

Analysis

Russia's Plan for a New Pan-European Security Regime: A Serious Proposal or an Attempt at Division?

By Margarete Klein, Berlin

Summary

In June 2008, Russia tabled a proposal for a new pan-European security architecture. It calls for a legally binding treaty under international law for all states “from Vancouver to Vladivostok”. In view of unresolved security issues on the continent, there is certainly a need for debate over possible improvements in Europe's security architecture. The Russian proposal pursues two aims. The first is to address Russia's security concerns and make the Europeans and the USA listen to them. The second is to strengthen Russia's position in European security policy and to weaken the influence of Western institutions such as NATO. Therefore, Medvedev's idea of a “Helsinki 2” process should not, serve as the sole basis for such a debate, The European states would do better to develop proposals and demands of their own and to test Moscow's interest and willingness to compromise against these.

Medvedev's proposal

In his speech in Berlin on 5 June 2008, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev proposed his idea for a new pan-European security architecture for the first time. He returned to it in his foreign-policy concept of July 2008 and provided more details in his speech to the World Policy Conference on 8 October 2008 in Evian, France. At its core lies the demand for a summit meeting of all states “from Vancouver to Vladivostok”, which would produce a security treaty that is binding under international law. Whereas the initial international response to this proposal was muted, his idea has increasingly gained attention since the war in Georgia. What exactly does Medvedev's proposal include? Where are the potential starting points for a useful debate, and where are the stumbling blocks? Finally, what motives is Russia pursuing with this proposal?

The Russian president has justified his plan by pointing out that the existing security architecture in Europe has failed to achieve the goal of the Paris Charter – namely, to create a Europe that is united, free, and secure. To remedy this situation, he proposes that the security treaty elaborated by a pan-European summit meeting should be based on five principles, which he specified in Evian: First of all, the “basic principles of security and cooperation” in the Euro-Atlantic space must be affirmed. Second, all participating states should pledge neither to use violence against one another, nor to threaten the use of violence. Third, the treaty must guarantee “equal security” for all. Fourth, no state or international organization would have the “exclusive rights” to protect peace and stability in Europe. Furthermore, as a fifth principle, the treaty should stipulate “basic parameters for arms control” and establish

new cooperation mechanisms for combating proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, international terrorism, and drug trafficking.

Unresolved security issues in Europe

When considering Medvedev's proposal for a common European security architecture, one can only agree with his fundamental diagnosis – that the goals of the Paris Charter have not been realized completely and that Europe suffers from security deficits. This became evident once again during the conflict in Georgia. The OSCE, NATO, NATO-Russia Council (NRC), EU, CIS, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CTSO), and the efforts of individual states all failed to prevent border skirmishes from escalating into interstate war and an international crisis. This is all the more reason for concern since Europe has a number of similar “frozen conflicts” with a comparable potential for escalation: Transnistria, Kosovo, Crimea, and Nagorno-Karabakh. There are no commonly accepted and effective mechanisms for resolving these conflicts, so the frozen status is in fact frequently regarded as the maximum level of security attainable. However, in view of the high armaments growth rates, especially in Russia and the Caucasus countries, it is dangerous to rely on this state of affairs continuing.

Besides the regional conflicts, the crisis of arms control and disarmament is one of the most important unresolved security issues on the continent. In protest against the failure of NATO states to ratify the adapted treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) – for which Russia has to a great deal itself to blame – Moscow suspended its participation in December 2007. Ever since, it has refused to report on military exercises

or troop movements or to admit arms inspectors into the country. Although the European states are not directly involved, they are also affected by the crisis over nuclear arms control and disarmament between the US and Russia. In the dispute over the installation of the third pillar of the US missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, the leadership in Moscow had already threatened to abrogate the INF Treaty and to deploy Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad. An additional danger will arise once the START I Treaty expires in December 2009, after which date no verification regime will exist in the field of strategic nuclear weapons. The SORT treaty, which will remain in force until 2012, does not stipulate any detailed monitoring procedures. Against this background, many observers worry that the crisis of confidence between Russia and the Western states, which has already become aggravated in recent years, will further deteriorate. A peaceful resolution of existing points of contention (such as NATO's eastward expansion or the US missile defense system) or cooperative resolution of common security challenges (such as combating international terrorism or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction) would thus become even more difficult in the future.

There is therefore a definite need for discussion on the shortcomings of the European security system. The idea of doing so within the framework of a pan-European summit conference seems, in principle, to be a reasonable one. Whether such a meeting produces an informal agreement or a legally-binding security treaty is of secondary importance. The decisive factor will be the contents of the discussions. Does the Russian proposal provide starting points for resolving security issues, or would such issues be aggravated if the treaty were adopted and implemented? A review of the generally still quite vague Russian proposals indicates a large number of stumbling blocks and areas that are still under construction.

Construction Site I: Legal Principles and their Enforcement

Medvedev has suggested that the pan-European treaty be used to reaffirm the "basic principles of security and cooperation," such as territorial integrity, political sovereignty, and the other principles of the UN Charter. This is a reasonable proposal, but is not sufficient on its own to ensure that the principles are enforced. After all, they have already been enshrined in many documents and nevertheless been violated – including by Russia itself. For example, Moscow decried the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state by

Western countries as "immoral and illegitimate", but itself violated the principle of territorial integrity when it extended unilateral recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia – what is more, it did so following the use of military force. In the framework of a regional security agreement, the main requirement would be not so much the mere codification of principles of international law, but rather the creation of binding mechanisms for resolving conflicts and efficient mechanisms to penalize violations of the treaty.

Construction Site II: Institutional Foundations (OSCE and NATO)

Principles and rules require institutions that help to enforce them. Which are the institutions that can take on this task in Europe? When considering the Russian proposal, it is noticeable that the OSCE is not envisaged as having a special role to play in this context. Medvedev justified this during his visit to Berlin by stating that the institutional structure of the OSCE is "incomplete" and that efforts to develop it further were doomed due to the "bloc policies" of the Western states. This is a reiteration of longstanding Russian criticism against the OSCE, which Moscow accuses of being insufficiently attentive to security policy issues and concentrating too much on the "human dimension", particularly election monitoring. Indeed, there is a notable imbalance between the three "baskets", and it would make sense to give more weight to the security policy basket. After all, the OSCE is the only real pan-European institution that includes all states as members with equal rights and thus represents a quasi-natural forum for discussing matters of European security. It is also conceivable without great difficulties to give up the economic basket. After all, economic issues have long been discussed predominantly in the formats of the EU and of the European Neighborhood Policy. Giving up the "human dimension" of the OSCE, as the Russian proposal implicitly demands, would be wrong, however. First of all, Europe should not be conceived solely as a community of interests, but also as a community of values. Second, empirical investigations confirm at least one thesis of "democratic peace": Democracies rarely wage war against other democracies. The rule of law, political responsibility of rulers towards their citizens, and transparent decisionmaking processes are therefore also relevant in terms of security policy.

Revitalizing the OSCE as a security-policy actor without jeopardizing its human dimension will be difficult in view of the Russian position. This path is more sensible, however, than Medvedev's alternative proposal.

He had urged that the EU, the US, and Russia as the “three pillars of European civilization” should form the mainstays of the new European security system. While this proposal is in line with the Russian desire to be on equal terms with the US, it cannot be an acceptable proposal for the European states. First of all, it leaves unanswered what role will be played by the neutral states and those that are only NATO, but not EU, members. Second, this course would significantly weaken the security policy weight of the European states compared to the US and Russia. After all, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) are still insufficiently developed. Third – and most importantly – this proposal envisages no role for NATO.

This goes to the heart of the problem with Medvedev’s proposal. It appears to be mainly aimed at weakening the role of NATO within European security policy. This becomes obvious from a closer analysis of the Russian president’s statements on the “principle of equal security”, which he linked with three “No’s” in his Evian speech: First of all, nobody should be permitted to guarantee their own security at the expense of others. Second, military alliances or coalitions should not conduct any operations that undermine the unity of the common security space. Third, military alliances should not develop in such a way as to threaten the security of other treaty partners. These principles are formulated in a highly subjective manner and ultimately amount to a Russian veto against almost all NATO operations. They would thus not serve “equal security”, but primarily lead to a unilateral improvement of Russia’s security. This would be unacceptable for NATO countries. After all, the alliance constitutes the most important security institution in Europe and will remain as such, despite all Russian criticism. It not only binds the US to Europe and provides its members with the instruments they require as security policy actors, but the decades of cooperation have also generated trust among participating countries, so that an armed conflict between NATO states seems practically inconceivable today. Without NATO, Europe could face a relapse into the era of nation-state power politics of the 19th century – a scenario that is not entirely unattractive for many Russian observers.

However, insisting on the preservation of NATO does not mean that there should be no debate over ways of improving cooperation between the alliance and Moscow. In addition to a revitalization of the OSCE in terms of security policy, an enhancement of institutionalized cooperation between Moscow and Brussels

would be a major step forward for European security. Such cooperation, however, has hitherto suffered from problems that are not easy to overcome. First of all, Russia’s willingness to cooperate with an institution whose very existence it castigates as a “relic of the past” has always been limited. Second, the NRC is merely a consultative body that can only agree upon joint activities in cases where consensus has been established. The integration of Russia into this framework will always remain limited. That could only change if real decision-making authority were conceded to Russia. However, there are no prospects for Russia to gain full membership in NATO in the mid-term future. The transatlantic alliance is not interested in such an outcome and Russia is not willing to undertake the necessary reforms. Furthermore, the idea of integrating Russia into NATO is contrary to Russia’s identity as a great power. After September 11, 2001, the British prime minister at the time, Tony Blair, suggested giving Russia a semi-membership: Russia would wield a veto in matters where solutions would be hard to come by without Moscow’s cooperation, such as in combating proliferation or international terrorism. However, the third problem is that it would be difficult to prevent Russia from abusing such a partial membership for blocking other alliance decisions. It would therefore only make sense to change the institutional format of NATO-Russia relations after both sides improve their attitudes towards one another significantly.

Construction Site III: Mutual Security Guarantees

Insistence on preserving NATO does not mean that Russia’s legitimate security interests with respect to the alliance’s eastward expansion or the deployment of missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic should not be discussed as part of a negotiation process. In the Founding Act between NATO and the Russian Federation of 1997, Moscow already received assurances that no nuclear weapons or “substantial combat forces” would be stationed on the territory of the new member states. However, this Founding Act only constitutes a statement of political intent, not a legally-binding treaty under international law. A clear definition of “substantial combat forces” could, however, be elaborated and codified in the framework of the CFE negotiations or the meeting of a pan-European summit. Security guarantees for Russia concerning the missile defense installations in Poland and the Czech Republic (e.g., in the form of verification measures) could also be addressed at such a meeting.

However, one precondition would be for Russia to agree to guarantee the security of the smaller states of Eastern Europe. The latter feel threatened by their heavyweight neighbor to the east – partially due to historical experiences, partially in reaction to current Russian foreign policy. For instance, the five foreign-policy principles announced by President Medvedev only weeks after the war in Georgia on 31 August 2008 made a strong impression. Among these were the protection of Russian citizens abroad and the announcement that Russia would pursue “privileged interests” in its neighborhood. In principle, it is undeniable that states have greater interests in some regions than in others. In Russia, however, this concept is all too often interpreted as referring to an exclusive zone of influence, implying limited foreign-policy sovereignty on the part of the countries concerned. Therefore, no negotiation process should be undertaken before Russia has acknowledged the rights of these countries to choose alliances freely and before it has agreed to provide security guarantees. This very point can serve as a test bed for the earnestness of Russian proposals.

Construction Site IV: New Spurs in Arms Control

A pan-European summit would also need to give new impulses in conventional arms control and disarmament as a matter of urgency. That will not be easy to achieve, independently of whether ratification of the adapted CFE Treaty remains a target, or whether a new treaty system – a CFE III Treaty of sorts – is negotiated. For Russia’s unilateral recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as the announcement of its intention to station 3,800 Russian troops in each of these territories means that the issue of the “host nation” will complicate things more. After all, the CFE Treaty stipulates that foreign troops can only be stationed in a country with the explicit assent of the host nation. In the course of future negotiations, it will therefore be important to ensure that Russia does not attempt to shirk its older duties through a new negotiation mandate.

About the author

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Further reading

- Marcin Kaczmarek: The Russian proposal for a new European security system, in: Center for Eastern Studies Commentary, Issue 11, 16 October 2008 <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/epub/ecomment/2008/081016/Commentary11.htm>
- Medvedev’s Berlin speech, 5 June 2008: http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/06/05/2203_type82912type82914type84779_202153.shtml
- Medvedev’s speech to the World Policy Conference in Evian on 8 October 2008: http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/10/08/2159_type82912type82914_207457.shtml

Conclusion

While the international response to Medvedev’s proposal was initially muted, it has attracted additional attention in recent weeks. Cyprus, Italy, Spain, Germany, and in particular France have at least indicated their willingness to negotiate. NATO, too, has stated its openness to a debate at the foreign ministers’ meeting on 3 December 2008. Although there was no majority at the meeting of OSCE heads of state and government on 5 December 2008 for the proposal of President Nicholas Sarkozy to hold a special summit on this issue in mid-2009, the issue will remain on the European agenda, since it resonates with a need for discussion in view of the unresolved security questions on the continent.

There are two fundamental problems with Medvedev’s proposal. The first is a matter of timing: Efforts should be made to prevent Moscow from misinterpreting a rapid willingness by Europe and the US to negotiate as a signal indicating that a policy of strength leads to concessions on the part of the West. A review of statements by Russian politicians following the last NATO foreign ministers’ meeting, when Georgia and Ukraine were not accepted into the Membership Action Plan, gives the impression that the alliance’s decision could be primarily attributed to Moscow’s warnings, credibly supported by its use of military force in Georgia. The second basic problem is found in the substance of Medvedev’s proposal. Much of it is vague, and in addition to some promising ideas, it also includes quite a few unacceptable elements that seem to be aimed primarily at dividing Europeans or creating a wedge between them and the US. There is only one solution for both of these problems: The Western countries cannot afford to wear themselves out working on Medvedev’s proposals; instead, they should develop an agenda of their own for joint discussions with Russia. This would require a debate over legitimate Russian security interests as well as the formulation of clear demands towards Moscow. It is essential that this process be closely coordinated between the European states in order to minimize Moscow’s attempts to divide them.

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay