that envisions an alliance between Russia, China and Turkey that would replace the US-led international order -- is gaining currency in Ankara, Moscow and Beijing, according to a prominent Turkish intellectual, Mustafa Akyol and other well-known pundits.

The rise of Perincek's Homeland Party, dubbed the Russian lobby by Akyol in an article in *Al-Monitor*, comes on the back of its ability to backchannel a reconciliation with Russia following a rupture in relations and a crippling Russian economic boycott in the wake of Turkey's downing in 2015 of a Russian warplane.

Perincek, together with deputy Homeland leader Ismail Hakki Pekin, a former head of Turkish military intelligence with extensive contacts in Moscow including Putin's foreign policy advisor Alexander Dugin, mediated the reconciliation with Erdogan's tacit approval. They were supported by Turkish businessmen close to the president who were severely affected by the boycott, and ultra-nationalist Eurasianist military officers.

Making Inroads

Several factors have worked in favour of the Eurasianist idea. The first is the increasingly strained relations between Turkey and the West over the latter's perceived lack of support following this summer's failed military attempt to topple Erdogan. The second is a Western refusal to crack down on the Hizmet movement led by exiled imam Fethullah Gulen, who Turkey holds responsible for the unsuccessful coup. The third is Western criticism of Erdogan's wholesale crackdown on his critics. Differences over Syria have intensified the pro-Eurasianist thinking.

Erdogan's purported alignment with the Eurasianists fits neatly into an apparently larger Russian effort to fuel populist and right wing sentiment in the West and interfere in the affairs of former Soviet states. Together with China, whose One Belt, One Road initiative seeks to tie Eurasia together through infrastructure and trade, Russia seeks to reach out to Western intellectuals and politicians whose views stroke with Moscow's ambition.

Outgoing US President Barack Obama has blamed Putin personally for hacking into Democratic Party computers to undermine Hilary Clinton's presidential bid. A *New York Times* investigation concluded that Russian cyberwar had played a key role in defeating Democratic candidates in local races for the House of Representatives.

Germany's head of foreign intelligence Bruno Kahl warned last month that Russia might try to undermine Chancellor Angela Merkel in upcoming elections. "We have evidence that cyber attacks are taking place that have no purpose other than to elicit political uncertainty. The perpetrators are interested in delegitimising the democratic process as such, regardless of who that ends up helping. We have indications that (the attacks) comes from the Russian region," Kahl told German newspaper Sueddeutsche Zeitung.

Russian Funding

German media reported earlier this year that the Russian embassy in Berlin had co-funded a security policy seminar hosted by the Alternative for Germany party that is riding a populist wave with its anti-immigrant and anti-European Union positions. In France, National Front leader Marine Le Pen, a frontrunner in presidential elections, stands accused of being beholden to Moscow because of a US\$10.2 million Russian loan to her party.

Speaking to the Financial Times, Czech Foreign Minister Lubomir Zaoralek warned that Russia was pursuing a "divide and conquer" policy in Europe by trying to boost Eurosceptic populists. Officials of former Soviet states say their long-standing warnings of subversive Russian activity were ignored by the Obama administration.

To be sure the US and the West too have a long history of waging disinformation and destabilisation campaigns. As a result this may be a case of the pot calling the kettle black, yet one wrong doesn't justify another.

For their part Moscow and Beijing have been reaching out to Western intellectuals and journalists who have been charting Eurasianist advances. Prominent Turkish journalist Murat Yelkin warned recently that Perincek's group was exploiting its "close access to Erdogan" to promote an "elaborate plan" that would rupture Turkey's relations with the EU. This it would do by reintroducing the death penalty, something the Turkish leader has advocated, and reversing restrictive EU regulations adopted by Turkey.

None of this amounts to incontrovertible evidence of a Russian-Chinese plot. The West however risks ignoring at its peril what could be a pattern rather than a string of unrelated incidents that foreshadows a new world order that ranges across the Eurasian mega continent.

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