

The West and Russia

Reaction: No more diplomacy of lost opportunities

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The post-Cold War strategy of NATO enlargement unfortunately resulted in a 'diplomacy of lost opportunities'. We lost a splendid opportunity to establish a working relationship with the Russian part of Europe which had been isolated after turning communist in 1917. NATO, simply by sticking to its borders after the reunification of Germany, by not striving for new members and by not remilitarizing those former Warsaw Pact countries, could have created a relationship with Moscow that would have been void of such unproductive antagonisms as we now have to cope with. EU enlargement by itself (in spite of its negative effect on EU political cohesion) would have been more than sufficient for dealing with the needs of former Russian satellites. This is not crying over spilt milk: Some reflections on the wrong choices of the past might now, however unlikely, induce some timely thinking.

Sense and sensitivity

As far as the Soviet Union and the Cold War are concerned it would be wrong to suggest that the Russians' anti-Western attitude was purely a matter of communist propaganda and brainwashing. Most Russians did not (and do not) have to be convinced in order to feel anti-Western. There is quite some tradition on this point in Russian history. For example, Russia as a nation and all Russians singly — irrespective of their identification with communism or not - are very conscious and immensely proud of 'their' victory in 1945 and are very sensitive to any lack of recognition by the West. Russians are also keenly aware of the fact that World War Two was not the first time that their country saved the western part of Europe. Russia defeated Napoleon's wildest ambitions and forced Germany into a two-front war during most of World War One.

The West, and possibly the US in particular, never had any declared and purposeful intention of 'humiliating' Russia in the aftermath of the Cold War, or of scrapping Russia from the list of big powers. It is another matter indeed that patronizing, often arrogant, ill-considered or badly informed Western policies did result in a Russian feeling of being humiliated. In fact, it is sad to note that Western countries had so little understanding of what they actually were achieving. They did not recognize the negative effect they had on decision makers in Russia and on the Russian public in general. Russians in the early nineties were

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favourably inclined towards the Western world, in particular because they had become conditioned to disbelieve their own government's propaganda.

However, with all the miseries that befell them after 1990 in the course of Western-style democratization, privatization, liberalization et cetera, Russians soon lost confidence and started wondering whether a good deal of Soviet agitation — in particular on the subject of intrinsically aggressive Western attitudes — had not been well founded after all. NATO enlargement definitely encouraged such thoughts.²

Misguided 'regime change'

A fundamental oversight in all our 'superior' advice to Russia and to other Eastern European countries was that the reconstruction of their economic (and social) system was simply not possible without a complete overhaul of their legal framework, their juridical infrastructure, laws on private ownership and taxation, administrative rules and regulations. The result has been that privatization went according to completely degenerated communist rules of the game and that its fruits were enjoyed in the same way as in communist days, by a small and privileged minority. Forceful and pretentious advice by Western schools of economics and specialists forced a pace of change for which those Eastern societies were not equipped. In Soviet lands the situation was much worse than in other Eastern European countries. These had 'only' suffered 40 years of communism and a planned economy and there still existed a kind of institutional memory of how things had worked in the pre-World War II days of 'capitalism'.

Whether the EU could have done more to bring about a less painful change of regime in the former satellite countries is debatable. But it certainly could have put available time to better use by planning and assisting the accession of new members, through a step by step procedure, in a yet to be decided more remote future. Instead, we are filling political, economic and social holes and repairing all sorts of 'accidents de parcours' with a lot of money and with little idea in which direction the recipients will take us. The only thing that has become clear is that the process of political unification within the EU as such is at a standstill, possibly for quite some time to come. Incidentally, the resulting obvious lack of geopolitical clout and negotiating strength on a wider international and strategic scale is the very reason why Moscow is so relaxed about the present way of EU enlargement.

Understanding Russian foreign policy

Russia has all sorts of different 'near abroads'. As far as Moscow is concerned, the term applies to the former Soviet republics, in Europe as well as in Asia, which became independent after 1989. But here too we have categories. Ukraine

² It is worthwhile reading former British Ambassador Rodric Braithwait's excellent comment on the subject, to which I fully subscribe: 'Let the Russians sort out Russia', *Financial Times*, 11 March 2008.

is a chapter apart and so is Belarus. The Baltic countries are different, in Moscow's perception, from the Caucasian or Asian republics. The former Warsaw Pact countries do not qualify for Moscow's definition of 'near abroad' but are regarded as former dependencies which had no business in leaving the 'no man's land' that Moscow expected to be granted at Russia's western borders after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact alliance.

The West and the US in particular have failed to understand and appreciate that Russia is the last of the original and classic continental powers, like France, Germany and Austro-Hungary used to be. (The US never was such a power, which should explain its lack of appreciation of this aspect.) Russia has an ongoing security concern on two continents, it has thousands of kilometres of dubious and insecure, at times volatile, borders, and it has within its federation regions that seek their 18th and 19th century autonomy or independence. So security and national politics in Russia are understandably geographic in nature. Square miles are not limited to historical atlases but are tangible realities of today.

NATO has managed to confirm and indeed strengthen such perceptions. With its enlargements it proved to Moscow that square miles do indeed matter, in the 21st century as well as in the past. It fed — and continues to do so — Russia's worst suspicions, mainly because of the absence of truly convincing arguments for incorporating new member states from Eastern Europe, particularly at a time when Western defences are under no conceivable threat.

NATO's core mission

Two leading questions regarding NATO arise. One is: if the Atlantic Alliance's security is no longer threatened at its borders, what kind of mission does it have beyond these borders? Outside of its own treaty area? And the other: what kind of relationship - to its own advantage — can the EU have with NATO as a military defence organization?

As far as the first question is concerned, it would seem that no agreed position exists among NATO countries. For years governments have been labouring in vain to find a new strategic mission, outside of their area. But recent history has shown that the views of member countries on military engagement outside treaty territory are very different, are changing, ad hoc and at times unpredictable.

Various reasons may be considered. The single most pertinent, however, is that unity of purpose and action comes only when security at home is at stake. And unity becomes questionable when the issue at hand lies beyond the reach of immediate national concern. Let's face it: the US is the only member state left with straightforward global interests. But these interests are not necessarily of actual concern to the other NATO countries collectively. And certainly not to each and every individual member state of the Alliance in particular. And if interests are not shared, related issues are unlikely to result in agreed NATO policy.

Pursuing and forcing the out-of-area issue will never result in anything comparable to NATO's original solidarity for the defence of Western Europe —

NATO's core task for decades, covered by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Now, with our new borders in Central and Eastern Europe, it would be quite enough to limit our ambitions to maintaining a remotely credible military organization for security in Europe at its immediate borders. We should honestly and realistically contemplate the risks of incorporating such Russian 'near-abroads' as Ukraine and Georgia, and even a part of Russia itself. (The Crimea had never been part of Ukraine until it was 'given' in 1954 by Khrushchev to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic as a 'present' to mark the 300th anniversary of the unification of Kiev with Moscow.) Further extension of treaty territory might be so unsettling that NATO members would even have to contemplate the consequences of seriously destabilizing the order of coexistence which has gradually established itself in Europe during the post-Soviet years.

NATO returning to its core task of collective self-defence would not automatically prevent member states from participating in out-of-area expeditions individually. Alliances of the able and willing would of course be possible as experience has shown. NATO countries could even operate collectively if requested and mandated by the United Nations, with or without non-NATO countries. That would then be a matter of choice and not of treaty or agreed policy obligations. We would be spared such utter abuse of Article 5 as in the case of America's call for NATO's 'global war on terror'.

The European Union and NATO

Considering the current lack of purpose within NATO it should be urgent for the member states of the European Union to agree on their own strategy. Presently, French and German ambitions are pointing in the direction of a Union defence organization with structures of its own, whereas Britain is loathe to set up anything that may seem to be in competition with the existing transatlantic organization of NATO. Irrespective of the framework, the EU at the end of the day may choose for its military set-up, there is first the underlying issue of a political decision to be taken. Does the EU choose to link up to or intertwine with the policies and the military organization of NATO? Or will it establish a military component of its own and decide on a case by case basis whether or not to coordinate, and possibly cooperate, with NATO?

There is no doubt that there should be no organizational or formal link between the two multilateral organizations. This is not changed by the fact that, quite obviously, they share many interests and that most EU countries are in fact also NATO members and will have put the same military units at either organization's disposal. In the view of third parties, shared interests should not seem to mean identical positions and should not limit the Union's own identity and freedom of action. In particular it should not confirm Moscow's already worst suspicions: that in matters of regional and global security the EU is an extension of US policy, that it has only a limited say of its own, that in the process of negotiations with strategic implications it pays to do business directly with Washington rather than with Brussels.

Such direct dealing between the select few on the highest level of geopolitics, between the top dogs so to speak, is a natural phenomenon in international politics. But it is certainly not in the interest of the EU if it desires a meaningful role on the international scene. The Union should therefore avoid getting drawn into NATO politics and having to side with or oppose American objectives in NATO. Otherwise, it would open its flanks to manipulative Russian diplomacy, it could damage its own political cohesion and it could reduce its global prestige. It would also seriously limit the effectiveness of its diplomacy if, as a result of the Lisbon constitutional agreement, such diplomacy at some time would come into existence.