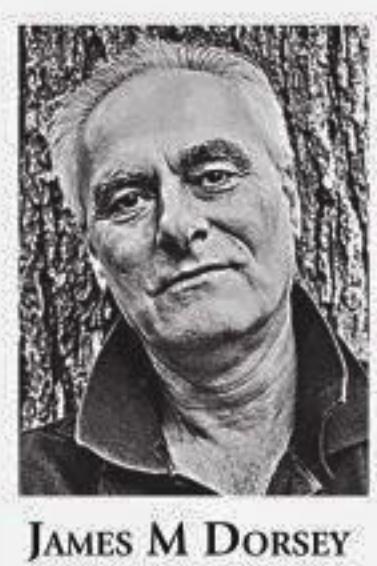


Eurasia's Great Game

India, Japan and Europe play to Putin's needs



JAMES M DORSEY

EURASIA'S Great Game is anything but simple and straightforward. A burgeoning alliance between China and Russia that at least for now is relegating potential differences between the two powers to the sidelines has sparked a complex geopolitical

dance of its own.

With India, Japan and Europe seeking to drive a wedge between the two Asian powers, Central Asian states, where anti-Chinese sentiment is rising, are quietly rooting that Asian rivalries will grant them greater manoeuvrability.

Indian prime minister Narendra Modi on a visit to Russia this month during which he attended the annual Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, established to attract Asian investment in the country's Far East, announced a USD 1 billion credit line to fund development

of the region.

Mr Modi and Russian president Vladimir Putin also agreed to establish a maritime link between the Far East's capital, Vladivostok, and Chennai that would reduce transport time from 40 to 24 days.

The connection potentially could serve as an extension of the Indian Ocean Corridor that links India to Japan and the Pacific and competes with China's pearl of strings, a series of ports across Asia in which China has invested heavily.

In contrast to Mr Modi, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has attended the forum since its inception in 2015, did not announce any major deals in response to Mr Putin's insistence that "the development of the Russian Far East, strengthening its economic and innovation potential, and raising the living standards of its residents among others, is our key priority and fundamental national goal."

With the trans-Atlantic alliance fraying at the edges, Markus Ederer, the European Union's ambassador to Russia and one of the EU's top diplomats, appeared to recognise Mr Putin's priorities when he urged the bloc, to engage on a massive scale with Russia on some of the most tricky political and security aspects in their relationship despite differences over Russian aggression in Ukraine and Georgia, human rights and alleged Russian interference in various European elections.

A memorandum to senior bureaucrats, Mr Ederer suggested that 5G mobile communications, personal data protection, the Arctic, regional infrastructure and the development of joint policies on matters such as customs and standards by the EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland, should be topics on the EU-Russian agenda.

Mr Ederer said that these were areas "where leaving a clear field to our competitors by not engaging would be most detrimental to EU interests."

He argued that a "pragmatic" move towards "enhanced co-ordination" with Russia was needed to combat "Eurasian competition" as China's influence grows.

The EU "would have everything to lose by ignoring the tectonic strategic shifts in Eurasia. Engaging not only with China but (also) with Russia... is a necessary condition to be part of

the game and play our cards where we have comparative advantage," Mr Ederer asserted.

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Modi, Abe and Ederer see opportunity in what Thomas Graham, a former US diplomat and managing director of Kissinger Associates, describes as Russia's need for "diversity of strategic partners in the (Far East) to maintain its strategic autonomy (from China) going forward."

The EU, India and Japan hope to capitalise not only on Russia's requirement for diversified investment but also Mr Putin's need to counter widespread anti-Chinese sentiment in the Far East that has turned against his government at a time that protest in Russia is accelerating and after Mr Putin's party this month lost a third of its seats in the Moscow district council.

Public sentiment east of the Urals is critical of perceived Chinese encroachment on the region's natural resources including water, particularly in the Trans-Baikal region.

A petition initiated earlier this year by prominent Russian show business personalities opposing Chinese plans to build a water bottling plant on the shores of Lake Baikal attracted more than 800,000 signatures, signalling the depth of popular resentment and pitfalls of the Russian alliance with China.

Protests further erupted earlier this year in

multiple Russian cities against Chinese logging in the Far East that residents and environmentalists charge has spoilt Russian watersheds and is destroying the habitats of the endangered Siberian tiger and Amur leopard.

The protesters, who also denounced construction of housing for Chinese workers, are demanding a ban on Russian timber exports to China.

Underlying the anti-Chinese protests is the lopsided nature of economic relations that Russian scholar Leo Aaron says fits Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin's definition of colonial trade, in which one country becomes a raw material appendage of another.

"China is Russia's second-largest trading partner (after the EU) and Russia's largest individual partner in both exports and imports. For China, the Russian market is at best second-rate. Russia ranks tenth in Chinese exports and does not make it into the top ten in either imports or total trade," Mr Aaron said.

He noted that three-quarters of Russia's exports to China were raw materials and resources as opposed to consumer goods, electronics and machinery that account for the bulk of Chinese sales to Russia.

European, Indian and Japanese efforts to capitalise on anti-Chinese sentiment taps into a deeply embedded vein.

Writing under the pen name P. Ukhatabuzhsky, Russian author Nikolai Dmitrievich Obleukhov warned already in 1911 that "Russians are being displaced by the yellow races who seize commerce, industry, wages, and so on... God guides people. Those nations who protect Good and Truth will be victorious. If Russia, carrying the light of Orthodoxy, faces in Asia the yellow races wallowing in the darkness of paganism, there cannot be any doubt as to the outcome of this struggle."

Mr Putin, presiding over a country in economic trouble, can't create the margins of manoeuvrability that he needs on his own. He hopes that India, Japan and Europe will come to his aid.

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PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin opens a plenary session of Eastern Economic Forum at far-eastern Russian port of Vladivostok on September 5, 2019.

The Rohingya repatriation conundrum



MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

A recent UN report published on Monday gives a dreadful account of the situation in Myanmar stating that the Rohingya remaining in Myanmar's Rakhine state face a "serious risk of genocide" and that the repatriation of the Rohingya living in Bangladesh is "impossible." The report also said some 600,000 Rohingya are living in "deplorable" conditions in Rakhine state, subject to restrictions on movement that negatively affect almost every aspect of their lives.

This clearly indicates that the Myanmar government's intention to take back the Rohingya from Bangladesh is nothing but an "eyewash". The country has deceived not only Bangladesh but the international community. In such a situation, none of the Rohingya in Bangladesh's refugee camps are likely to return to their motherland.

Even before this report had been made public, the repatriation attempts of the Rohingya had proved futile. After the second failed attempt, the Rohingya refugees have reiterated their demand for Myanmar citizenship and freedom of movement within and beyond their native province of Rakhine.

The last wave of exodus began about two years ago when hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, as a result of persecution by the Myanmar government and military. That exodus of several weeks turned certain pockets of Bangladesh's

Cox's Bazaar into the fourth largest refugee concentration in the world, practically seeing an entire ethnic group uprooted from their native lands. Two years on, with renewed talks of Rohingya repatriation, it appears that there is little sense of urgency among the refugees. In fact, there have been reports of strong reluctance on the part of the refugees to return to Myanmar where they have been forced to live in subhuman conditions, deprived of basic human needs.

In Bangladesh, the refugee camps have electricity and sufficient food. There are a host of NGOs helping the refugees with all kinds of support, from providing cooking utensils to imparting education. With a safer and more secure life in Bangladesh, the Rohingya's list of conditions for repatriation is becoming longer making their return rather challenging.

Although they agree in principle and claim that they would like to return to their homeland, the Rohingya refugees also point out that there is no guarantee that they would not be persecuted by the Myanmar authority again. Some refugees unequivocally state that they would simply perish if they return, while recalling the brutal torture and violence against their kin.

The Myanmar government and its military have been accused of unleashing genocide to eliminate the Rohingya, and many of them living in Bangladesh cannot even bear the thought of trusting the government and the same military to keep their promise.

Among the several things that have notably changed in the last two years is that the Rohingya have found their solidarity. Although initially they did not have a common voice, a unified effort is becoming increasingly

evident in their demonstrations during high-profile visits of VIPs through their statements and articulation of demands.

A recent example is the programme that had been organised to mark two years of the recent exodus of the Rohingya to Bangladesh. Thousands of Rohingya attended a rally observing August 25 as "Genocide Day" and placed a number of demands, including their safety, citizenship and punishment of those involved in killings of Rohingya in Myanmar.

Till date, the Myanmar authority did not meet a single demand of the Rohingya, which basically put the whole repatriation process in jeopardy.

The repatriation process can effectively take place only if the Myanmar government shows a genuine commitment by inviting representatives from Bangladesh, the international community and the Rohingya refugee community living in the camps, to visit the facilities that they claim to have built for the Rohingya. This initiative will help in creating effective communication channels and trust building platforms between the Rohingya and the Myanmar authorities.

Subsequently, the Bangladesh government should actively form an international oversight task force to visit the facilities that Myanmar claims to have built for the Rohingya as per the commitment made by the Myanmar authorities, and to create awareness to encourage repatriation.

The most important task for both Myanmar and Bangladesh would be to reduce trust deficiency to facilitate a meaningful repatriation process. Delay of repatriation of the Rohingya will result in multidimensional problems for Bangladesh.

Already the local people of Cox's Bazar are becoming disgruntled by the prolonged presence of the refugees and tensions have erupted from time to time. There have been reports of some Rohingya refugees forming criminal gangs, connecting with local gangs and getting involved in crimes such as murder, human trafficking and drug smuggling. These activities pose a threat to both the locals and the Rohingya refugees within the camps.

In a situation that is so complex and getting worse every day, the global community must come forward united with strong action to compel Myanmar to improve the

situation in Rakhine state and create an environment that will allow the Rohingya to return.

Bangladesh stands beside the Rohingya refugees on humanitarian grounds and it is now the responsibility of the global community to stand beside Bangladesh to expedite the repatriation process by exerting pressure on Myanmar government. Otherwise, the displacement of such a huge population of refugees with no certain future will create further tensions in Bangladesh and threaten regional peace.

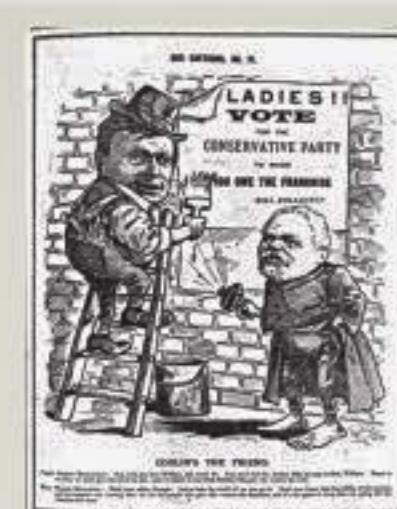
Mohammad Al-Masum Molla is a reporter at The Daily Star.



A Rohingya man passes a child through a border fence near Maungdaw township bordering Bangladesh on August 28, 2017.

PHOTO: REHMAN ASAD/ AFP

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



September 19, 1893
New Zealand becomes the first country to grant all women the right to vote

With the signing of the "Electoral Act" into law, on this day in 1893, by governor Lord Glasgow, New Zealand became the first self-governing country in the world where women had the right to vote in parliamentary elections.

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BEETLE BAILEY



by Mort Walker

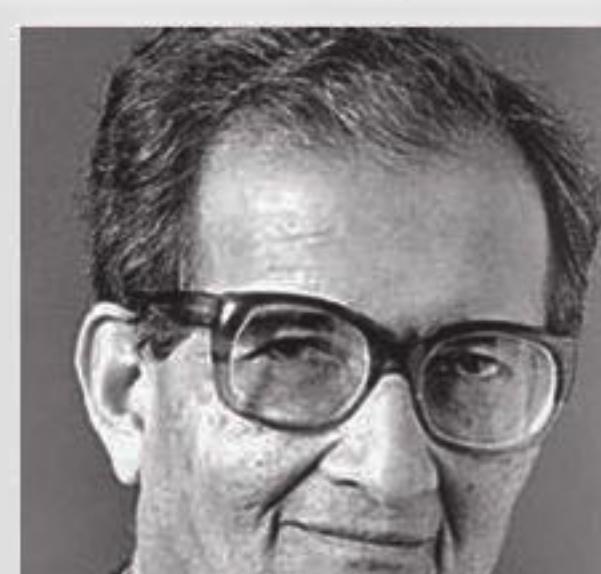
BABY BLUES



by Kirkman & Scott

QUOTEABLE

Quote



AMARTYA KUMAR SEN
(Born: 1933)

Nobel prize-winning economist and social theorist

Human ordeals thrive on ignorance. To understand a problem with clarity is already half way towards solving it.