

European Security Architecture at Risk?

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Abstract^{1*}

The forty-year anniversary of the Helsinki Agreements on which the existing formal security arrangements of Europe are based, could have led to a convivial party. In reality the opposite is actually the case. The European safety relations in 2015 look now oncourse for another long-lasting conflict between East and West. There is little time to celebrate.²

Keywords

European Security – East-West relations – Ukraine – EU – NATO – OSCE – Russia –neighbourhood relations

The Ukrainian crisis has led to a heated debate on whether or not this has led the European continent into a dangerous geopolitical waters. Are we reverting backto the time of the Cold War more than 25 years after it ended? How do we reactto such a development: with a reevaluation of our foreign and safety policies – back to the classic power politics – or do we retain the value-based approach ofthe Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europa (OSCE) and the EU? Both organizations are – especially in the long term – challenged to offer an answer to the way in which Russia is dealing with its neighbourhood – theCrimea, theintervention in East Ukraine, but also the frozen conflicts in Moldoviaand Georgia – that at the very least runs contrary to the principles they stand for.Pure power politics is more suited to NATO (and the us) as has been apparent inthe last few months with the extra protection of a number of Eastern Europeanmember states.

Whether the balance tips in either direction depends on a large number of factors. A range of scenarios is possible, varying from a hardening of the situation to a resumption of dialogue which could lead to new binding agreements.

This article will analyse whether the existing European partnerships cancontribute to a turning point or at least serve as a bridging function in the current conflict. Concerns about a new permanent division increase, and also within the EU there are those who still have fearful memories of the Cold War.³

Unfortunately the actual circumstances are not encouraging. The OSCE isno longer the forum where security issues are really discussed and dealt with. The EU – for many years willfully blind to the course that Russia took in this millennium – has now adopted, but only after hesitation and partly in reactionto the mh17 disaster, a harder line towards Russia and has fully committeditself to provide support to Ukraine. Brussels is thereby no longer a logical portof call for Moscow which blames the EU for entering into an Association Agreement with the Kiev government.

As a result of the increasing threat, NATO has in a certain sense come backin from the cold although this has may have been too vociferously contended by – until very recently – Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen.⁴ This has only added to the suspicions surrounding NATO in Russia.

1 * A version of this article was previously published in the Internationale Spectator of December 2014, jaargang 68, nr. 12.

2 For an evaluation of the previously mentioned Helsinki process: Bob Deen and Jan Marinus Wiersma, “40 years Helsinki: No time for celebration.” Internationale Spectator, jaargang 69, nr. 5, summer 2015.

3 See the reactions of Thorvald Stoltenberg, the Norwegian Minister for Foreign Affairs during the Cold War, and from Ostpolitik designer Egon Bahr: <http://en.ria.ru/world/20141030/194851407/> Former-Norwegian-Foreign-Minister-Urges-Nordic-Countries-to.html. http://www.spd.de/aktuelles/122502/20140808_interview_bahr.

4 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_111132.htm.

So the signs are not positive. President Putin has not retracted any of his harsh criticism of the US and its allies.⁵ In every respect, the European security structure is dysfunctional. Where did it all go wrong?

Why has Russia reneged on its commitments? How probable is it that it will return to respecting them?

The Black Hole

In recent times, famous articles from the last thirty years or so have been regularly referred to in order to shine light on the current situation. One example is the article by Jan Rood on 25 years after the cold war, in which he discusses the views of the 'political realist' John Mearsheimer and the 'liberal internationalist' Francis Fukuyama.⁶ In his conclusion he acknowledges that both offer valid arguments. On the one side is the European integration process which continues via deepening and expansion, on the other side is the division of Europe that has not been completely lifted and still creates a large amount of antagonism. The relative success of the EU (and NATO) is at the same time the cause of tension which keeps in place a division of Europe. The EU has yet to find a political answer to the latter issue.

Also worth recommending is a rereading of the book *The Grand Chessboard* (1997)⁷ by Zbigniew Brzezinski which offers a geopolitical analysis that is in many respects still very relevant.

In a chapter entitled "The Black Hole" (sic) he evaluates the new geopolitical setting of Russia. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in a monumental amount of confusion with a power vacuum at the heart of Eurasia. The most worrisome result for the Russians was the loss of the now independent Ukraine. Self-examination in political and intellectual circles and a heated debate over the nature of Russia followed. Brzezinski analysed how, in successive stages, first better connections to the West were sought, the focus was then placed on relations with immediate neighbours and, finally, the alternative of an Eurasian counter-alliance of countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States was added.

The latter fits with the reasoning of Samuel Huntington who points out in *The Clash of Civilisations* (1993) that the old dividing lines from before 1989 were being replaced by new ones.⁸ The non-contemporary Eurasian concept seems to have filled a gap left by the collapse of Communism. It originates from its own, unique cultural characteristics and values that differ from those of the West. Because it acts as a bridge between the Russians and the Asians, the concept is popular in Central Asia.⁹ In circles surrounding Putin it is extremely influential and acts as a breeding ground for extreme anti-Western views¹⁰ and an aggressive nostalgia for the imperial past of which Ukraine was part.¹¹

An Ukrainian association with the EU, let alone membership thereof, stands in opposition to this ideal. Thus in this case there is not just question of occasional and opportunistic arguments. The internal dynamics of Russian politics

5 <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/23137>.

6 Jan Rood, "Het einde van de Koude Oorlog in Europa en daarna", *Internationale Spectator*, September 2014, p. 11–16.

7 Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*. New York, 1997.

8 *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993.

9 An important university in Astana is named after Lev Gumilev, considered to be one of the founders of the Eurasian Concept.

10 See: Alexander Doegin. <http://www.4pt.su/en/content/aleksandr-dugin%E2%80%99s-foundations-geopolitics/ukraine/>.

11 <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/08/putin-the-backstory-110151.html#ixzz3GtFZUYDV>.

and society contain the gist of the drama which is now unfolding.

President Putin has inherited an almost bankrupt state from his predecessor and with it the frustrations over the position of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He chose the opposite direction from the West that he partly blamed for the poor state of his nation. He established an authoritarian and nationalistic regime in the form of a 'managed' democracy. He does not shy away from violence and oppression against his antagonists and has overcome protests in his country. His work for Russian minorities outside of Russia and his imperial politics have made him immensely popular.¹²

One can call it revisionism, ethnic geopolitics, or nostalgia, but it seems to have taken off in modern Russia. Since his appointment he has been busily centralising power: in the capital Moscow and around his person. The oligarchs have been tamed, the periphery brought under control and democracy as well.

NATO as a Hindrance

The Russian opposition against the eastward expansion of NATO is a constant aspect of its foreign policy.

There exists a number of different interpretations of recent history and whether or not commitments were made to Moscow concerning the (non-)expansion of the Atlantic Alliance.¹³ At the beginning of Yeltsin's presidency the US missed an opportunity to strike a security deal with Russia. After the Russian presidential elections of 1996, President Clinton decided that the time was ripe to launch a NATO expansion. According to Clinton, the strategic vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe needed to be gradually filled. But that happened at a particular pace and in a way that the Russians – and some Western Europeans – still found to be just acceptable. They saw that the train could no longer be stopped and they therefore accepted the offer of a new agreement with NATO in the form of the NATO Russia Founding Act (1997).¹⁴ But there was little enthusiasm about this cooperation. The Russians kept complaining that Washington had still not fulfilled its promises regarding NATO enlargement. Cooperation with the Atlantic Alliance reached an all-time low in 2014.¹⁵

Moscow – which had just as little trust in the OSCE – therefore tried to develop the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation) into an opponent of the Euro Atlantic alliance. An attempt to replace the OSCE with a security-focused pan-European organisation – a proposal by, at that time, President Medvedev was never developed any further than the Russian drawing board.¹⁶

What about the Helsinki Process: OSCE and CFE without a Future?

It is evident that the existing pan-European security arrangements were equally unable to prevent the conflict in Ukraine as were the EU and NATO. The responsible organisation, established as the CSCE, dates back to the time of the cold war, has later been given a new coat of paint (OSCE) but is plagued by conflicts between pro-Western countries and member states that take their lead from Moscow. Because only unanimous decisions can be taken by the OSCE, effective action with clear mandates is often impossible.

12 <http://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/russia-ukraine-and-central-europe-return-geopolitics/>.

13 <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142310/joshua-r-itzkowitz-shifrinson/put-it-in-writing>.

14 Ronald. D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door. How the Alliance remade itself for a New Era.* New York, 2002.

15 <http://www.nato-russia-council.info/en/about/>.

16 <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/275>.

Next to the OSCE is also the CFE (Conventional Forces Europe) – treaty an inheritance from the cold war. In the treaty, which entered into force in 1990, restrictions were placed on the arming and mobilisation of conventional armed forces. Significant reductions were implemented. However, the restrictions did not last. Since 1999 a major disagreement has existed between Russia and the NATO member states. During a CSCE summit in Istanbul that year, in exchange for allowing them to rearrange some of their internal military deployments, the Russians promised that they would withdraw their last remaining troops from Moldova. They also agreed to engage in further discussions with the Georgian government on the same issue, as well as to withdraw their troops from the North Caucasus. Moscow did not live up to its promises, however, thereby giving NATO an argument not to ratify the adapted treaty. In 2007 Moscow subsequently suspended its participation in the CFE. One of Russia's arguments was that it wanted to be compensated for the expansion of NATO. In 2011 NATO also no longer accepted inspections. In this way an important instrument in regulating conventional weapons in Europe was lost. No one expects a rapid recovery of the treaty.¹⁷

Adding to his critique of the OSCE that Russia's security interests were not being sufficiently ensured, Vladimir Putin voiced serious objections against the human dimension of the OSCE and the promotion of democratic rule by the organisation. These were not aimed at promoting democracy in his country, but at undermining it, he claimed.¹⁸ The OSCE's election observation missions were becoming a thorn in his side because they in his view were specifically used to keep tabs on former Soviet nations.¹⁹

In the year of the fortieth anniversary of the Helsinki Accords the enormity of the crisis with which the OSCE is confronted is overbearing. There exists an enormous divide between the European practice of today and the Helsinki agreements of the past.

The collapse of the communist dictatorships was solemnly celebrated and this resonated in the Charter of Paris from 1990. It says: "Ours is a time for fulfilling the hopes and expectations our peoples have cherished for decades: steadfast commitment to democracy based on human rights and fundamental freedoms, prosperity through economic liberty and social justice, and equal security for all our countries."

And: "Democracy, with its representative and pluralist character, entails accountability to the electorate, the obligation of public authorities to comply with the law and justice administered impartially. No one will be above the law."²⁰

On the 10 principles of Helsinki, the Charter states: "All the principles apply equally and unreservedly, each of them being interpreted taking into account the others."

"we renew our pledge to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence

17 <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/remember-the-cfe-treaty-10203?page=2> en

http://en.ria.ru/military_news/20130402/180392027/Russian-Military-Says-CFE-Treaty-Has-No-Future.html.

18 [pe82917type84779_118123.shtml](http://en.ria.ru/military_news/20070711/118123.shtml) Speech by President Putin, Munich 2007.

19 Moscow always sends its own observers. An organization called the Agency for Security and Cooperation in Europe (ASCE) was active in Eastern Ukraine during the illegal elections of 2 November 2014.

20 <http://www.OSCE.org/node/39516>.

of any State...”.²¹

Even though these lofty wordings do not reflect today's reality, it is much too early to be making final judgements about the OSCE, considering the lack of any alternatives. This is apparent with the crisis now engulfing Ukraine. The organisation plays an important role in the preparation and implementation of the so-called Minsk Accords on a military ceasefire in the country and the political settlement of the internal conflict between Kiev and the separatists. The OSCE is the only acceptable forum for all the parties involved. It will also serve as a platform for an eventual resumption of dialogue on European security.²²

And then the EU

One would have expected the EU to have taken earlier and clearer action against the Russian violations of the Helsinki Agreements. The problems with Moscow are not new. In the official security strategy of the EU, dating from 2003, effective multilateralism is emphasised as the most important instrument for the strengthening of international rules. The EU is presented as a *global player* with a broad range of instruments – both civil and military. There are calls for active involvement in the regions on the borders of the EU, with the goal of creating a ring of friends. A strong OSCE fits into that picture, hence the statement: “The best protection for our security is a world of well governed democratic states.”²³ If we look at the progress which has been made in Europe between 2003 and 2015, we find that the goals have only been partly achieved. Time and time again it has become apparent that the EU is not a global player but instead leans heavily on the US. The circle of friends has only been partially realised. The EU must accept that Putin's Russia has made radically opposing choices. As a result of internal disputes the once very successful instrument of enlarging the EU has become ineffective for Eastern Europe. Association Agreements with the three remaining ‘friends’ – Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine had to wait until 2013 and 2014. In 2008, the war in Georgia admittedly set off alarm bells and in the evaluation of the security strategy of that year this was certainly noticeable, but the Eurozone crisis prevented any change in the position of the EU. It turned inward. People in Brussels could have predicted that something like the Ukrainian crisis would occur. The general mood however was *business as usual*, that only changed with the annexation of Crimea, which showed that this was no longer possible. In Brussels the conclusion was that EU foreign policy would have to be revised. As a result, in 2014 it was decided to re-evaluate the Neighbourhood policy as well as the official security strategy and to adjust them where necessary.

21 And those principles were and are:

Sovereign equality, respect for the rights that are inherent to this sovereignty;

Do not threaten or use violence;

Integrity of Borders

Territorial integrity of states:

Peaceful resolving of disputes;

Non-intervention in internal affairs;

Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, which includes freedom of expression, conscience, religion or faith;

Equal rights and self-determination of the people

Cooperation between states

To exercise in good faith the obligations under international law

22 For a good overview of the role of the OSCE in the Ukrainian crisis, see Christian Nünlist, *Perspectives on the Role of the OSCE in the Ukraine Crisis*. Centre for Security Studies/eth Zürich, 214.

23 <http://www.eas.europa.eu/csdp/about-csdp/european-security-strategy/>.

Conclusion

In the short term, no one expects a rapid change of course from Moscow. The current crisis is also due to structural causes. Ambitions clash. Russia keeps accusing the West – particularly the United States – of double standards and interference in other countries. The internal power position of President Putin – his first priority is connected to the continuing or even the expansion of the Russian influence in countries of the former Soviet Union and then, in particular, the countries in which significant Russian minorities live. On the basis of both external and internal considerations Moscow will give preference to alternatives such as the Eurasian Union, the CSTO and collaboration with China over restoring cooperation with the West within the framework of the OSCE or the NATO-Russia Council. As long as there are major differences of opinion in the OSCE about the interpretation and implementation of the Helsinki Agreements, there will be merely a supporting role for this organisation to play and only then if Moscow agrees with that – so in Ukraine but not in Georgia. Cooperation between NATO and Russia has been put on the backburner. The mood in Moscow is downright hostile. NATO has no bridging role to play. The opposite is more likely: a continuation of a hard-line approach of the Atlantic Alliance towards Moscow.

The EU tried to keep its doors open to Moscow until long after the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis by being careful with the sanctions. This policy proved unsustainable after the escalations of July 2014. Within the EU not everyone fully agreed with tougher sanctions on the basis of economic motives (Hungary), because of old relationships (Bulgaria) or out of a fear of a new division emerging (voiced by influential German (former) politicians). Why now opt for a hard line that comes with a lot of political and economic damage, after having accepted the aggressive role of Russia in its environment for years, is one of the arguments one hears? And do the Russians not have a point in their criticism of NATO and the way the West deals with self-determination – if this applies to Kosovo then why not to Crimea? These arguments need to be taken into account. However, at present there is a deadlock – Russia will not give up Crimea, just as it will not stop its interference in the Ukraine. This leaves the EU with little room to manoeuvre. Brussels has to continue defending the territorial integrity of Ukraine, to promote democratic values and emphasise that the country is free in its choice of allies, without interference from the outside world. At its core it boils down to the latter, which is what so much complicates this conflict.

That Ukraine's NATO membership is rightly or wrongly anathema in Moscow is easy to understand. However, that an association agreement with the EU would inspire such resistance is new. As a result, the EU has ended up on one side and has put its cards on the pro-European regime in Kiev, even if this is not without risks.

The Achilles' heel of President Putin is the Russian economy, which is not doing well, partly as a result of the sanctions imposed upon Russia. Alternative economic partners like the BRICS can only offer partial compensation. The EU is and will remain an enormous market, particularly for gas and thus an enormous source of income. The sanctions have hit Russia and the EU in particular, who therefore both have the greatest interest in getting rid of them. President Putin seems set to ride out the economic storm and has a lot of popular support for that. In any case, the EU is stuck for the time being with the sanctions package. The lifting them would be more damaging than retaining them even though they have not immediately had the politically desired effect.

So should we merely accept that it will be the EU versus the Eurasian Union, or NATO against the CSTO and the ASCE as a counterpart of the OSCE? Should we wait for a total economic collapse of Russia and a change of regime there?


Or should we in Europe go back to Helsinki and try to put the opponents next to one another and to attempt to recalibrate the OSCE rules so that everyone feels secure under them? Who dares to initiate this exercise and

the related debate about European values? It would be a repetition of the Helsinki process as it once began – sitting around the table as opponents without any preconditions.²⁴ This would, again, mean a tough dialogue with banging fists on the table²⁵ For such an exercise to have any chance, at least the situation in Ukraine will have to be stabilised with a lasting ceasefire and the implementation of the political part of the Minsk II agreement which would regulate the relations between Kiev and the separatists and obviate the need for continued Russian interference. Sanctions could then be reduced. France and Germany keep pushing for progress in this direction. Hopefully at a certain moment such a development would also help to reinvigorate the OSCE. Only then would it be time to celebrate.



24 [http://www.ipg-journal.de/kommentar/artikel/erschuettertes-vertrauen-642/\[2\]](http://www.ipg-journal.de/kommentar/artikel/erschuettertes-vertrauen-642/[2]).

25 See: <http://www.rijksverheid.nl/documenten-en-publicaties/toespraken/2014/09/02/schoo-lezing.html> And the policy briefing of his successor Bert Koenders about relations with Russia. <http://www.rijksverheid.nl/bestanden/documenten-en-publicaties/kamerstukken/2015/05/13/kamerbrief-over-betrekkingen-met-rusland/kamerbrief-over-betrekkingen-met-rusland.pdf>.



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