Pandemic of Territorial Ambitions is Spreading

In February 2020, The Lancet medical journal published research on the psychological impact of quarantine. The authors of the article conducted a fairly thorough review of its effect on mental health and reported the negative effects of isolation on psychological well-being of individuals in nations that have suffered from a pandemic. Psychological problems experienced by those impacted range from increased anxiety, insomnia and emotional disturbance to post-traumatic stress symptoms and depression.

From the author’s perspective, a number of politicians in countries where COVID-19 continues to spread seem to, unfortunately, be suffering from the mental health issues, discussed in The Lancet, irrespective of whether or not they were infected with the novel Coronavirus. And this is evidenced from, among other things, the outbreak of yet another highly contagious disease, which can be referred to as the pandemic of territorial ambitions (PTA).

There is no doubt that a wave of Arab Spring uprisings, the latest Iran crisis and the Syrian conflict are all part of USA’s notorious scheme to create the New Middle East by essentially redrawing the borders within the region. The author would like to remind his readers about the plan, unveiled in 2006 by US Secretary of State at the time Condoleezza Rice, and the map depicting the coming changes, a brainchild of Ralph Peters, “a retired colonel of the US National War Academy”, which was published by Armed Forces Journal in 2006 as well. The concepts that came to light 14 years ago are even more relevant today in the Middle East. According to the aforementioned road map to
redraw the borders in this region, Turkey was supposed to lose the largest swathes of its territories. Its entire eastern region as well as parts of Syria and Iran were meant to constitute an entirely new country, Free Kurdistan (which would be established as a result of the collapse of regional order). Other nations, such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and a number of other countries, were also meant to decrease in size. Hence, it can be concluded that optimal conditions for the pandemic of territorial ambitions were created quite a while ago.

Recently, there have been a number of reports about Japan’s territorial claims: its disputes over the Kuril Islands with Russia and other territories with South Korea and China; its use of the “Ainu factor” in Tokyo’s expansionist strategy, and even an Antarctic territory spanning the entirety of the Ross Ice Shelf claimed by Japanese Army Lieutenant Shirase Nobu for his homeland in 1912 (which was “not taken seriously by even the government of Japan”).

Unfortunately, the virus of territorial ambitions has also reached media outlets of friendly nations, such as Russia and China, with reports about PRC’s claims over the Russian city of Vladivostok. For instance, recently, the Belt and Road News Network (BRN) media outlet, created with support from Beijing and “dedicated to news, views and analysis on the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI)”, unexpectedly published an article clearly not aimed at promoting the fostering of ties between the PRC and the Russian Federation. In fact, the story hinted at the possibility that China could start a territorial dispute with Russia in the future. The fact that yet another Chinese media outlets, The South China Morning Post (a Hong Kong-based English-language newspaper), reported about a nationalist backlash in China in response to a celebration to mark the founding of Vladivostok indicates that the outbreak of the virus of territorial ambitions was no accident. The article also stated that the fallout, which had “happened a day after the anniversary of Hong Kong’s return to Chinese rule and the introduction of the National Security Law”, came “at a time when borders are a particularly sensitive topic” in the PRC.

Nowadays, the pandemic of territorial ambitions is not only spreading in the East. It has reached Europe just as the novel Coronavirus had not long ago.

For example, Latvia’s daily newspaper Latvijas Avīze reported recently that Ineta Ziemele, the President of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia, thinks the Abrene county (or Pytalovo District) “donated to Russia must also be included in the calculation of the damage caused to Latvia”. After the Soviet Union recognized Latvia’s independence in 1991, the two countries started border negotiations. However, the agreement reached in 2005 was not concluded. Russia refused to sign it “after the government of Latvia had adopted a unilateral explanatory declaration” (i.e. “according to Article 1 of the Latvian Constitution the Abrene/Pytalovo district” was part of Latvia). Finally, in 2007, “a treaty on the Russian-Latvian state border was signed and ratified”.

Although Finland has not made any official territorial claims over the Russian territory of Karelia, polls have shown “that approximately 26% to 38% of Finns would like to see Karelia return to Finnish control”. In addition, “36% of Finns supported the return of ceded territories”, according to the latest survey conducted in 2005. Karelia has been fought over for centuries: it was part of a Swedish province, the Russian Empire and the Grand Duchy of Finland. The Treaty of Tartu between Finland and Soviet Russia was signed in 1920 and confirmed the border between the two nations. The agreement was quite generous to Finland. However, after World War II, a part of Karelia became an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Russian SFSR in 1956.

The UK government, which has also been impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak, began showing symptoms characteristic to the pandemic of territorial claims. For instance, according to French magazine Valeurs actuelles, “Conservative MP, Edward Leigh, regretted on Twitter the loss of the sovereignty of Calais in 1558”. The article stated that “he would like to regain it in order to prevent the arrival of migrants in his country”. His statement generated criticism in the UK. MP Andrew Gwynne reacted by posting “Why stop at Calais? After all, Our Majesty is still Duke of Normandy”.

Recently, the pandemic of territorial ambitions spread to Liechtenstein, which launched a legal action to return a swath of Czech territory confiscated from its ancient ruling family at the end of World War II. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Liechtenstein stated that the case involved “fundamental questions of sovereignty”. Liechtenstein “lodged a formal complaint with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) alleging disregard of the sovereignty by the Czech Republic over the return of nearly half a million acres of land”. According to The Financial Times, although the Foreign Minister expressed confidence that the court would rule in Liechtenstein’s favor, the principality had so far “had few successes in challenging the confiscations”.

Even a perfunctory analysis of consequences of the pandemic of territorial ambitions reveals that, as a rule, the seriousness of territorial claims is inversely proportional to the size of a nation. In other words, the smaller the
country, the more likely it is to be infected by the virus of territorial ambitions. Hence, it is not surprising that
Russia, the largest nations in the world with borders extending for nearly 60,000 km, is a target of some of the
aforementioned territorial claims. Recently, various political technologists have seemingly turned their focus to
territorial claims that abound nowadays. After all, they could not have left well enough alone such an important
aspect to foreign policy. They have masterfully transformed this sacred issue into a powerful and effective tool,
which could be used to exert political influence, impact trade and manipulate.

Only time will tell what effect this particular pandemic will have. But one thing is clear - it is becoming yet another
factor that will have a negative impact on the already tense global political environment.

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