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Western Isolation of Russia: Weakening?

By Christopher Cheang

SYNOPSIS

However the outcome of the recent US-Russia summit is analysed, one aspect is becoming clear: US diplomatic isolation of Russia might be coming to a close. Another sign: German Chancellor Merkel's recent call, supported by France, to invite President Putin to an EU Summit.

COMMENTARY

OVER THE last few years, Germany and France, the European Union's two most powerful countries, have been consistently advocating for a dialogue with Russia, despite the Crimean annexation and Russia's support of Ukraine's separatist regions.

Germany has its own reasons, partly historical going back to memories of last world war, but mainly economic. Germany is Russia's largest trade partner, after China. There are reportedly almost 4,000 German companies in Russia. France, on the other hand, views the rise of China in the context of geopolitics. The French prefer to keep EU relations with Russia on an even keel so as not to push it closer towards China.

German and French Calculations

Germany remains a keen and major consumer of Russian energy, as illustrated by Berlin's strong support of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, despite massive US pressure to stop the completion of its construction.

Historically, the memory of Operation Barbarossa in 1941 and its brutal consequences on the USSR as well as Nazi Germany's defeat are etched into the consciousness of Berlin's leaders. Germany was split into two countries — the Federal Republic of

Germany (FRG) allied with the West and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) which was a member of the Soviet bloc.

Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Vladimir Putin reportedly spoke to each other on the telephone on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Operation Barbarossa. Russia's massive annual celebrations of Victory Day on 9 May 2021 also serves to unwittingly remind Germany of its responsibility in the conflict.

France's President Emmanuel Macron, on the other hand, believes the rise of China is a challenge for the EU which the EU would find it difficult to master, if its relations with Russia remain strained. Hence, both Germany and France have not been too keen on granting Ukraine membership in NATO, which Russia has consistently warned against.

In short, the EU's two most powerful members are keen to maintain a dialogue with Russia.

EU Summit 24-25 June

Last week's EU Summit in Brussels discussed its relations with Russia, among other issues. Reportedly, and not surprisingly, the Baltic states and Poland were not keen on Merkel/Macron's proposal to have a summit with the Russian president. Their suspicions and distrust of Russia remain entrenched, given their tortured history. There has not been a summit with Russia since the events of 2014 in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, unanimity towards Russia was seen in the EU Summit's call on Russia "to demonstrate a more constructive engagement and political commitment and stop actions against the EU and its member states, as well as against third countries".

The EU member states also stressed the need "for a firm and coordinated response" to "any further malign, illegal and disruptive activity by Russia" and "for additional restrictive measures, including economic sanctions" to be considered.

At the same time, they reiterated their "openness to selective engagement with Russia in areas of EU interest"; these included "concrete options on topics such as climate and the environment, health, as well as selected issues of foreign and security policy and multilateral issues". The Summit also criticised Russia's human rights situation.

Intertwined Interests

The unity displayed at the Summit towards Russia does not change the fact that the EU's two most powerful countries are not comfortable with the prevailing state of relations with Russia. If they persist, it might be a question of time before their views could prevail and eventually become EU policy.

Russia has therefore shown more interest in developing bilateral relations with the EU member states, especially Germany and France.

Merkel's departure from the political scene in September is not likely to change

Germany's stance towards Russia; her successor, Armin Laschet, is believed to share her views on Russia and the need to maintain a dialogue with Moscow.

Unlike the USSR, Russia is integrated into the global economic system and the EU economy. Geopolitically, its role has become more important to the West in balancing a rising China, which NATO recently declared a challenge that it had to address. Moreover, the EU cannot ignore the relatively large Russian market.

Concern Over Open Conflict

Global Issues of common interest like climate change, terrorism, the pandemic, and regional issues like Syria, Libya, Iran and Afghanistan (in the aftermath of the pending Western military pullout) cannot be fully or even partially resolved without Russia's cooperation.

Perhaps concern about the possibility of an open conflict is another factor accounting for the German-French proposal, given the Russian military build-up on its border with Ukraine a few months ago and the recent incident between Russian naval forces and a Royal Navy vessel in the Black Sea.

Finally, there is the realisation that President Putin's power has not and will not be adversely affected by the non-parliamentary opposition especially that of a movement led by Alexei Navalny. Of late, the authorities have moved to ban his movement.

Moreover, in an effort to revive the political fortunes of the ruling United Russia (UR), President Putin suggested at its 19 June congress that Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov be added to the party's candidate list for the September parliamentary elections. He described them as "political heavyweights".

Dialogue with Russia: Easing of Western Isolation?

While UR is the country's dominant party, and is considered Putin's power base, recent polls suggest that its support is waning. Putin's support of UR and vice versa as well as its long affiliation with him also mean that UR's electoral performance in September will be interpreted as a reflection of his popularity.

Both Shoigu and Lavrov are considered popular, the majority of Russians being supportive of a strong military and resolute foreign policy which these two men represent; therefore, UR stands to benefit from their candidatures.

For good measure, Putin also announced spending on infrastructure, education and health, in the realisation that these popular candidates for UR are not an iron-clad guarantee for its electoral success.

In any event, the EU is realistic enough to conclude that since Putin is likely to be in charge of Russia till possibly 2036, there might not be any other alternative but to conduct a pragmatic yet determined policy towards Russia. A crucial part of that policy includes maintaining a dialogue with the country's most powerful man.

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