Behind The Lines!

PUTIN'S DILEMMA ON THE SOUTHERN FRONT

<u>Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin in his new term as Russian president continues to mystify</u> the prognosticators who seek clues to Russia's political course in 2012 and beyond. His hard-edged ex-KGB profile is increasingly reminiscent of the old Soviet-style <u>schizophrenic political behavior</u>: simultaneously playing both sides of an issue while adroitly obscuring the real objectives. A prime example is <u>Putin's peculiar anti-American statements</u> while Russia facilitates transport of U.S. military supplies across the Russian landmass and airspace in support of operations in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Russia and the Islamic people who inhabit the Northern Caucasus have been <u>at war literally for centuries</u>. There are no early indications that the relationship will improve under Putin, but instead <u>political conditions will continue to deteriorate in the region</u> as he seeks to control the Caucasus on his own terms. Contact between Russia and the "people from the East' extends at least as far back as the invading Mongol/Tartar hordes of the 1200s. The occupying <u>Mongols left an indelible imprint on Russian culture</u> as they established an administrative system to collect tribute (дань) from a disorganized and vulnerable Russia. A number of contemporary Russian words find their origin in the administrative terminology of the Mongol system: *pencil* (карандаш), *paper* (бумага), *money* (деньги) to name a few. Linguistic and cultural influences notwithstanding, a 240-year occupation by a ruthless invader leaves other <u>profound imprints on the national psyche</u>. For example, there is a common Russian expression "scratch a Russian, find a Tartar." Lenin's eyes even reflect a subtle hint of the slanted eyelids that are a characteristic Oriental facial feature.

Historically, the Russians have an <u>innate fear of a return of the "people from the East"</u> (think Chinese as the modern day Mongols) and the "people from the Caucasus" (think Muslims encroaching from the south). And for good reason. The <u>Muslim presence in contemporary Russia is an increasingly prominent one</u>. Islam is second only to Russian Orthodoxy in terms of religion in Russia. Mosques are part of the Russian landscape, especially as one travels farther south from Moscow and to the Caucasus area. Demographics relate to this Russian concern as well. The dangerously <u>low birth rate among Russians</u> coupled with the extremely <u>high birth rate among the Muslim population</u> gives the Russian leadership strong reason for pause. Some demographers predict that Muslims in Russia will outnumber ethnic Russians within 50 yeas or so.

<u>Russia's greatest nightmare</u> in the volatile Caucasus is <u>terrorist strikes and sabotage</u> leading up to and during the XXII Olympic Winter Games hosted by the Russian Federation in Sochi in 2014. Doku Umarov, the self-proclaimed Chechen leader of the Kavkaz (Caucasus) Emirate who has been called "Russia's Osama Bin Laden," is Vladimir Putin's most feared nemesis in the region. <u>Russian counterterrorist elements are already operating</u> in the area to frustrate and <u>neutralize the Umarov threat</u>.

V. V. Putin returns to power under the dark clouds of <u>alleged election fraud</u>, <u>bloody street demonstrations</u> in Moscow and other metropolitan areas, and an <u>increasingly vocal and nascent middle class</u> in Russia. Western intelligence agencies, academics and pundits continue to evaluate Putin's ability to survive these <u>distinctly new formidable and ultimately divisive forces</u> that seek to change the face of Russia in our lifetime. Time is not Putin's ally.

Does Russia have concerns about the <u>expanding Muslim world</u>? Most assuredly. Are the prospects encouraging for political stability in Russia for the long term? Probably not. So what is the <u>main threat to Putin</u> as he begins his new term as Russian president? <u>Growing nationalism</u>, especially among the <u>restive young demographic</u>, which extends to the Muslim population as well. All of the vast natural resources of oil, gas, gold, etc. which accrue to Russia's overall power come to naught against a <u>disgruntled populace</u> bent on changing a <u>tired</u>, inefficient, oppressive and <u>reactionary system</u> that belongs to another century. It bears repeating: <u>Time is not Putin's ally</u>.