

Behind The Lines!

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Perfidious Vladimir?

If 2005 is any indication, and most likely it is, Vladimir Putin will continue to mystify the prognosticators who seek clues to Russia's political course in 2006. His policies vis-à-vis the international community are increasingly reminiscent of the old Soviet-style schizophrenic political behavior: simultaneously playing both sides of an issue while adroitly obscuring the real objectives. Several recent cases in point, in no particular order, serve to illustrate.

Iranian Nuclear Facilities: Putin has consistently sought to obfuscate the issue of Iran's rapidly developing nuclear capacity by simultaneously encouraging it with material and technical support while reassuring the West that Iran's nuclear objectives are entirely peaceful. His proposal would enrich Iran's uranium at Russian facilities for peaceful use in nuclear reactors and thereby eliminate the production of weapons grade material for military purposes. Not surprisingly Putin's proposal would have dual benefits for Russia by assuaging the concern of Western countries about the growing Iranian nuclear threat while simultaneously allowing Russia to maintain its good relations with the Iranian regime. Not so fast! If implemented, would Russia be the executive agent for this long-term project? Would an international commission under the auspices of the United Nations be created to assure compliance with safeguards for handling, transporting and processing the material? As usual, the devil is in the details. Diplomatically, Putin favors bringing the issue of a nuclear Iran before the United Nations Security Council, but predictably he does not support sanctions against Tehran. In the military arena, Russia continues to sell military hardware to Iran, including the recent deal to provide the Iranian armed forces with the TOR-M1 upgraded surface-to-air missile defense system and its implications in the event of an air attack on Iran's nuclear sites by western air forces.

Natural Gas Crises in Ukraine and Georgia: Despite vigorous denial to the contrary by Russian officials, Putin's recent decision to disrupt natural gas supplies to both Ukraine and Georgia were deliberate and well-planned signals to these two former Soviet republics that Moscow still wields power in the so-called "near abroad" (ближнее зарубежье). If nothing else, it was a clear case of growing Russian "economic imperialism" accruing from its vast energy resources in bringing pressure on selected former republics of the Soviet Union to dissolve their developing ties with the West and NATO and voluntarily return to the Russian sphere of influence. Putin's apparent strategic plan to project power in Russia's periphery, not with bombs and aircraft carriers but through oil and gas, is slowly but perceptibly emerging as evidenced by the recent energy events in Ukraine and Georgia. He affirms as much in his extensive "state of the federation" news conference on January 31st when he referred to his vision of Russia as an "energy superpower."

Emerging Russian Policy in the Middle East: In some circles Putin's personal invitation to the Palestinian group Hamas for talks in Moscow came as a rather startling development. Victory by the militant Hamas in the recent parliamentary elections begins a new period in the post-Fatah political era following the death of Arafat and the current incapacitation of Israel's Sharon. Moreover it sets in motion Russia's newly emerging Middle East policy. Putin seized the offensive on the increasingly complicated and constantly changing chessboard that is the Middle East by signaling that he views Russia as a counterpoise to the United States and insists on being a major player in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Despite his assessment of Hamas as not being a terrorist organization, unlike its declaration as such by the United States, Putin treads a very fine line between his own benign view and his avowed rejection of terrorist organizations.