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Keeping the Germans happy, the Russians in and the Americans out

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Recent developments have intensified the debate regarding Russia's position in Europe and the possibility of the country enhancing its cooperation with western institutions and organizations. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit and the NATO-Russia council in Lisbon are the culmination of decades of attempts to mend fences. A lot is being written by journalists and academics speculating both on the outcome of the summit and the consequences for relations between Russia, NATO and the European Union (EU). While prospects for change have already been underlined by Secretary-General of the Atlantic Alliance Anders Fogh Rasmussen and by the Group of Experts report, much is still left to debate and negotiate.

While some wave the flag of notable change and profound reform, others are shielded by past experiences from similar summits, stating that nothing new will come of this meeting, predicting instead a 'Groundhog Day' summit as satirized by Nikolas Gvosdev.¹

In some European capitals a perception reigns that Dmitry Medvedev's Russia is more inclined to cooperate and join the West, albeit in a very limited

way. Nevertheless there remains hostility and distrust towards Russia, detritus from the communist years and the post-Soviet upheavals in Eastern Europe. Yet, in a world where capital is sovereign and geopolitics stay in classrooms or inside closed doors at the top leagues, history provides a reminder of what seems to have been forgotten in the post Cold War euphoria and triumphalism: Russia is for all intents and purposes an integral part of Europe's security. Notwithstanding the banality of this statement, this is where the geopolitical truth of European security resides and the point from which all negotiations should start.

Russia has been Europe's protector since the Kievan Rus² was formed. This position as Europe's buffer zone has in the past bled the Russian nation countless times, facing hordes of Khazars, Mongols, Persians, and Turks. It was then called upon to resolve Europe's internecine implosions, against Napoleon's France, Kaiser Wilhelm II and Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. Yet post World War II Russia was supplanted in its role as ultimate defender and 'caretaker' of Europe by a new formidable superpower, the United States (US). More than that, the amorphous

¹ Nikolas Gvosdev, "Moving Beyond NATO's Perpetual Crisis" (*World Politics Review*, 29 October 2010).

² Kievan Rus was a Medieval state that existed between the 9th and 13th century. Largely predating the Tsardom of Russia and the Russian Empire, Kievan Rus saw the emergence of the House of Riurik.



ideology of the international proletariat employed by the Bolsheviks in 1917 drained Russia of much of its identity, breaking the backbone of its existence - the peasantry - and destroying the religion that impelled it to proclaim itself the 'Third Rome'. Divested of the essence of its national identity and its geopolitical role, and lost in 'geographical' inclinations between the doctrines of East and West, Russia was indeed, like many have observed, absorbed in a profound identity crisis, with few political prospects of rediscovering its quintessence.

The fall of the Soviet Union was described by Russia's former President Vladimir Putin as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. All things considered, the event - and its implications - are top candidates to fit the description. After almost twenty years of absence from the European scene, provoked and induced by NATO's expansionism and Europe's democratic rhetoric, lost in concepts of great power nostalgia and Eurasianism, Russia under Dmitry Medvedev 'appears' to be more open to new agreements. When thinking about future relations between the two blocs, it is important to understand the locations of influence and decision-making in foreign policy circles. If in the West foreign policy is carried out by governments but largely influenced and constrained by constitutional checks and balances, parliaments, courts and civil societies composed of a free press, NGO's and other lobby groups, in Russia, the historical line of authoritarian rule that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union - especially during the 1993 constitutional crisis - suppressed the development of such institutions, leaving foreign policy decision-making in the hands of a small political elite. Moreover, as Jeffrey Mankoff notes, "since Putin's move from the Kremlin to the White House, foreign policy decision-making has been concentrated in the prime minister - not in the ministry of foreign affairs, the security council or the cabinet".³ Hence, true decision-making might rest in the hands of Putin and his advisors, and not with Dmitry Medvedev or Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, which drains the credibility of Medvedev's talks with his European counterparts if he is acting without the consent of his Premier.

Nonetheless, France and Germany have given a strong impetus for future rapprochement to materialize at the Lisbon summit. The Deauville forum witnessed improvements in relations between Russia and 'Europe', giving renewed strength to the conception of a possible Russian shift towards the West and greater institutional

and economic modernization. However, when the Franco-German axis speaks of closer cooperation and the ability to work together to solve some of Europe's problems, they cannot address Russian complaints about the presence of a 'substantial' number of NATO troops close to its borders, and the role of the US as a major player in Europe's security apparatus.

Regardless of foreign policy concepts and military doctrines, of the mood of the political debate, the course of negotiations or internal pressures, Russia currently shares specific common threats with the Western world, a fact which gives impulse to a cooperation Russia cannot afford to withdraw from. Four issues have been identified as bearing the possibility of cooperation between the two blocs: the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, solving Europe's deadlocked frozen conflicts, the fight against piracy, and most importantly dealing with the serious threat posed by growing terrorism around Eurasian and Atlantic borders. With such an enterprise ahead, it is peculiar that both these actors are not already cooperating, given the potential of such a collaboration. But the answer lies where it all started, in Europe.

Of the many common threats facing Russia and European states, the great power politics of the Cold War have thus been responsible for preventing closer cooperation. Today the thorny issues are not fifty thousand tanks on the other side of the river Elbe, but missile defence shields - meant to deter third players from launching potential nuclear warheads - treaties of conventional armed forces in Europe, American nuclear weapons on the continent, the use of energy as a means of conducting foreign policy, and an apparently forgotten war against Georgia in the summer of 2008. Yet the real threat these actors represent to each other is minimal, a 'defcon 5' of sorts. Why would the West fight a war against Russia or vice-versa, when Russians are buying castles in England, clothing in Milan and attending relaxing spas in the Czech Republic? Again, why would Europe bite the 'hand that feeds' it energy? Indeed, the likelihood of a confrontation is beyond minimal.

Hence, the impediment for cooperation does not reside only in animosities between parts of Russian society - namely the military - and NATO, but also on a rooted perception that Russia did not lose the Cold War - yet was ignored by the West -, followed by Yeltsin's disastrous reforms in the 1990s, thus disparaging the meaning of democracy within the Russian people.

All of this predicates one particular argument: Russia is used to being a superpower. This is a central pillar of its national identity, one not erased by the psychological heritage of the Cold War. When Volker Rühle, Klaus

³ Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russian foreign policy: the return of great power games (Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), p. 54. Jeffrey Mankoff is associate director of International Security Studies at Yale University.



Naumann, Frank Elbe and Ulrich Weisser⁴ wrote an open letter in the *Der Spiegel*, inviting Russia to join the Atlantic Alliance⁵, they were reminded of the assertion of Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's ambassador to NATO, that "great powers don't join coalitions, they create coalitions. Russia considers itself a great power".

The single problem around all of this public hysteria and new political camaraderie is that no one 'asked' Russia if they are willing to commit to Europe and to its security on Europe's terms. NATO leaders are unilaterally trying to implement the anti-ballistic missile defence shield project, while still attempting to get Russia on board. Rough negotiations and some compromises are expected, but the future implications of Russia's wider objectives, goals and interests in international politics are not being properly equated. Russia may not become a trustworthy partner with regards to European security, not because it lacks interest, but simply because Europe is only a part - albeit a critical one - of its final goal, which is to have a more preponderant presence in world affairs, by counter-balancing US hegemony.

Russia appears to be stepping in not to cooperate with Europe per se, but to fill in the power void slowly being left behind by an American political departure from the Old Continent. The fact that US President Barack Obama did not attend celebrations for the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2009, and cancelled the EU-US summit planned by the Spanish presidency of the EU for May 2010, further support the Russian government's political pragmatism in the face of American disengagement from Europe. This embodies a major shift in world politics, which allows Russia to pursue its common interests with Europe at a time, and on terms, most advantageous to it. Russia's policies towards Europe, its preference towards dealing bilaterally with EU member states and its energy diplomacy, represent some of the many steps necessary to keep the Germans friendly, the Russians in and the Americans out. Following this doctrine, Russia has had continual success.

All of this builds up to something referred to by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and to an extent defended by former Prime Minister and Presidential candidate

Yevgeny Primakov: Russia believes it should be a world leader in a post Pax Americana multipolar world. When adopting this doctrine, the Russian government's recent willingness to discuss issues which were once seen as taboo in influential circles in Russian politics firmly fits in the grand scheme of things.

However, there are no guarantees that Russia desires to enter into a new European security architecture as it is designed today and simply draw a line under centuries of animosity and conflict. Russia does not deal in pooled sovereignty and supranational institutions, but in international spheres (much like the EU) and zero-sum positions. As demonstrated by a number of gas conflicts with its 'near abroad', it is not about security or territory but about gaining influence and economic leverage over others, something Prime Minister Vladimir Putin understands to be the fountain of power for a solid, proactive foreign policy.

Moreover, Europe itself is deeply divided. If people in France, Germany, Italy, or Portugal are comfortable cooperating with their Russian colleagues, and in fact push for political convergence and deeper collaboration, other countries with closer historical ties with the Eastern giant are manifestly uncomfortable with the course of relations. The new members of NATO define their security as being directed against Russia, while in Western Europe, Russia is a fundamental piece in achieving a viable security framework in the continent. Hence, the introductory yet banal statement that Russia is an integral part of Europe's security does not seem to extend to the entire Atlantic Alliance, where the new members also have veto rights to block any decision they consider harmful to their national security.

There is much to be discussed in the Lisbon summit on the 19th and 20th of November. Nevertheless, strong dividing lines within NATO, Russia's distrust of the Alliance and of its plans in Europe, differing positions regarding the 2008 war in Georgia and Europe's long forgotten frozen conflicts, are issues that cannot be erased from the agenda, notwithstanding NATO leaders' desire to reach a common denominator with Moscow.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen said that "it's essential that the well-known disagreements and disputes between NATO and Russia don't overshadow the fact that there are other areas where we share interests because we are faced with the same security challenges".⁶ Perhaps NATO's new policy towards Russia is a hazy 'agree to disagree' formulation. Yet NATO will push for a territorial missile

4 Volker Rühle was Germany's Defense Minister from 1992 to 1998, retired General Klaus Naumann was inspector general of the German Armed Forces and chairman of the NATO Military Committee, retired ambassador Frank Elbe was director of the Planning Committee at the German Foreign Ministry and ambassador to India, Japan, Poland and Switzerland, and retired Vice Admiral Ulrich Weisser was director of the Planning Committee at the German Defense Ministry.

5 Volker Rühle, Klaus Naumann, Frank Elbe and Ulrich Weisser, "It's time to invite Russia to join NATO" [*Der Spiegel*, 3 August 2010].

6 "NATO will not change Georgia policy at Lisbon summit" [*RIA Novosti*, 3 November 2010].



defence agreement when it knows Russia is suspicious of this and prefers to consult with the US first, in order to assess the Iranian nuclear threat and the necessity to implement a missile defence system on such short term. This is a dangerous double-standard that might set a negative imprint on negotiations.

Nonetheless, this degree of cooperation between NATO and Russia is unprecedented. But given the crucial importance of Russia in assuring European security and vice versa, one would assume that both Russian and

NATO leaders would have understood each other by now and pushed harder for further convergence.

In an interview, Dmitry Trenin said the missile defence shield deal can either be a game changer or a game breaker.⁷ But unless Putin's line of foreign policy is broken or the influence of Russia's military on its decision-making is weakened, this summit may very well turn out to be a 'game breaker', freezing relations in the security domain for years to come.

⁷ Dmitry Trenin, "Joint missile defence would be a Russia-NATO breakthrough" (*RT News*, 3 November 2010). Dmitry Trenin is director of the Carnegie Moscow Center.

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