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Russia, the West, and Gas Pipelines Cold War Heating Up

by NORMAN POLLACK

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The US/EU discouragement of the South Stream project to supply natural gas to Western Europe is a prime example of rigid ideology gunning for confrontation no matter the cost, a permanent war mindset directed to Russia and China and broader militarization of power in perhaps intuitive recognition of the West's own pending decline in face of its own cannibalistic, indeed self-devouring, mode of capitalism. In world history, the dissolution of American unilateral military-economic-political supremacy, and that of its tributaries ("friends and allies") engrossed in wars of regime change and counterrevolution, as well as embarking on participation in the Grand Showdown with Adversaries, Putin and Li, to foster an ancien regime of advanced capitalism, US-defined and –sanctioned, in perpetuity. Sorry Obama, sorry Morgan Chase, Exxon Mobil, Monsanto, the whole kit and caboodle of corporate-financial America, intervention, sanctions, IMF/World Bank machinations, Pacific-first carrier battle groups, drone assassinations as a means of displaying American power and cynicism, won't prevail in the long run. Even possibly, the next decade. For these are all stop-gap measures in postponing the inevitable, that others, beyond the West-centric global system, want and will gain a place in the sun. And I'm sorry to report, the New York Times cannot always have its way, sucking at the teat of American power.

Ukraine is the Tonkin Gulf of an earlier day, the flimsy pretext for gearing up for battle, presently, economic, but, should NATO forces via Ukraine be stationed on the Russian border, Putin will be more than chagrined, and Li, the Great American Pivot placing a military concentration in the Far East, ditto. Only a declining Empire has dreams of suicidal intent, vindictively bringing everyone down with it, notably, our “partners” in Europe. And what better means of forcing the issue, than energy—oil, in traditional terms, now gas as well. Ideology has been raised a significant notch, from earlier Cold War anticommunist hysteria, to the vaguer, more sinister, potentially more horrendous and encompassing Counter-Terrorism of today. Never mind ISIL, although that will do for starters; China and Russia lurk in the shadows, and North Korea, Cuba, and Venezuela can be counted on for raising the war temperature of the American public. But at this very moment, let’s turn to pipelines, a presumed sign of Russian aggression. Russia is adopting the Turkish route to markets, enabling it to direct supplies around a hostile EU, and at the same time, ease age-old tensions with China by entering into contracts which supply that country as well.

Michael Birnbaum’s Washington Post article, “Putin cancels new natural gas pipeline to Europe in a surprise move,” (Dec. 2), captures the Cold War context of the decision, “a measure of the dramatically reshaped relations between Russia and the West,” a move which, the reporter claims, “deprives the Kremlin of a tool that would have increased Russian political influence over southeastern Europe and detoured natural gas around Ukraine, leaving it more vulnerable to Russia.” In a word, Putin’s defeat, prompted by EU leaders who “intensified their opposition to the plans because of the grinding conflict in Ukraine.” The defeat is problematic, here disguised as a Western victory; Russia’s underwriting of the project, where it would take all the risks, clearly benefited Europe. Yet the concern was that for Russia to pursue “grand expensive infrastructure projects in Europe,” as for example, sending large quantities of gas underneath the Black Sea, would give “political clout through energy supplies.” Putin cancelled the project.

Putin, in his Ankara press conference with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Dec. 1, responding to Western sanctions and hostility, particularly EU pressure on Bulgaria to prevent construction, seemed completely rational: “If Europe does not want to implement the project, then it won’t be implemented. We will refocus our energy resources to other parts of the world. It would be ridiculous for us to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on the project, go all the way through the Black Sea and then stand in front of the Bulgarian border,” only to find Bulgaria rejecting the project. For Russian leaders, “the new southern gas route to Europe would have shielded E.U. consumers from energy disputes between Ukraine and Russia.” But no, anti-Russian politics triumphed. Instead of welcoming the opportunity for improved relations, Europe would continue business as usual. Western sanctions, Birnbaum observes, “made foreign investors wary of ties to major Russian state-owned companies, including Gazprom, the natural gas giant that was leading the effort to build the pipeline. Restrictions on long-term lending to major Russian banks have made it difficult for Russian companies to raise money for new projects.” (Presumably, if Gazprom had invited in Exxon-Mobil, tensions would have been relaxed—mine.)

If one compare the title of the Post's article with that of the New York Times, "In Diplomatic Defeat, Putin Diverts Pipeline to Turkey," (Dec. 2), the Post may be negative, but NYT goes overboard. Andrew Roth's vitriol, in his opening sentence, states: "President Vladimir V. Putin said Monday that he would scrap Russia's South Stream gas pipeline, a grandiose project that was once intended to establish the country's dominance in southeastern Europe but instead fell victim to Russia's increasingly toxic relationship with the West." He next not-subtly demonizes Putin (already now implied): "It was a rare diplomatic defeat for Mr. Putin, who said Russia would redirect the pipeline to Turkey. He painted the failure to build the pipeline as a loss for Europe and blamed Brussels for its intransigence." But of course the important point is not NYT bias, but the actual issues, including the developing context for heightening Cold War tensions. Roth sees the decision as "a rare victory" for the EU and the Obama administration, finally overcoming their "largely impotent" condition following Russian aggression in Ukraine. (Impotence? Hardly, in light of the Ukrainian coup, NATO mobilization, tightening of already burdensome sanctions, etc.)

Ukraine was the stumbling block, accounting for "increased pressure from Europe against the pipeline," antecedently, though, a rejection of Putin's claim that "the \$22 billion South Stream project [was] a sound business move," Washington and Brussels "dismiss[ing] it as a thinly veiled attempt by the Kremlin to cement its position as the dominant supplier in Europe"—in effect, a stealth attack on the West. Always the Other Guy benefits: "If there was one winner it was Turkey, which, along with China and other energy-hungry developing nations, has been exploiting the East-West rift to gain long-term energy supplies at bargain prices." The reporter is, if anything, candid: "As the Ukraine crisis deepened, eventually developing into a Cold War-like standoff, the Western powers became determined to resist Mr. Putin's aggressive policies at every turn. One such effort was the South Stream pipeline."

Tacit admission (and I think correctly) that the West viewed energy as part of the larger confrontation, at one with the recognition that the global power structure, with the addition of China, was changing as the Russia-China rapprochement—precisely because, in part, of energy—was taking place. Still laboring under the idea of Russia's pipeline defeat, Roth is perhaps unaware the opposite is happening, far more consequential in geopolitical terms: "The Ukraine conflict also helped turn Mr. Putin away from the West. He signed a major and long-delayed deal to provide gas to China and began seeking other, non-European markets for his oil and gas. This, too, made the pipeline more expendable." Add to this the imputation of Putin the power-mad ruler of a Russia anxious to restore its bygone prestige, and you have the narrative complete: "The Russian president directs energy and pipeline strategy personally, as perhaps the major source of power he wields in the international arena." As I note below, Putin's point about EU pressure on Bulgaria to freeze construction, that it denies Bulgarians of "fees of up to \$500 million annually...[and deprives them] 'of the opportunity to act as a sovereign state,'" elicits Roth's jibe that Putin said that "with a rhetorical twist of the knife."

My New York Times Comment on the Roth article, same date, follows:

What "Diplomatic Defeat"? How Putin's decision can be construed as a defeat at the hands of the US/EU reveals an NYT deep bias against both Putin and Russia (Roth's aside, "rhetorical twist of the knife," should have been flagged as rancid hate-mongering, not the first for that

reporter.) Try for once an objective appraisal. This route-shift will directly hurt Western Europe, encourage closer Sino-Russian relations, and increase Turkey's role in the Middle East (to the obvious consternation of Israel—after the aid-altercation to Gaza).

If anything, Putin took the principled stand, as evident by the original route which, given the opposition, he was forced to change. I may sound bitter, but I think the US is steering toward a renewed Cold War under Obama, taking on Russia and China as putative interrelated THREATS. Ultimately, this will backfire, as the global geopolitical framework experiences a decentralization from US unilateral hegemony. Europe will shiver. But The Times will gloat at what it takes as the West's having given Putin a black eye. Meanwhile, both Russia and China are dramatically strengthening, not only because of their respective internal development, but also US go-for-broke diplomatic/military shortsightedness.

By all means, Keystone uber alles, fracking and all.