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A NEW EUROPEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE?

Agnieszka Nowak
Associated Researcher

Can we, 20 years on since the 'iron curtain' collapsed, imagine a new trans-regional security forum bringing together Russia, Europe and the US? Well, Russia certainly can and tries to convince the west that 'Atlanticism has already had its day' (1) and that 'existing security organizations are no longer capable of guaranteeing Europe's security' (2). To remedy this 'situation' Russian President Dmitri Medvedev has suggested that all countries in the region, as well as the regional security organizations such as NATO, the EU, OSCE, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), should convene a top-level summit to discuss a new security treaty. What is it the Russians want and how are they trying to achieve it?

Medvedev launched his concept of 'new European security architecture' last June in Berlin. Since then, he has developed and promoted the idea further in speeches in Evian, October 2008 (3) and in Helsinki, in April this year (4) and has described the forum he has in mind as 'Helsinki Plus', in a reference to the 1975 Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (5). The Russian proposal will be discussed in Corfu on June 27-28 at a trans-regional security forum for the 56 participating states of the OSCE. The informal meeting will allow for direct talks at the Foreign Ministers level between Russia, the US and the European partners.

The main goal of Medvedev's proposal appears to be to establish a 'Euro-Atlantic security system that is equal for all states – without isolating anyone and without different levels of security'. This means, first and foremost, that Russia demands to be treated as an equal partner to Europe and the US. Secondly, the new security system should be established through a treaty clearly affirming the intergovernmental relations in the Euro-Atlantic area. According to Medvedev, the treaty should guarantee equal security by preventing any acts (by military alliances or coalitions) that undermine unity of common security and forbid the development of military alliances that would threaten the security of the other parties to the treaty. Russia's proposal thus appears to aim at marginalizing NATO and to exclude bloc politics.

nitially, the response from the Europeans to the Russian initiative was tentative, perhaps largely due to the lack of details about the proposed treaty. The Europeans may also feel ambivalent about the project due to what appears to be the second part of Russia's two-pronged campaign to achieve its goal. On the one hand, they have worked to persuade others about the necessity of defining a new framework for European security and the importance of Russia as a strategic security partner for achieving peace and stability in Europe. But on the other hand they have also appeared to undermine the effectiveness of security frameworks already in existence like NATO and the OSCE. So while Medvedev's speeches have been conciliatory in tone, underlining Russia's willingness to cooperate on various security issues and its adherence to European values, Russia's relations with the EU, NATO and the OSCE have become increasingly tense over the last months. The cold war rhetoric of a Russian 'sphere of influence' and the accusations of provocations could be heard from Moscow or Russia's diplomatic representatives almost daily.

Relations between Russia and NATO have been unusually tense since NATO endorsed the US decision to install anti-missile facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic. The potential further expansion of NATO to include Georgia and the outbreak of the Russia-Georgia war have been other sources of discord and caused the interruption of Russia-NATO Council meetings. At the beginning of May and only a week after the resumption of dialogue, Dmitry Rogozin (Russia's ambassador to NATO), announced that Moscow was pulling out of the Russia-NATO Council meeting in Brussels scheduled for May 18-19. He quoted Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying that any future talks would be 'inappropriate' in light of the tension over NATO military exercise in Georgia (6). At the same time, NATO expelled two Russian diplomats on espionage allegations.

Although Russia seemed to favor dealing with the EU over security issues and welcomed the EU's effort to negotiate a ceasefire agreement in the Russia-Georgia conflict as well as EU monitoring of the Georgian-South Ossetian border (7), relations with the EU have also deteriorated recently, due to disagreement about energy / gas issues and the EU's Eastern Partnership. During the last EU-Russia Summit in May, President Medvedev reaffirmed that Russia has no intention of ratifying the European Energy Charter and instead will propose a new agreement. He also warned that the EU's newly launched Eastern Partnership risks inflaming political tensions (8).

At the OSCE meeting scheduled for June 27-28 on the Greek Island of Corfu, Russia will have an opportunity to present its proposal of a new security treaty. Still, the OSCE is another organization that has found relations with Russia becoming increasingly tense over the last year. The OSCE has not been able to come to an agreement with Russia about its border monitoring mission in Georgia/South Ossetia. The OSCE is supposed to pull out all monitors by June 30, after Russia blocked agreement to extend their mission beyond December 31, 2008 and gave it six months to withdraw (9). In the meantime Russia redeployed its peacekeeping troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, breaking the previous agreements and without consulting its move with anyone, simply announcing that Moscow was assuming formal control over the boundaries of the two rebel provinces (10).

Despite current disagreements and mutual mistrust between Russia and other security actors, the Russian proposal for a new security treaty will get a hearing in Corfu. By itself, this must be considered a Russian success. Rudiments of the proposal presented so far have been criticized by the security analysts as inconsistent and ambiguous (11). Russia has an opportunity to present a detailed proposal and certainly will expect a response from both the US and the European partners. The question is though whether Russia is truly interested in a new treaty, or just playing for time while reasserting itself in its former sphere of influence. We will perhaps get an indication of Russia's true intentions when the details of the Russian proposal become known.

Notes

- (1) President of Russia official web portal, Speech at Meeting with German Political, Parliamentary and Civic Leaders, June 5, 2008, Berlin
- (2) President of Russia official web portal, Speech at Helsinki University, April 20, 2009, Helsinki
- (3) President of Russia official web portal, Speech at World Policy Conference, October 8, 2008, Evian
- (4) President of Russia official web portal, Speech at Helsinki University, April 20, 2009, Helsinki
- (5) RFE/RL, Medvedev To Float European Energy Security Proposal, by Ahto Lobjakas, April 20, 2009
- (6) RFE/RL, Russia and NATO At Odds Over Planned Military Exercise In Georgia, by Rony Synovitz, April 22, 2009
- (7) Spiegel online, EU monitoring Mission in Georgia, Russians Allow Observers into Buffer Zone, October 10, 2008
- (8) EUobserver, EU-Russia summit ends with prickly exchange over energy, Andrew Rettman, May 23, 2009
- (9) Reuters, OSCE Georgia plan fudges South Ossetia Status, by Mark Heinrich, May 11, 2009
- (10) Telegraph, Russia deploys troops along Georgia's internal border, Adrian Blomfield, May 3, 2009
- (11) Russia and its 'New Security Architecture' in Europe: A Critical Examination of the Concept, Andrey S. Makarychew, CEPS Working Document No.310/February 2009