



Time to reassess the European security architecture?

The NATO–EU–Russia Security Triangle

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Abstract

NATO will celebrate its 60th anniversary in April during a highly symbolic summit hosted jointly by France and Germany. In contrast to previous key summits in 1999 and 2004, today the allies have to deal with a transformed and oppositional Russia, besides a fast-evolving security environment. A few months ago, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev issued a proposal for a new security treaty. The proposal has added a further element to the catalogue of security disputes causing relations with Washington to deteriorate, among which missile defence continues to be one of the most divisive.

This paper analyses Russian pressures on security issues and the way the EU and NATO have been addressing them. It is argued that tensions over missile defence are closely related to NATO's enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia and to arms control (the Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe), and that these issues are poorly tackled at the multilateral level. Aside from the positive moves already undertaken by the Obama administration towards Russia, it is difficult to foresee any rapprochement in the existing incompatibility of views on the legitimacy of NATO. In this context, the role of the EU in improving the security dialogue with Moscow is substantial.

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THE NATO–EU–RUSSIA SECURITY TRIANGLE

EPIN WORKING PAPER No. 22 / MARCH 2009

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Introduction

“Europe, North America and we in Russia need a new security treaty. So this is our proposal” (Lavrov, 2009). These words by Sergey Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister, are a reminder of the renewed Russian desire to reshape security relations and institutions in Europe. This idea was launched by President Dmitry Medvedev last June and is recurrent in the serious and polarising security-related disputes over the US project to extend missile shields in Europe. Additionally, the Russian–Georgian war has created a more difficult environment for relations with the Kremlin. As far as relations between the European Union (EU) and Russia are concerned, significant changes have occurred. After a ‘reflection period’ from September to October 2008, the agenda for cooperation has refocused on core interests (trade and energy). In parallel, a new agenda on security is taking shape. Despite a comprehensive cooperative dialogue, producing concrete results mainly on economic matters and trade, the political outcomes have not been satisfying for either partner. This is particularly noticeable in the ‘common space of external security’,¹ or more broadly in the political difficulty of achieving a renewed partnership.

Both the EU and Moscow express divergent views on an array of security issues, ranging from the so-called ‘common neighbourhood’ to NATO enlargement. There is a need to evaluate the current stalemates in the European security dialogue and the possibilities for developing the dialogue into a problem-solving tool – taking into account the influential role of the main European security actors. The creation of a real partnership is a task at the core of the security triangle that underlies EU–Russian relations, US–Russian and NATO–Russian relations. But given the renewed political distance, furthermore aggravated by the Georgian crisis, what are the prospects for achieving such a partnership?

The political context is vital to understanding the current difficulties and the linkages among the common security problems in Europe. Among the most visible issues are the unilateral initiative by the US to install a missile defence system in the Czech Republic and Poland, Kosovo’s independence and the EU-accession aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia. Ten years ago, despite Russian opposition, NATO was able to enlarge to countries of the post-Soviet space. The 60th anniversary summit of the alliance will occur in a transformed security landscape and give rise to reflection about NATO’s doctrines. The recent Munich Security Conference held in February 2009 launched the new US administration’s stance on Russia and security. A few months ago, Medvedev’s foreign policy was still taking shape. The present circumstances are thus

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¹ The 1997 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement is the legal basis for EU–Russian relations. A new framework of cooperation was established at the St. Petersburg summit in 2003. Since then, Brussels and Moscow have cooperated in four areas (the so-called ‘common spaces’): a common economic space; a common space of freedom, security and justice; a common space of cooperation in the field of external security; and a common space on research, education and culture.

particularly prone to novelty and change, and consequently it is pertinent to address the new Russian pressures on European security in light of the anti-missile dispute and the main connections with other security concerns informing the difficult relationship with the Kremlin.

1. Missile defence: The tip of the iceberg

The anti-missile issue is mainly a bilateral one and is poorly addressed multilaterally because of flaws in the existing security architecture. The Bucharest NATO summit in April 2008 voiced the support of the European member states for an anti-missile shield.² There is nonetheless discomfort among the allies about building such a system that may be perceived as directed against Russia. There is now a shared feeling that the US will actually postpone the missile defence project.³ The discussion about the implementation of a missile shield in Europe has provoked intense transatlantic debate mainly since 2007, although it is an old issue in a new context. It is part of the arms control and arms reduction talks that began during the cold war. Later, Washington expressed its intentions to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972 but faced Russian opposition to this move. The main US argument for the shield is a change in the perception of threats at the global level and a need to develop efficient defence systems. After 11 September, the Russian–American bilateral relationship improved and in December 2002, the US unilaterally withdrew from the ABM Treaty. In the US missile defence project, the European sites would together become the third location in the US system, complementing the other two in Alaska and California. As far as the EU is concerned, Brussels is not an appropriate forum to discuss the issue since the EU lacks competence in the matter. Furthermore, issues falling under the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) are approved under the unanimity voting procedure, which allows each member state to impose its national views and block decisions.

The idea that Russia should participate in the missile defence system and contribute to a pan-European device is often advanced by the defenders of the American proposal. It is also often accompanied by the idea that Russia should join NATO, which is presented as a panacea for all the security problems in Europe. In view of the history of relations between Russia and its NATO counterparts, it is hardly likely that the alliance along with its 1990s adaptations could be seen as more attractive to Russia now than before, considering Russia's global resurgence. On the contrary, Moscow is questioning this legacy of the 1990s and is seeking an appropriate role in the European security architecture. There are two opposing and contradictory stances being taken. On one side, Russia wishes to engage in a substantive discussion about the pertinence of NATO, in view of its belief that the alliance is erecting a new Berlin wall (Putin, 2008). On the other side, the West sees NATO as an entirely new organisation, which has adapted to the new geopolitical situation and is no longer a threat to Russia. The debate about missile defence obscures another (avoided) discussion about the fact that NATO could represent a bloc against other countries. At the very least, the two stances are evidence that Moscow has

² See the Bucharest Summit Declaration issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council (Bucharest, 3 April 2008), Press Release (2008)049, NATO, Brussels, 3 April 2008 (retrieved from <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-049e.html>).

³ Derived from a source at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, February 2009. Joe Biden's discourse in February in Munich mentioned the need to press a "re-start button" to re-launch relations with Russia (see Blitz, 2009). According to *Le Monde*, 7 February 2009 ("A Munich, Joe Biden donne le ton de la nouvelle diplomatie américaine."), Biden has resumed the prudent position already developed by Obama, with the newspaper quoting Biden as follows: "Nous allons continuer à développer nos défenses antimissiles (...), à condition que la technologie fonctionne et que le coût en vaille la peine. (...) Nous le ferons en concertation avec nos alliés de l'OTAN et avec la Russie."

not been offered a satisfying role in the organisation, which it permanently perceives as a threat or at minimum an advantage that could be used against its interests.

The main questions raised in the debate about the necessity of a missile defence system in Europe fall into two categories. Political and technical arguments are used to defend or attack the project.⁴ From a technical point of view, the feasibility and effectiveness of such a device is questioned, as is the proven existence of a threat posed by an eventual Iranian nuclear bomb. From a political point of view, the risks of proliferation and an arms race are discussed, as is the real purpose of the extension of the US Ground-Based Midcourse Defence (GMD) system in Europe. Whether Europe needs such a system, against whom it might be directed and the consequences for arms proliferation are critical questions to be considered. Until now, bilateral discussions have been preferred to multilateral methods as a means to address them.

The discussions between Washington and Moscow are a principal diplomatic tool to overcome the Russian opposition. In the transition from President Vladimir Putin to successor Dmitry Medvedev, there has been continuity concerning the stance adopted. Since May 2008, the new Russian president has erected a diplomatic fence against missile defence in Europe. In late spring 2008, these efforts were complemented by Putin in his role as prime minister when he visited France. Nonetheless, the 2007 talks and the 2008 informal summit in Sochi maintained the possibility of a compromise. In June 2008, in his first visit to a Western country (Germany), Medvedev underlined two leitmotifs of the Russian foreign policy. First, NATO enlargement would seriously damage relations with Russia; second, the transatlantic approach is no longer suited to addressing security challenges in Europe. He proposed the creation of a 'European security pact' that would link all the parties. He summarised the main idea of renewing the existing security architecture and mentioned the need for a 'breathing space', namely to discuss Kosovo and the missile defence system (Medvedev, 2008). Indirectly, President Medvedev has urged a reshaping of the existing dialogue but without enlarging NATO and with Russia taking on a new role. This is the first time such a proposal has been advanced and defended, in an elaborated and more gentle tone (even if we can assume it entails a rejection of the role the US has been playing in Europe).

Putin and Medvedev have echoed each other in their visits, since they constitute a tandem leadership. A few days before Medvedev's German visit, Putin expressed similar ideas in Paris. He argued that Iran is not a nuclear threat; furthermore, he repeated that NATO perpetuates the bloc logic and he referred to the military bases installed in Romania and Bulgaria as contradictory to the collective proclaimed goal of arms limitation. The extension of the US system is seen as deepening this latter tendency (De Hoop Scheffer, 2009). That he opposes NATO enlargement in principle is in accordance with the more refined argument presented by Medvedev: Russia challenges the current alliance and its role in Europe.

Missile defence is therefore not an isolated, controversial question and it should be understood in a broader panorama, where the actors (particularly Russia) link different issues as a means to achieve goals. In the case of Russia, recovering from the humiliation of the Yeltsin years is an important factor. Yet, the issue of security at its borders is more consistent and goes beyond political post-imperial symbolism. The elections of 2007, which had blurred the interpretation of Russian foreign policy, are now over and it is clear, mainly since the August war in Georgia, that the Kremlin intends to reassert its role in the 'near abroad' and globally.

⁴ See for instance Slocombe et al. (2007), Webb (2008), Muller (2008) and Krause (2007).

2. Disentangling the security issues

Two main issues are advanced by Russia in connection with the anti-missile system: Russia's decision to suspend the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) and its opposition to further eastern NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia. The latter is also connected to Kosovo's proclamation of independence in February 2008, with the Kremlin arguing that it sets a precedent for other separatist entities in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moscow further supported these regions, which led to escalating tensions between Abkhazia and Tbilisi from March 2008 onwards. After the Georgian–Russian war, Moscow recognised the independence of the two entities. A solution to these frozen conflicts, or at least their stabilisation, is fundamental for any Georgian transatlantic aspirations. During his term, President George W. Bush made several diplomatic efforts to support the Ukrainian and Georgian ambitions in this regard. Still, a number of European allies were against this proposal and consequently NATO endorsed the prospect of entry but delayed it with no precise schedule being set.

For Moscow, this NATO outcome was not satisfactory because membership was merely postponed (while continuing to be encouraged) and because the allies decided to complement the anti-missile project with a system developed by the alliance to cover the geographical area left out by the US plans. It is interesting to note that the division among the allies is similar to the divergences among the EU member states towards Russia. For instance, France and Germany are key partners for Russia in Europe and are inclined to take a prudent and conciliatory stance, mostly when strategic interests are at stake. In April 2008, the summit represented an achievement to help determine Bush's legacy in foreign affairs. The confirmed reinforcement of the contribution of the allies to the Afghan theatre positively balanced the summit. Yet, this does not hide the identity crisis of the organisation, which is still struggling for a broadly accepted *raison d'être* both internally and externally. Russia's increasing prominence on the NATO agenda has provoked an unexpected result. A few days before the summit, the NATO secretary general underlined that it has helped to keep the alliance united much more than expected.⁵

Why is NATO perceived as a threat by Russia? Russian Ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin has perhaps expressed the most radical Russian views about the alliance as well as about Kosovo. His remarks even led to an argument with the Agence France-Press (AFP), which Rogozin accused of distorting his speech. He denied the quotation in which he allegedly advocated the use of force to impose respect for international law in Kosovo.⁶ The fact that Putin appointed this outspoken nationalist politician to the post in January 2008 is representative of Moscow's determination to voice its opposition to the adaptations of the alliance and to a new missile defence system in Europe. For Rogozin (and hence Moscow), NATO expansion and missile defence “pose a clear and present danger to Russia” (Osipovich, 2008). While still president, Putin voiced the same idea when he threatened to target missiles at Ukraine, should it join the alliance (Belton, 2008). For the Kremlin, these two issues are closely linked to the equilibrium of forces in Europe. The French and German caution at Bucharest in delaying the NATO Membership Action Plans for Georgia and Ukraine reflected the desire to preserve relations with Moscow.

These events also demonstrate that this third post-cold war enlargement differs from the previous ones of 1999 and 2004. Russia is now able to reject the status quo it had previously

⁵ “Nato closes ranks”, Editorial Comment, *Financial Times*, 4 April 2008.

⁶ Letter by Dmitry Rogozin to the chief editor of the AFP in Paris dated 25 February 2008. Details of Rogozin's speech are reported by the news agency RIA Novosti (retrieved from

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