

# The Idea of European Security: The Renewed Russian Dilemma

Written by Sandra Fernandes

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SANDRA FERNANDES, OCT 25 2012

In the post-bipolar era, the security architecture of Europe had to be adapted and the main European security actors undertook internal and external changes. The principal challenge has been the re-approximation of former enemies, namely the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia. The main remaining institution available to assume security and defense responsibilities was NATO. Original institutionalized frameworks of cooperation have, then, been created to deal with Moscow that is not willing to be a member. Additionally, the Kremlin has moved towards its own institutional arrangements, such as the creation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

The debate about the European security architecture has gained a new impetus since Russia has been able to reassert its position externally under Putin's leadership.[1] As Lavrov (2011) recently underlined, Russia seeks the "permanent elimination of the Cold War legacy". It is an old and recurrent question related to the predominance of Western institutions in the framing of post-Cold War Europe that needs to be put under a new perspective, mostly since 2008. This year has been marked by challenging events impacting on the contested *status quo* inherited from the 90's.

Although Moscow has always been reluctant in accepting the predominance of NATO and a diminished security role in Europe (and later opposing as well the role of the European Union in the post-soviet space), the first straightforward moves to change this state of play have emerged in 2008. Firstly, the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 has reaffirmed the Russian political, security and military prerogatives in its *near abroad*.[2] Secondly, the NATO enlargement towards Ukraine and Georgia has been cautiously postponed by the Alliance considering Russian vehement opposition to it, although there was division among member states on the issue. Thirdly, former president Medvedev issued an institutional proposal for a new security pact in Europe that he developed later in 2009 (President of Russia 2009). The three elements are illustrative of the renewed challenge posed by Russia.

This article aims at analyzing the Russian dilemma for the definition of new European security architecture, taking particularly into account the Medvedev proposal and the existing flaws in the current architecture. We argue that it is time for political creativity to improve the imperfect heritage of the last twenty one years. In fact, the security architecture is proving not being suited to address the nowadays challenges, as recent years issues have outlined (see below). Recently, it is often argued that Russian membership in the Transatlantic Alliance would solve the above mentioned security issues. This proposal is informed by some 'wishful thinking' and avoids another much more defining problematic. In fact, one of the questions to be raised should be the following: what is the role of NATO in Europe today and how does it contribute to solve security problems? The complexity of the security architecture should not be hidden behind the curtain of enlargements, which have not been helping to create political convergence with Russia.

At the end of the Cold War, the idea of creating a pan-European architecture for security was fed through the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The discussion of the organization's role in European security has been recurring, despite the prominence that NATO took on the remodeling of the post-Cold War order. The Helsinki Declaration of 1975 is at the origin of a pan-European dialogue and recognizes principles such as

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peace, consultation and respect for human rights. However, these principles were not to be interpreted the same way. In the post-bipolar era, the starting point of pan-Europeanism can be found in the 1990 'Paris Charter' towards a united and democratic Europe. Divergences about the Helsinki commitments have been enduring and Klimov (2008) believes that it is time to organize a major conference on security and take into consideration the new facts of the XXI century. He points out that Helsinki happened long ago and that it is no longer valid today.

Besides the 2008 events, above mentioned, other inter-connected security issues are illustrative of the gap existing between the Kremlin and the existing institutional arrangements. The issue of further NATO Eastern enlargements is, in fact, linked to other two security issues that have been addressed and opposed by Russia, with some success: the US missile shield and the CFE[3] Treaty. They are dealt with in different forums, at bilateral and multilateral levels. The existing security architecture makes it difficult to discuss missile defence outside the bilateral US-Russian dialogue.[4] Actually, there are several security dialogues which do not necessarily overlap.[5] Concerning conventional armaments, Russia suspended its participation from the CFE since December 2007, causing concern among signatories.[6] These Russian responses, so far, highlight that, contrary to what happened in the 90's, these long lasting and recurring disagreements are now to be dealt taking into account a real Russian capacity of influence. It is also geopolitically significant that Moscow does not accept the idea of a 'shared neighbourhood' with the EU.[7]

Nonetheless, the so-called 'Medvedev proposal' has proven to be a mere rhetoric exercise besides the Russian affirmation that it will not accept what it perceives as an imposed Western security order. The bottom line of the disagreement on security issues lies in a deep incompatibility of views that crystallized mainly on NATO and the OSCE. On the one hand, the Kremlin does not recognise the legitimacy of the existence of NATO in the post-Cold War world. On the other hand, the Allies do not even question NATO *raison d'être*. The Alliance has formally been willing to engage in a dialogue on the 'Medvedev proposal' but it considers the existing security architecture as being "satisfactory" and "balanced" (Scheffer 2009). The fact that the proposed Russian concept of security architecture is hardly operational adds to the difficulty in opening such a dialogue (Fernandes 2012).

In fact, the Medvedev bid for a new security pact has not provoked significant reactions. Its formulation and the promotion of a debate by the Russians has still to materialise. Moreover, Brussels and Washington have not shown willingness to enter into this debate. The proposal has been included in an institutional framework in 2009 at the launch of the Corfu process within the OSCE, with no interest in actually resuming this proposal in substance. It is believed that the content does not bring novelty and the question raised by the Russian initiative refers more to the process in which the debate will be conducted, than to substantive issues.[8] The all exercise appears to be a 'food for thought' somehow disconnected from the pressing inter-related security issues, above-mentioned.

Long-term divergences about the legitimacy of the security order are, then, not prone to produce a satisfactory solution for the inclusion of Russia in the European security architecture. Additionally, the 'near abroad' represents a political and operational limit for Moscow that is hardly surmountable. The prospects for cooperation in this area of particularly sensitive sovereignty points to the need for continued efforts in a long-term approach. In this context, Ukraine is of particular importance in the eyes of the Kremlin. Additionally, the Russian resurgence may translate into more assertive and unilateral responses in the absence of a security debate. The new Russian doctrines point in this direction and the Russian external actions since the second term of Putin evidence, perhaps, that this path has already been taken. Considering that the accession of Russia to NATO it is not likely, it is imperative to find a *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* that is able to balance two opposing elements that mark European security relations: foundational controversies *versus* the need for cooperation based on interdependencies. Although the Medvedev proposal turned out to be an 'empty shell', the debate about the European security architecture is still open and challenging.

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[1] On the return of Russia in European and global affairs, see (Oldberg 2010).

[2] The 'near abroad' corresponds to the fourteen Newly Independent States that were part of the former USSR along with Russia. This notion corresponds to a zone of vital interest, or at least sphere of influence, that informs deeply the Russian perception of threats. In August 2008, former President Medvedev (2008) mentioned that Russia has 'special interest regions', reinforcing by this mean the idea that a country such as Georgia is part of the 'near abroad'.

[3] The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE).

[4] For a detailed analysis of these inter-related security issues and the institutional framework, see (Fernandes 2009).

[5] For instance, the EU lacks competences, under Title V of the Treaty on the European Union, to discuss hard security matters. Member states are, then, able to pursue national aims in bilateral talks with third states. As far as NATO is concerned, the Alliance decided to complement the US missile defence system.

[6] This decision relates to Russian fears regarding several elements. Moscow wants to avoid conventional NATO troops at its borders. The Federation also links the CFE treaty and missile defense in Europe in the sense of a strategic disadvantage for Russia. Overall, the suspension reflects willingness to review the provisions of the Treaty itself.

[7] On the issue, see (Fernandes and Makarychev 2009).

[8] This information has been retrieved by the author from interviews with EU and Russian officials in 2010.

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