

Commentary...

The Eurasians are coming!

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

The nomination of Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson for Secretary of State is a very significant development, one that confirms President-elect Donald Trump's sympathy toward Russia.

It would be a mistake to underestimate Tillerson's qualifications — you don't get to be the head of a major oil company unless you are highly intelligent and geopolitically savvy. Tillerson is reportedly both, in spades. And he has established a remarkable working relationship with Russian President Tsar Vladimir Putin.

Many people are troubled by Trump's warm attitude toward Russia, and critics portray Trump as Putin's stooge. That's simplistic. I suspect that Trump naturally and instinctively identifies with the Russian strongman (in part because of Putin's great personal wealth, but mostly because Trump is a fundamentally weak man who is attracted to tough guys). Yet it seems clear that Trump and the team he is assembling ideologically swerve away from the Establishment Atlanticist paradigm that has driven U.S. foreign policy since 1945. In short, they don't have a big problem with Russia asserting its interests and reestablishing its geostrategic hegemony over the Eurasian continent.

In fact, they see mutual interests — from oil exploration in the Arctic to combating a mutual enemy in Islamic radicalism. And they simply like the Russians a whole lot more than they like the Chinese.

If there is, in fact, a broad tilt toward Moscow, that's a tectonic shift that will make China very angry and make Europe very nervous

— especially Ukraine and Georgia and even the Baltic states.

Those states are obviously on Russia's western periphery; they're not the true interest of the Eurasia-oriented ideologues who seem to have gained a great deal of throw-weight in Putin's Russia over the past few years.

Eurasianism has a long pedigree — dating back to the 1920s when White Russian intellectuals developed a paradigm by which they could understand and cope with the Bolshevik Revolution, an earthquake that had turned their world upside down.

The ideology has usually been on the far right margins of Russian political thinking, but in the past decade it has infiltrated the mainstream, with Putin framing policy with Eurasianist terminology and rhetoric.

Eurasianism considers the "East" the center of gravity of Russia, and considers Russia, as a metaphysical concept, to be utterly separate and different from Europe. It's strongly tied to Orthodox tradition and is authoritarian in its political philosophy — which, of course suits Putin well. Eurasianism is, in every sense, opposed to the political, ideological, material and social values of the West.

Putin is a pragmatist, and he's probably using the Eurasianist philosophy to inculcate a sense of nationalism and us-against-the-world solidarity that bolsters his

authority. But the Russian strongman seems also to genuinely share many of the instincts of the ideology, and he certainly seems to be playing it out: Once he established his domestic dominance, he launched a long-term project to regain lost imperial territory and to disrupt and destabilize the West.

There seems to be no doubt that Russia actively sought to disrupt the 2016 presidential election through hacking the Democratic National Committee and providing a data dump to Wikileaks. Putin may have been directly involved.

There's a lot of pearl-clutching going on about Russia's interference, which must seem like a pretty good joke in the Kremlin. The U.S. would *never* do something like that, meddling in a nation's election — except maybe in Iran, Indonesia, South Vietnam, Italy, Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Afghanistan...

So, what happens if the U.S. decides that it is comfortable with a "Eurasianist" Russia? How do Eurasianists, who form their identity in large part in metaphysical opposition to the West, react to a suddenly more receptive and cooperative U.S.?

Putin will seek a free hand in what he sees as Russia's sphere of influence (the old Soviet Empire) and an easing of sanctions on individual members of his elite. He'll likely get both.

It will be very interesting

to see how Trump's Iran hawks — proposed National Security Advisor Lt. General Michael Flynn, proposed CIA director Mike Pompeo, Secretary of Defense-in-waiting General James Mattis — will square their profound suspicion of that regime with a potentially cozy relationship with Iran's partner, Russia. In fact, the status and stature of Iran may be the telling point in the success or failure of a new U.S.-Russia relationship. Bear in mind that the Russians and the Iranians basically just won the Syrian Civil War with the re-taking of Aleppo. Their man Assad will continue to rule in the ruins and the Iranian arc that runs from Iran across Iraq and Syria to its client Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Interesting times.

Trump's outlook and appointments presage something more than a "reset" with Russia, which the Obama administration touted and failed to deliver upon. This could represent a deep change and a marginalization of the Atlanticists, including many

of the foreign policy old guard in the Republican Party (think John McCain).

This has the potential to be highly disruptive of the post-war world order, which has, ironically, been breaking down ever since its apparent triumph over the Soviet Union in 1991. It's nerve-racking at best and downright mad at worst to committed Atlanticists — which is most of us, since that's the paradigm that we've lived in for 70 years.

We've only dealt with Russia in a couple of ways — as an enemy or as a prostrate, shambolic mess that we could exploit and remake in the image of Western capitalism.

It's impossible to predict how it might go if we accept Russia as a legitimate Eurasian empire — a third pole (the other being China) in the great geopolitical scheme.

Such a change would likely create oscillations that spin the world in unexpected directions. That could be a good thing — but there's also the potential for chaos. Keep your powder dry.

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