

How NATO and Russia are Shaping the Future of European Security

Written by Daryl Morini

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DARYL MORINI, MAR 25 2010

From Vancouver to Vladivostok, an important strategic reorientation is under way. Security experts, academics and even the general public are involved in a debate that will influence the future course of European and, perhaps, international security. I am alluding to NATO's new Strategic Concept,[1] which should see the light of day by late 2010. Why should we care? After all, it seems that on the occasion of its 60th anniversary last year, the only thing many observers were celebrating was the redundancy of the Transatlantic Alliance. The most outspoken NATO critics bluntly argue that:

there is little prospect that the process of decay can be reversed. Today's NATO is a hollow shell. The outward appearance is one of an impressive organisation—with an abundance of perks for the military brass or member states... It is time to terminate this increasingly dysfunctional alliance—or at the very least extricate the United States from it.[2]

America should thus cut its losses and leave the sinking ship that is European security. Times are indeed tough for NATO, pinned down (until the recent Marjah offensive) in Afghanistan, in a state of 'strategic drift' in the post-Cold War era and seeking a purpose for the Twenty-First Century.

But there is another side to this story, namely that NATO is undergoing profound structural changes and, indeed, a political renewal to equip it to face current and future challenges. The last Strategic Concept of the organisation dates back to 1999, at the height of NATO's first 'out of area' operation in the Balkans, and before the events of 9/11. Today's European Union (EU) is arguably post-Hobbesian, in that Brussels views power politics as decidedly *passé*. The idea that a conventional military conflict could once more break out in Western Europe seems not only unthinkable, as the founders of the EU had envisioned, but materially impossible. However, the same cannot be said of wider Europe—west of the Urals. Aside from the pressing issues of borderless terrorism, health pandemics, human and drug trafficking, piracy, cyber warfare, and other trans-national threats, NATO must today make profound decisions in the traditional security sphere. Additionally, it is frozen by exhaustive internal deliberations about how to adapt with the resurgence of Russia as a regional power.

From Cold Peace to a "New Cold War" in Europe?

Indecision over how to deal with Moscow's foreign policy, especially since the latter's invasion of Georgia in August 2008, has crippled cooperation between the European Allies. The western member-states, especially Germany, France, Spain and Italy (self-described by Silvio Berlusconi as Russia's "advocate" in the EU) are increasingly entangled in Russian pipeline politics. In a nutshell, the delivery of Russian natural gas to Europe through a nationalised company, *Gazprom*, consists of more than just business as usual. Former President Vladimir Putin had firmly vowed to employ Russia's energy delivery network as an arm of the state's foreign policy. *Gazprom* is thus a

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direct tool in the reconstruction of Russia's international power and status. (Demonstrating his intellectual consistency, Putin even argued this point in his doctoral thesis).[3] Some view this as an explicit strategy aimed at the "Gazpromisation" of European energy security—that is, constricting Europe's energy alternatives and, thus, policy options through an energy dependence on Russia. [4]

The more Western European countries play down worries about Russia's downstream activities, however, the more pronounced the fears of NATO's eastern members become. If the potential return of a Russian great power—bent on rebuilding its traditional sphere of influence in the neighbourhood—doesn't raise alarms in Western capitals, it certainly does from Prague to Tallinn. It took the outbreak of the Russo-Georgian War to remind Europeans that interstate conflict on their doorstep, nearly ten years after the notorious Yugoslav example, was still a distinct possibility. Admittedly, a tasteless joke which televised the news that "the Russians are coming!" would simply not have the same effect in Parisian cafés as in downtown Tbilisi.[5] But Eastern Europeans would empathise more, on this matter, with Georgians than with their own Western allies, who cannot relate to the legacy of having spent a lifetime behind the Iron Curtain. In the aftermath of the August War, a common concern in the region, articulately espoused in an open letter to the Obama administration by prominent scholars and former policy-makers, has been "whether NATO would be willing and able to come to our defense in some future crises." [6]

The August 2008 conflict was fought to decide much more than the future of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia's two separatist enclaves. Broader geostrategic interests were also at stake—most notably NATO's next round of eastern expansion, which could have assimilated both Georgia and Ukraine, and realised the Kremlin's nightmare scenario of strategic encirclement by the Alliance. On the eve of the August War, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov admitted to his Georgian counterpart that Moscow was determined to halt Tbilisi from joining NATO, by any means necessary.[7] Whether this tragic episode represents the declared start of a "New Cold War" between Russia and NATO is still up for debate.[8] Ukraine's recent *volte-face* on NATO membership and adoption of an international posture more amenable to Russia—following the election victory of Viktor Yanukovich—has merely added to a long list of question marks. More telling than a definitive answer, however, is how the uncertainties raised by this discussion are widening NATO's East-West cleavage. A centrifugal force is splitting the Alliance in two, with the US oscillating uneasily between both camps.

Hence, Russia's foreign policy direction poses a significant challenge for the Alliance. I repeat, a *challenge*, rather than a threat. Russia is not the West's eternal enemy, as Cold Warrior geopoliticians routinely suggest. Moscow has legitimate security concerns in Europe. Nevertheless, Russian fears about NATO's expansion past previous Soviet bloc borders—whether one perceives these as genuine or contrived—have brought NATO-Russia relations to breaking point. So much so that General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen, on a working trip to Moscow for the new Strategic Concept in late 2009, went to the unusual length of assuring his audience, at the Moscow Institute of International Relations, that "NATO will never attack Russia. Never. And we do not think Russia will attack NATO. We have stopped worrying about that and Russia should stop worrying about that as well." [9] Such bold confidence-building measures indicate how pear-shaped relations between the Transatlantic Allies and Russia have gone in recent years.

Why NATO Still Matters

So how, we are entitled to ask, is NATO still relevant if its expansion and post-1991 activities are to blame for irritating a resurgent Russia? Three reasons stand out. First of all, NATO is central to the strategic unity of European countries—most EU states being in the Alliance, and such neutral countries as Sweden increasingly flirting with the idea of joining. The notorious European inability to speak with one voice at lower policy levels is one thing, in the defence and security realm it is another altogether. For all of its achievements in the past ten years, the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) is not yet capable of ensuring the protection of a realm of some 500 million human beings. Indeed, in their tacit division of labour, according to Daniel Keohane, the "ESDP is potentially meant to do everything but collective defence—the *raison d'être* of NATO." [10]

The recently-ratified Lisbon Treaty may have given the EU a more coherent foreign policy and defence structure but, in terms of military capabilities, the changes remain largely theoretical. At a future date, NATO-EU relations

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themselves may encounter an institutional crisis. This Euro-Atlantic divergence of interests is particularly likely if Washington sees any or all of the dreaded “three Ds” (de-linking, discriminating, and duplicating) being implemented by an autonomous European Defence Force. However, the EU’s trademark “quiet diplomacy” will probably not risk upsetting the current status quo,[11] particularly if the result is to permanently split the Union itself along ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Europe lines. After all, secession is now a distinct possibility under the Lisbon amendments. It would thus be a diplomatically dangerous move for the EU’s new heads, Herman Van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton, to bet on where the allegiance of such firm US-allies as Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania and the Baltic states would gravitate to, if made to choose between the EU’s socio-economic enticements and the American security umbrella.

Secondly, alternative institutions lack the diplomatic clout of the Transatlantic Alliance. This not only stems from the major, some would say overbearing, US engagement in NATO, but also from the membership of such an important regional player as Turkey. Hence, Europe needs NATO to engage and negotiate with Russia as equals, in matters of common interest. The joint-work of these partners in the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), for example, is needed to coordinate logistical operations for the international intervention in Afghanistan. As counter-intuitive as it might sound, a cooperative EU-Russia relationship presupposes that Russian leaders bury the hatchet with NATO. The more Kremlin officials play wedge politics by differentiating between a ‘bad’ NATO bloc and a ‘good’ European Union, the more Europeans will instinctively think twice about the motives behind Russian criticism.[12] Decoupling the EU from NATO would neither benefit European security, nor Brussels’ relations with Moscow.

Finally, the argument itself that NATO’s dissolution would once and for all exorcise Cold War ghosts, and extend European perpetual peace and stability across the continent is a spurious one. The critics seldom explain exactly how this leap of faith might pan out? Furthermore, what is the political viability of this option, especially in the wake of the Russo-Georgian War? Unsurprisingly, the most vehement proponents of NATO’s abolition are the Kremlin and its affiliated media outlets. President Dmitry Medvedev himself has proposed a novel, pan-European security structure to (tacitly) replace the Alliance. Its secondary objectives might include the gradual sidelining of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty.[13] This effectively translates to diluting American influence in European security institutions, increasing Russia’s representation within these and, ultimately, abandoning the collective security guarantee and treaties on which the post-Cold War European security order was built. A hard sell for most security-conscious Europeans, not to mention American strategists.

Getting the New Strategic Concept Right

The mood is particularly gloomy in the defence establishments of eastern NATO states. In recent years, Russia’s foreign policy “has focused on encouraging and exploiting divisions among the Europeans, in order to deter them from strengthening the influence of NATO (and the EU) in Eastern Europe,” as a *Centre for European Reform* paper suggests.[14] Indeed, Russian war games late last year rehearsed a fictitious intervention in the Baltics, based on a vague scenario involving a rebellion in Poland and Lithuanian terrorists. But such Russian muscle-flexing has proven counter-productive, only heightening mutual suspicions.[15] In order to calm their Eastern allies, NATO strategic planners caved in to demands for military contingency plans for the defence of the Baltic states to be drawn up, and practised this month. This measure was likewise expected to escalate tensions, by considerably militarising NATO-Russia disputes.

NATO’s challenges are immense, its room for manoeuvre slight. The fine line to walk consists, in sum, of uniting the East and West European allies *not against* Russia, but in partnership with it. Demonising Moscow as an outcast in Europe—a Nineteenth Century-minded pariah state—is not a diplomatic solution, but a call to arms. On the other hand, strategic naïveté will not improve European security. This explains the need for Europeans to negotiate with Moscow, as equals, through their existing joint institutions—most notably the NRC, but also the OSCE and Council of Europe. The moment calls for a spirit of pragmatism, not sabre-rattling and rash decision-making. Moscow has sought to influence the debate over the Strategic Concept by releasing a new military doctrine of its own, in February, which continues to identify NATO expansion towards Russia as one of its “main external threats of war.”[16] What room does that leave for optimism in a Europe which, supposedly, considers itself beyond the folly of inter-state conflict?

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The dream of a Europe that is whole, free and, finally, secure—no matter how remote—can only become reality through the genuine institutionalisation of the Russo-European relationship. Such a process might take decades, at least. But it should begin now, to catch up on the momentum lost since 1989. NATO remains the most viable institution through which that partnership can function. Russia's eventual membership in the Alliance should remain open, even if it is not feasible in the short term. Aside from the stringent domestic political criteria for entry, however, Russian ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin remains ambiguous on the matter. Although not ruling out Russian membership in the Alliance at some unknown future date, Rogozin insists that "great powers don't join coalitions, they create coalitions." And evidently, "Russia considers itself a great power." [17] As for Igor Yurgens, a close foreign policy advisor to President Medvedev, he remains open to the idea that the current Transatlantic security architecture extend across Eurasia to the Russian rim of the Pacific Ocean—on the condition that the organisation undergo cosmetic changes (principally by ditching the name NATO). [18] But one of the many unknowns weighing heavily on European leaders of the Alliance is whether this enthusiasm is, in fact, felt at the apex of the Kremlin's "vertical of power", or if it is simply espoused for tactical reasons.

The deadlock might just be broken when NATO finally releases its 2010 Strategic Concept. If intelligently crafted, the new Concept could balance the need to offer a more viable Strategic Partnership to Russia, whilst reaffirming NATO's support for Eastern European member-states, and the founding principle of European security that is collective defence. In the meantime, however, the stakes remain incredibly high, and the inter-alliance debates endless. The kind of conventional military brinkmanship going on at the common NATO-Russia border is not good news—a phenomenon not seen since the frostiest Cold War periods. If the last East-West confrontation offers a cautionary tale, it is that the situation urgently needs to be de-escalated, before worst-case scenarios become self-fulfilling prophecies. In the long run, whether NATO-Russia relations steer an increasingly cooperative or conflictual course remains, for the moment, chillingly uncertain. One thing we can be sure of, though, is that NATO and Russia will continue to shape Europe's security landscape well into the new century.

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[1] Whatever one may think of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, its open and, therefore, accountable debate over its upcoming Concept demonstrates NATO's credentials as a democratic institution. See *NATO's New Strategic Concept*, available at: <http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/index.html>

[2] Ted Galen Carpenter, 'NATO at 60: A Hollow Alliance', *CATO Institute*, March 30 2009: 12

[3] Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: How the Kremlin Menaces both Russia and the West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 210.

[4] Such diversification projects as the planned Nabucco pipeline, which would run from Turkey to Austria, are criticised as being aimed at Russia. Gazprom has suggested another 'South Stream' project to compete against Nabucco. Robert R. Amsterdam, 'The Gazpromisation of European energy security', *Cyprus e Directory*, 2008, available at: <http://www.cyprusedirectory.com/articleview.aspx?ID=500>

[5] 'Bogus TV report of Russian invasion panics Georgia', *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, 14 March 2010, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8566571.stm>

[6] Valdas Adamkus, Martin Butora, Emil Constantinescu, Pavol Demes, Lubos Dobrovsky,

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Matyas Eorsi, Istvan Gyarmati, Vaclav Havel, Rastislav Kacer, Sandra Kalniete, Karel Schwarzenberg, Michal Kovac, Ivan Krastev, Alexander Kwasniewski, Mart Laar, Kadri Liik, Janos Martonyi, Janusz Onyszkiewicz, Adam Rotfeld, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, Alexandr Vondra, and Lech Walesa, 'An Open Letter to the Obama Administration from Central and Eastern Europe', *Gazeta*, 15 July 2009, available at: http://wyborcza.pl/1,75477,6825987,An_Open_Letter_to_the_Obama_Administration_from_Central.html

[7] Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 85.

[8] Michael Stuermer, *Putin and the Rise of Russia* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 224.

[9] Quoted in 'NATO Secretary General completes visit to Russia', *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, 17 December 2009, available at: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_60224.htm?selectedLocale=en

[10] Note that the Lisbon Treaty renamed the ESDP to *Common Security and Defence Policy* (CSDP). Daniel Keohane, 'ESDP and NATO', *European Security and Defence Policy: The First Ten Years (1999-2009)*, edited by Giovanni Grevi, Damien Helly and David Keohane (Paris: The European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2009), 127.

[11] In a speech to the European Parliament, on February 12, Baroness Ashton reaffirmed the importance of the Transatlantic relationship, and especially cooperation through NATO in Afghanistan and other issue areas. 'Catherine Ashton: EU should do more to "punch its weight" politically', *European Parliament*, available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/infopress_page/030-65814-336-12-49-903-20091202IPR65813-02-12-2009-2009-true/default_en.htm

[12] Irina Filatova, 'NATO exercises threaten Russian thaw', *guardian.co.uk*, 10 May 2009, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/may/10/russia-nato-georgia>

[13] Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Medvedev's Proposal for a Pan-European Security Pact: Its Six Hidden Objectives and How the West Should Respond* (Paris and Maastricht: Cicero Foundation, 2008), 6-7.

[14] Tomas Valasek, *NATO, Russia and European security* (London: Centre for European Reform, 2009), 8.

[15] A contextual aside helps to explain the fears in Eastern Europe: The Russian drive into Georgia in August 2008 was preceded by such a military rehearsal, with the participant formations staying in place to become the brunt of the invasion force. George Friedman, 'Georgia and the Balance of Power', in *The New York Review of Books*, August 27 2008.

[16] NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen duly criticised this doctrine, which he described as contrary to the spirit of mutual détente established during his late 2009 visit to Russia. David

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Brunnstrom, 'Russian doctrine does not reflect real world: NATO', *Reuters*, February 6 2010, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6150NI20100206>

[17] Valentina Pop, 'Russia does not rule out future NATO membership', *EUobserver*, April 1 2009, available at: <http://euobserver.com/9/27890>

[18] This name change would be needed to reflect the new geographical scope of the Alliance. In 'New video on NATO's relations with Russia', *natochannel.tv*, available at: www.natochannel.tv/?aid=3964

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