

Analysis

Russia's Relations with the EU and NATO: towards a "Strategic Partnership"?¹

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Abstract

Relations between NATO/EU and Russia have recovered following the Georgia conflict in August 2008. However, this has not led to a paradigm shift in relations. Moscow continues to advocate revisions to aspects of European security governance and has put forward proposals for a legally-binding European Security Treaty; Washington and Brussels have little appetite for such far-reaching change and affirm that NATO and the EU, founded on common values, should endure. This article examines ways in which the West might engage a Russia, which is seeking a greater say in European and global affairs, and sponsor an external environment which helps its modernization programme.

Following its invasion of Georgia in August 2008 and subsequent recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia's relations with the West—and indeed the future of the European security order—reached a crossroads. A decade of disappointments—NATO's 1999 intervention in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia (and the subsequent recognition of Kosovan independence by many Western powers), the Alliance's further enlargement, unresolved conflicts on Europe's periphery, the stagnation of arms control regimes, energy disputes and continuing perceived attempts to isolate Russia—has prompted Moscow to revisit, and in some cases try to revise, post-Cold War security arrangements.

This presents NATO and the EU with the perennial dilemma: how to engage Russia? Should efforts be directed towards a "transactional" relationship, defining interests and seeking compromises, thereby undermining many of the underlying assumptions of the West's policy towards Russia over the last two decades? Or, given that NATO and the EU constitute a "community of values, should they continue to seek a genuine "strategic partnership" with Russia based on common values?

In the wake of the Georgia conflict there appears to have been a return to "business as usual" between Moscow and the West. But Russia's leaders continue to restate some of the fundamental ideas—first brought to international attention by then president Putin's speech at the Munich security conference in February 2007—that have emerged in Russian foreign policy thinking over recent years: that the West's political and economic failures necessitate the reformulation of global governance on the basis of collective leadership; that contrary to the supposed triumph of the liberal democratic order, the sovereign "Westphalian" state is

re-emerging as the basic unit of a "multipolar" international order; and that, with NATO's promise to admit Georgia and Ukraine provoking the South Ossetia crisis and the OSCE enfeebled, the "patchy" architecture of European security governance requires a thorough overhaul, with the basic principles and "rules of the game" legitimized anew to create genuine equal and "indivisible" security.

President Obama's pressing of the "reset" button in US-Russia relations was part of an overall rethink of US foreign policy. Moscow has been courted as a "great power" and the return to the strategic arms control table—with the added bonus of a review of US missile defence plans in Europe—has boosted its image as a major global player. While Obama has reiterated US support for the sovereignty of Ukraine and Georgia, the issue of their NATO membership has been downplayed. Expectations are being set high in Moscow; the Medvedev administration has responded with a more constructive approach. Thus, while insisting on the UN-mandated process with the key involvement of the IAEA, Moscow has accepted that Iran has questions to answer about its nuclear programme and Medvedev has pointedly not excluded the prospect of sanctions. Moscow is broadly supportive of US involvement in Afghanistan and has signed up to an agreement to allow the transit of US military cargoes through Russia to Afghan territory. These positive developments have been reinforced by the establishment of a bilateral US-Russia presidential commission, chaired by Hillary Clinton and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, with working groups dealing with a wide range of issues.

Even if the term was not used explicitly, there has also been a "reset" in relations between Russia and Europe. Six rounds of talks about the new EU-Russia agreement (to replace the 1994 Partnership and Cooperation

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Agreement) have been held and a positive assessment made by Moscow. The most recent summit elicited encouraging talk of a “partnership for modernization” and the launch of a framework for talks on crisis management. Relations with many of the major European powers appear to have been smoothed over. There has also been movement in relations with NATO; the constructive tone adopted by the new Secretary General, Fogh Rasmussen, elicited a positive reaction by NATO to Russia’s CFE proposals, the revitalization of talks on military-military cooperation and the launch of a joint review of common security challenges in the NATO-Russia Council (NRC).

So is the idea of a “united Europe from the Atlantic to the Pacific” back on the agenda? More likely we are witnessing a new realism on the part of the major European powers, sobered by the Georgia conflict, constrained by the global economic crisis and more concerned about security developments further afield. To what extent Washington is prepared to countenance shared decision-making with Russia remains to be seen. Obama will be under pressure to sustain the values agenda and continue to support democratic sovereign governments in Ukraine and Georgia, in the face of perceived pressure from Moscow. Europe’s keen interest in trade and energy deals is bound to keep relations on an even keel, but a more coherent EU strategy is unlikely in the near future in view of the deep reservations in the new member states of central Europe.

Key to the relationship is the shared neighborhood. Although the EU mission in Georgia has been welcomed by Russia as a guarantee against further attacks by Saakashvili, Moscow has placed limits on its mandate and refused Brussels a role in the separatist territories. The termination of the UN and OSCE missions was insisted on by Moscow, due to their refusal to recognise the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. There is continuing concern over US military aid to Tbilisi. The deterioration of Russia’s relations with Ukraine, which spilled over from disputes over energy and trade issues into the security realm, was halted with the election of a new president, Viktor Yanukovich, but much remains to be done to cement a lasting relationship, which guarantees Ukraine’s full sovereignty.

Moscow’s concerns over NATO’s continuing support for Ukraine and Georgia, and the Alliance’s intention to acquire functions in energy security and cyber-defence, have meant that there has been no groundbreaking shift. Moscow has criticized NATO for ignoring the crisis in South Ossetia and called for a return to the spirit of the Rome Declaration, which accompanied

the establishment of the NRC. The Russia-NATO relationship may well not survive a third rebuff after the failure of the Founding Act and Permanent Joint Council of 1997 and the limited success of the NRC since 2002.

Is there the political will to overcome the stereotyped thinking and institutional inertia that has characterized relations between Europe and Russia? Will it take a crisis of greater proportions than Georgia before the key issues of European security are tackled? This can not be taken for granted; the then Secretary-General of the Council of the EU and High Representative for EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana (unsurprisingly), German Chancellor, Angela Merkel and French President, Nicolas Sarkozy have all emphasized the durability of the current institutional order in Europe. In a recent article, the EU’s former external relations commissioner, Chris Patten argued that, while the EU will never become a “superpower”, it needs to act on its own doorstep without waiting for the US. In other words, we are now firmly in a post-Atlanticist era where Europe needs to take on more responsibility for regional security governance.

Authoritative Russian commentators are, at best, ambivalent about the prospects for deeper engagement and, at worst, are much more negative than the governing elite. They foresee no substantive progress, with NATO’s pledge of accession for Ukraine and Georgia still in place; they perceive the EU’s Eastern Partnership as part of Europe’s “geopolitical” project. The position of even moderate commentators appears to be hardening. Pro-Europeans characterise EU-Russia relations as being in a “political and intellectual cul-de-sac” and describe how disappointment with Europe has marginalized progressive forces in Russia.

Nevertheless, the Medvedev administration, recognizing Russia’s isolation and reliance on patchy regional organizations in an unstable post-Soviet space, has opted for mitigating these security deficiencies via engagement with the leading powers. In other words, Moscow seeks inclusion in European security governance. The centerpiece of its response is Medvedev’s proposals for a European Security Treaty (EST), details of which have been submitted to the heads of NATO and the EU. The Treaty covers, first, the fundamental principles of relations between states – sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs and the principle of no security at the expense of others; second, arms control, confidence and security-building measures; third, the principles of conflict settlement in accordance with principles of the UN Charter; and fourth, cooperation between states on new threats and challenges.

Medvedev's proposals have been dubbed "Helsinki-2" by Russian officials, but in fact they focus almost exclusively on the political-military issues, which formed much of the agenda in the 1990s. Whether they can be turned into a "Helsinki-plus", with principles—including humanitarian ones—updated and reaffirmed to reflect evolving conceptions of security in Europe is open to some doubt. Moscow's aim appears to be to freeze the post-South Ossetia status quo; its state-centric agenda of sovereignty/self-determination, rules on intervention and the use of force appear mainly designed to prevent a repeat of Kosovo and ensure a voice, and a veto, for Moscow in regional security conflicts. The institutional architecture envisaged by Moscow to implement the treaty proposals—a massively complex undertaking—is unclear. Many of the principles identified by Medvedev are subject to such contestation that agreement would be difficult to achieve.

In both the EU and NATO, there appears to be little appetite for Medvedev's proposals. A treaty that would stop any further enlargement of NATO, even if this is not immediately in prospect, would be unacceptable in Washington; a joint article by Merkel and Sarkozy has affirmed that NATO and the EU, as alliances founded on common values, should take on increased importance in the current context of global crises.

A juridical agreement is therefore unrealistic. However, a coherent strategy for engagement with Russia might consist of the following. First, focusing on the main areas of disagreement and dealing with them within specific formats, such as the CFE Treaty process and the NRC. Second, focusing on the more constructive aspects of Russian foreign policy and using them to draw Russia into dialogue on wider aspects of security. Third, taking seriously Russia's potential as a "force for good" in tackling global security challenges, making it part of the solution rather than part of the problem; the principle of "joint ownership", with incremental progress on shared decision-making, should wherever possible underpin engagement.

Russia's domestic vulnerabilities are a key factor in its external relations: the geopolitical challenges faced by Russia are more than matched by the challenges of modernization. In the recent period, Medvedev has consistently focused on modernization – the development of an innovative economy as "part of a culture based on

humanistic values" and a functioning political system. The need for an effective foreign policy as a resource to underpin modernization is explicitly acknowledged. He faces problems with his modernization agenda; a technocratic, top-down approach, which may neglect broader social and political reform; the corporatist fusion of power and business; and doubts over whether there would be elite and popular support for radical change.

Nevertheless the present leadership is at least trying to construct a narrative of renewal and modernization. A more equitable external framework, sponsored by the US and the EU, with European institutions conceived on an inclusive basis, would impact—albeit gradually—on Russia's domestic politics, and on economic and social relations. The "partnership for modernization" proposed at the recent EU-Russia summit is an encouraging idea; it may well reduce Moscow's emphasis on differing developmental models and mitigate its political pathologies and structural economic weaknesses.

The potential gains of a concerted and coherent attempt on all policy fronts are considerable. Europe's institutional framework requires recalibration, but Moscow is not committed to its wholesale dissolution. There are substantial shared interests in global economic and security issues. With the EU, there is still a Russian narrative of "everything but institutions" which, despite inevitable—and in fact normal—conflicts of interests in trade, may assist materially in Russia's modernization. A changing NATO, with more political direction from its member-states, might indeed share a platform for cooperative security with Moscow, with substantive dialogue on the principles governing sovereignty and self-determination, conflict resolution and the use of force. They should be backed up with constructive negotiations on "soft" security issues between Moscow and the EU, which should bring the Eastern Partnership closer to the EU-Russia common spaces agenda.

This complex and resource-sapping agenda demands the involvement of key decision-makers on both sides, exercising the kind of political will and flexibility that was present at the end of the Cold War, but has been only sporadically in evidence since. Lavrov has expressed "cautious optimism", but this comes with a warning: after the failures of the first two post-Cold war decades, we can not allow ourselves yet another false start.

About the Author

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