



News from the Nations

Russia looks to the Mediterranean

After laying claim to the North Pole, Russia looks to the Mediterranean, according to *World News*. Russia's senior admiral called for the establishment of a permanent naval base in the Mediterranean for the first time since the Soviet era. Moscow's renewed naval ambitions are likely to spread further unease in NATO capitals. "The Mediterranean Sea is very important strategically", Admiral Vladimir Masorin said on a tour of the Russian navy's Black Sea base in the Crimean port of Sevastopol; "I propose that with the involvement of the Northern and Baltic Fleets, the Russian navy should restore its permanent presence there". According to *News'* report, these remarks raise doubts about the Kremlin's denial last year of a newspaper claim that new moorings were being built in the Syrian port of Tartus. According to the report, Russia had also begun to expand the port at Latakia, also in Syria. President Putin has been anxious to restore Moscow's influence in the Middle East, signing controversial arms deals with both Syria and Iran that have upset the United States and Israel. If the port plan were to go ahead, Russian vessels and warships from the US Sixth Fleet, based in Italy, would face one another in the Mediterranean for the first time since the Cold War when the Soviet navy was based in Tartus. Russia maintains a symbolic and largely empty logistical facility at Tartus, its only military base outside the former Soviet Union.

Putin's praise of 'Warsaw Pact 2'

President Putin and his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao will attend an unprecedented show of joint military force amid fears that the Russian leader is trying to turn a powerful central Asian alliance into a second Warsaw Pact. The United States will be anxiously watching from afar the military manoeuvres, held under the auspices of the six-member Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), as a request to send observers was rejected. Washington has plenty of reasons to be uneasy: founded in 2001, the SCO, which includes the four central Asian nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as China and Russia, is rapidly gaining a reputation as an anti-Western organisation. Analysts say the Russian president believes the organisation is emerging as a bloc that is rapidly becoming powerful enough to stand up to the West. The West has been desperate to strengthen its presence but has begun to fall behind both Russia and China. The SCO has wider ambitions: Pakistan, India and Mongolia all want to join, as does Iran, whose president Ahmadinejad has attacked US plans to build missile defence bases in Europe, saying they were "of concern for much of the continent, Asia and SCO members". Iranian membership of the SCO would pose an enormous headache for the United States. Like NATO, its treaty states that an attack on one member is regarded as an attack on all, raising the prospect that the United States could find itself aligned against both Russia and China if it took military action against Iran. For all Mr Putin's posturing, most analysts believe that an underlying antagonism between the member states means that the SCO is far from cohesive. Even so, the exercises will be a reminder that the global balance of power is shifting. For the first time, China is deploying troops, tanks and aircraft on a combined mission abroad. The exercises being held in the Russian region of Chelyabinsk involve 6,500 troops, heavy weapons and combat aircraft. While the goal of the mission is to simulate the capture of a city held by terrorists, the sight of Russian and Chinese troops marching together will give observers in Washington pause for reflection.

A MOVE TO BOOST PALESTINIANS

Russian President Putin recently lent his weight to the efforts of Israel and the United States to strengthen Palestinian President Abbas in his struggle against Hamas. He is quoted as saying, "I want to assure you that Russia will support you as the legitimate leader of the Palestinian people. I am convinced you will do everything to restore the unity of the Palestinian people". At the same time, unlike Israel and the US, Russia is refusing to cut ties with Hamas and is encouraging Mr Abbas to speak to the Islamic party.

Russia flexes its military muscles

Could Russian nuclear missiles soon be returning to the foreign soil of Eastern Europe? is a question asked in a report in *Newsweek*. It may be Moscow's response to US plans to deploy anti-missile defence radars and missile batteries in Poland and the Czech Republic. Russia's ambassador to Belarus, Aleksandr Surikov, said that Russia and Belarus were preparing a "response to Washington" that could include "nuclear facilities" in Russia's tiny but loyal Western neighbour. The last Soviet-era missiles were removed from Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan more than ten years ago as part of a US-backed disarmament programme, but Russia has changed vastly since then, and is now in the mood to arm, not disarm. Russia's military budget has tripled since Putin came to power. Some of that money has gone for a new generation of missile submarines and intercontinental ballistic missiles with warheads that Russia claims can manoeuvre in flight to evade the proposed US anti-missile defences. Russia has also been stepping up cold-war-style drills. Russian Tu-95 'Bear' long-range bombers, designed to deliver nuclear warheads, have resumed regular patrols along the US east coast. In recent weeks, according to this report, Bears patrolling the North Sea and the Pacific have prompted NATO and US commanders to scramble jets at bases in Scotland and on Guam. Putin is saying, "We're rich, we're back".

Russia looks east for allies

When Russia faces West, President Putin strikes a tough-guy pose, but Putin's posture looks quite different from the East. He has become a frequent guest in Asia, paying visits to China, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia, making deals and dispensing cash. Putin recently gave Indonesia a \$1 billion line of credit to buy weapons. Russia is obsessed with balancing off American influence, according to a report in *Newsweek*. By cultivating Eastern friends, Russia hopes to insulate itself against economic harm from escalating tensions with Western trading partners. Joining forces with China is an obvious move, and Putin brags that the two now enjoy the best relations in their history—they have settled their border disputes. Russia has also begun work on two gas pipelines to China and has taken on a new military alliance designed to counter NATO. Analyst Cliff Kupchan of the Eurasia Group puts it like this: "While Europe and the United States look East at Putin, Putin is looking East as well".

IRAN'S PLAN TO BOMB ISRAEL

Iran has drawn up plans to bomb Israel, Teheran warned recently. General Alavi, deputy commander of the Iranian air force, said his pilots were on stand-by to retaliate if Israel attacks Iran's nuclear research facilities. "The whole territory of this regime [Israel] is within the range of our missiles, we can attack their territory with our fighter bombers as a response to any attack". The White House reacted by calling the threat "provocative". It had earlier called for tougher sanctions in a last-ditch effort to stop Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, according to a report in a daily newspaper. Iranian President Ahmadinejad has called for Israel to be "wiped off the map".

Britain "centre for Hamas hate"

A report by the Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Centre found the UK to be "a major source of publishing and distribution of Hamas incitement". The bi-weekly *Al-Fateh*, aimed at children and teenagers, states that it is published in London and has a link on the Hamas website.

Syria and chemical weapons

"Israelis have unearthed a deadlier axis of evil", according to a report in the *Daily Telegraph*. "The Israeli Air Force launched a daredevil attack on a remote region of northern Syria to destroy a top-secret military facility. The precise nature of the target remains a matter of intense speculation, not least because the Israeli government has imposed a news black-out on the events of the night of September 6; and the Syrians, whose much-vaunted, Russian-built air defence systems failed to detect, let alone repel, the intruders, have been equally secretive. But judging from the small scraps of information that have emerged, it would be fair to conclude that a new axis of evil is under construction, with Syria assuming Iraq's place. But unlike Iraq, Syria has well-documented links to the pariah regimes in North Korea and Teheran, and is cooperating with them on a range of projects, from the acquisition of long-range ballistic missiles to the development of chemical and nuclear weapons . . . Even before the Israeli raid, Syria had been identified by a number of intelligence and government agencies as possessing the largest and most advanced chemical weapons capability in the Middle East". The Israelis used F-15s in the attack. Iran's nuclear programme, which Teheran says is peaceful, couldn't help but loom over their mission. "It's a tacit reminder to Europe and to Washington that if they do not take a tougher action against Iran, Israel may have to do it alone", said one commentator.