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GAZA ROCKETS PUT ISRAEL'S NUCLEAR PLANT IN BATTLE ZONE

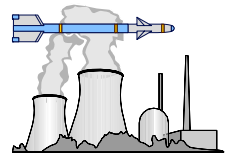
January 2, 2008 TimesOnline reported: "There were growing fears in Israel last night that Hamas missiles could threaten its top-secret nuclear facility at Dimona.

Rocket attacks from Gaza have forced Israelis to flee in ever greater numbers and military chiefs have been shaken by the size and sophistication of the militant group's arsenal. In Beersheba, until a few days ago a sleepy desert town in southern Israel, there is little sign of the 186,000 inhabitants. Schools are closed and the streets of shuttered shops echo with the howl of sirens warning of incoming rockets.

Israeli planes, meanwhile, began a new stage yesterday in their offensive on Gaza, killing Nizar Rayyan, a senior Hamas official. The one-tonne bomb in Jabaliya is also understood to have killed two of his four wives and four of his twelve children. More than 400 Palestinians have been killed in the six days of Israeli attacks."...

Despite a diplomatic mission by Tzipi Livni, the Israeli Foreign Minister, to Paris, the Israeli army continued to muster thousands of troops and scores of tanks along Gaza's border for a possible ground offensive."...

Israeli officials say that Hamas has also acquired dozens of Iranian-made Fajr-3 missiles with an even longer range. Many fear that as the group acquires ever more sophisticated weaponry it is only a matter of time before the nuclear installation at Dimona, 20 miles east of Beersheba, falls within its sights. Dimona houses Israel's only nuclear reactor and is believed to be where nuclear warheads are stored.



Israel's worst nightmare is that soon all its cities will be within range either of the Hezbollah Katyushas arrayed on the Lebanese border to the north or the increasingly sophisticated missiles stockpiled by Hamas to the south. Both groups have links to Israel's archenemy Iran."..."

ARMY PHONE LINKS CHINA AND RUSSIA

December 31, 2008 The BBC News reported: "A new military hotline between Beijing and Moscow has been used for the first time, according to reports in the Chinese state media. A senior Chinese officer discussed a range of topics with his Russian counterpart, Xinhua news agency said. The phone link is designed for "timely communication on significant issues".

Efforts to set up a similar hotline, mainly for use during crises, between Beijing and Washington appear to have stalled, correspondents say.

In a world where emails and mobile devices mean you can always be in touch with the office, it seems strange that two of the world's most important military powers have only now started using a direct telephone link designed to make it easier for their senior officers to contact each other.

No doubt security concerns and diplomatic issues had to be resolved first. But in huge bureaucracies it is not always easy to get to the man in charge in a hurry. The hotline will now make that easier. Put simply, the Chinese can now pick up the phone when there is a crisis and ask the Russians what is going on and what they are doing about it."..."

AS IF THINGS WEREN'T BAD ENOUGH, RUSSIAN PROFESSOR PREDICTS END OF U.S.

December 29, 2008 The Wall Street Journal reported: "For a decade, Russian academic Igor Panarin has been predicting the U.S. will fall apart in 2010. For most of that time, he admits, few took his argument -- that an economic and moral collapse will trigger a civil war and the eventual breakup of the U.S. -- very seriously. Now he's found an eager audience: Russian state media."...

Prof. Panarin, 50 years old, is not a fringe figure. A former KGB analyst, he is dean of the Russian Foreign Ministry's academy for future diplomats. He is invited to Kremlin receptions, lectures students, publishes books, and appears in the media as an expert on U.S.-Russia relations.

But it's his bleak forecast for the U.S. that is music to the ears of the Kremlin, which in recent years has blamed Washington for everything from instability in the Middle East to the global financial crisis."...A polite and cheerful man with a buzz cut, Mr. Panarin insists he does not dislike Americans. But he warns that the outlook for them is dire.

"There's a 55-45% chance right now that disintegration will occur," he says. "One could rejoice in that process," he adds, poker-faced. "But if we're talking reasonably, it's not the best scenario -- for Russia." Though Russia would become more powerful on the global stage, he says, its economy would suffer because it currently depends heavily on the dollar and on trade with the U.S.

Mr. Panarin posits, in brief, that mass immigration, economic decline, and moral degradation will trigger a civil war next fall and the collapse of the dollar. Around the end of June 2010, or early July, he says, the U.S. will break into six pieces -- with Alaska reverting to Russian control.

In addition to increasing coverage in state media, which are tightly controlled by the Kremlin, Mr. Panarin's ideas are now being widely discussed among local experts. He presented his theory at a recent roundtable discussion at the Foreign Ministry. The country's top international relations school has hosted him as a keynote speaker. During an appearance on the state TV channel Rossiya, the station cut

between his comments and TV footage of lines at soup kitchens and crowds of homeless people in the U.S. The professor has also been featured on the Kremlin's English-language propaganda channel, Russia Today.”...

(Vladimir) Pozner (a prominent TV journalist) and other Russian commentators and experts on the U.S. dismiss Mr. Panarin's predictions. "Crazy ideas are not usually discussed by serious people," says Sergei Rogov, director of the government-run Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies, who thinks Mr. Panarin's theories don't hold water.”...”

MEDVEDEV'S ASSERTIVENESS TROUBLES PUTIN

December 30 2008 The Financial Times reported: “It was an innocuous sounding comment in what appeared to be a routine television interview. But in the six days since Dmitry Medvedev, Russia’s president, described his feelings about taking the oath of office in May, the corridors of power have been buzzing.

“The final responsibility for what happens in the country and for the important decisions taken would rest on my shoulders alone and I would not be able to share this responsibility with anyone,” Mr Medvedev told an interviewer.”...

Usually when discussing such matters he stresses his “consultation” with Vladimir Putin, the prime minister and former president, who all but installed Mr Medvedev in his job and is thought to take most of the big decisions. But this time Mr Medvedev stressed that he was the single constitutionally empowered decision-maker.

Kremlin watchers say this assertiveness seems to be part of a new pattern, with Mr Medvedev appearing frustrated that, in spite of his constitutional power as commander in chief, he is stuck in a subordinate role.”...”



TEN YEARS ON, EUROZONE TAKES ON 16TH MEMBER

December 30, 2008 The EU Observer reported: “Ten years after the original 11 countries in western Europe set up a common currency, the monetary union is due to enlarge to Slovakia, as its 16th member state and the first in central Europe to switch to the euro.”...

“The Slovak economy was able to fulfil all the conditions required to join the euro less than five years after the country entered the EU and this had required a political will and a very dynamic economy. Now it's the time to reap the benefits of sharing the same currency," with 325 million Europeans in the 15-strong eurozone.

Some diplomats and officials described Bratislava's path to the euro as quite "bumpy," with the country's ambassador to the EU Maros Sefcovic claiming Slovakia had to convince colleagues about its readiness "at least twice as hard" as previous euro newcomers. After Slovenia entered the eurozone in 2007 and Malta and Cyprus followed suit at the beginning of this year, Slovakia will be the first central European state to join the euro club. It will be the poorest country, with some 67 percent of the eurozone's average GDP.

During the evaluation process, the long-term prospect of the Slovakia's price stability caused the biggest doubts over its readiness to adopt the euro, but despite recording the highest economic growth rates across the EU, Slovakia managed to keep inflation below the required threshold.

Concerning the switch-over in January, concerns over inflation have become "secondary," according to Daniel Gros, director of the Brussels-based Centre for European Policy Studies. He argues that due to the financial crisis, the main challenges for Bratislava will instead be to maintain domestic financial stability with a well-functioning inter-banking market and to have industry not too much affected by the slow-down in Europe, particularly in the automobile sector. Slovakia is the third-largest car manufacturer in central Europe and one of the fastest growing automotive markets in the region.”...”

CZECH REPUBLIC TAKES OVER EU PRESIDENCY

January 1, 2008 The Associated Press reported: “The Czech Republic took over the rotating European Union presidency Thursday, with the bloc aiming to see its new governance treaty approved in 2009.”...

President Vaclav Klaus _ the most outspoken Czech critic of the treaty said the EU presidency would give the country a chance "to influence the activity of this important organization."

"It is in our interest to succeed in this role," Klaus said in his New Year's Day speech to the nation. But Klaus is known as the country's most prominent Euro-skeptic, and in the past he has said that "a well-functioning, bureaucratic EU is not my goal." He has opposed the so-called Lisbon Treaty because, he says, it is undemocratic and would limit nations' sovereignty.

And during Czech presidency of the bloc, Klaus has vowed not to fly the EU flag over Prague Castle because, he said, the country "is not an EU province."

The last EU presidency under France featured efforts to tackle Europe's economic woes, and the next six months of Czech leadership will also involve dealing with the global financial crisis and overseeing implementation of a new \$258 billion European economic stimulus package. The Czechs will also lead an EU diplomatic push for peace in current conflict in Gaza between Israel and the Palestinians.”...”

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