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Building better security for wider Europe

Now and then: Navigating the security agenda between Russia and NATO

EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

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The European Leadership Network (ELN) is an independent, non-partisan, pan-European NGO with a network of nearly 200 past, present and future European leaders working to provide practical real-world solutions to political and security challenges.

About the author

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Introduction

The evolution of a wide-ranging system of agreements and understandings moderating security risks during the Cold War period was built upon an extended, if sometimes difficult, interchange between the United States and its NATO partners on the one hand, and the members of the Soviet-directed Warsaw Pact on the other. Its evolution also required substantive exchanges as to competing aims and interests within the rival blocs. The system that then emerged and retained a degree of practical effect even after the collapse of the USSR has since deteriorated to the point of extinction, even as confrontation between Russia and NATO has been reborn. This brief considers what lessons, if any, are worth drawing for the situation now from the experience of navigating the Soviet-NATO interchange then.

The bases of Cold War East West security management

Memories of the 1948 to 1989 Cold War have inevitably acquired a mythological character and distorted both Western and Russian - especially Russian - beliefs as to our present condition. The proposition that we are engaged in a further round of that contest is tempting for those who

resent the change it brought about in Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. A summary of factors that made the Cold War what it was, and why it was possible to live through the paradox between its potential for mutual catastrophe on the one hand and the evolution of systems meant to guard against such a disaster on the other may perhaps outline options to ameliorate today's risks.

The fundamental truths about the Cold War were threefold: its primary military expression was the deployment of Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces with the potential to break through the lines held by the United States and its NATO allies; the threat of Mutually Assured Destruction inherent in the nuclear weapons amassed by the Soviet Union, the United States and in smaller quantity by France and Britain; and the insecurity of what was then the Soviet bloc, which fed into the presumption inherent to the Stalinist system of capitalist enmity, which in its turn nurtured Western fears of Kremlin-based militarised ambitions for extending its control still further. The Cold War was pockmarked with inter-bloc crises up to Gorbachev's establishment as General Secretary of the Communist Party, including crises beyond Europe itself, from Korea to Afghanistan.

Confrontation between the two super-powers, in tandem with their NATO and Warsaw Pact colleagues, was particularly dangerous when one or other of the contestants was

“The essential purpose of NATO was and remained containment, not the overthrow of the USSR.”

feared by its rival to have secured an advantage in the relative “correlation of forces” between them. The possibility of the United States undertaking a preemptive nuclear attack was seriously considered as a risk to be faced by the Soviet Union when Andropov was General Secretary for instance. But as the Cold War and the arms race that went with it developed, so too did the realisation that containing its risks made a degree of cooperation and even collaboration between the rivals essential. No Western power was able or willing to intervene in the course of crises inside the Soviet bloc. The essential purpose of NATO was and remained containment, not the overthrow of the USSR, the liberation of the Warsaw Pact states or the forcible reunification of Germany. The Soviet Union was never able to secure its hold over Berlin, central though that was for the secure establishment of the German Democratic Republic it desired. What came over the years to seem to the vast majority of analysts to be the permanent division of Europe made

it inevitable that both of the major powers should place their strategies firmly within that shared and expected binary context.

While there were differences of perception within NATO during the Cold War, basic unity between the members of the Alliance was underpinned by the constraining realities of a divided Europe. That did not prevent the construction and development of separate European institutions within Western Europe itself, but it limited their geographical scope and political choices. There were no parallels to these within the Warsaw Pact beyond the network of inter-party relationships built up and controlled by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Western countries had the further advantage over Warsaw Pact countries of recovering solidly from the devastation of World War II within the context of Western-developed international financial and trading institutions and agreements. These were strengths that fed into a common set of general ideas that buttressed policy discussions within NATO and beyond.

It was this general framework that enabled the NATO countries to make a consistent effort over the years to reach accommodation with the Soviet Union over: nuclear testing, and a balance of capacity between the USA and the USSR as to their nuclear weapons; an attempt to

“The 1975 Helsinki settlement.. provided for an international say on human rights issues, including in the USSR.”

achieve mutual and balanced force reductions; agreement on confidence building measures such as monitoring military manoeuvres and in due course to determine the geographical stationing of military units; and the restriction of intermediate nuclear missiles. The 1975 Helsinki settlement decided German borders that had been disputed for years. It also provided for an international say on human rights issues, including in the USSR, which had a more far reaching impact than the Soviet hierarchy had imagined. None of these advances would have been possible without long and concentrated effort and forward planning within NATO, involving committed work by individual countries, whether European or North American. Insistent dialogue with Moscow was essential, too, whether in bad times or good. The realities of the Cold War focused NATO, and many non-member countries for that matter, on the central problem of maintaining so far as possible a balanced and secure relationship within a divided Europe.

After the Cold War

The withdrawal of Soviet armed forces from central and eastern Europe, together with the peaceful reunification of Germany, in themselves altered the framework that had before determined NATO's security policies. The subsequent collapse of the USSR appeared to most members of NATO as the prelude to even more far reaching changes which would justify a considerable peace dividend from reduced defence spending. Former members of the Warsaw Pact were concerned to ensure the stability of central and eastern Europe, and to insure themselves against the uncertainties of what was happening in the Soviet Union, or later in Russia, by securing recognised places in Western structures for themselves. In practice, that meant NATO, neither the EU nor the countries themselves initially being ready for EU membership. The way that formerly Soviet countries and Russia in particular developed was more troubled, but the Western belief that they, and again Russia in particular, were in transition, however difficult it might be, towards “normality” was quite general. Russia was no longer regarded in the Yeltsin years as a present military threat. Putin was seen, against some of the evidence, as a reformer as his terms in the Kremlin began.

The forces that had determined western European countries to invest in security, to work together in NATO,

and to look for new ways to curb nuclear and/or conventional military risks were accordingly weakened. Transatlantic unity was over time diminished. The supposition that one way or another, and given suitably restrained and respectful NATO behaviour, relationships with Moscow would become closer held sway at times even during the Cold War. Against the evidence, they retain their force today, as witness the Obama reset, and the recent call by President Macron for warmer ties with Russia as a European country.

2019

Any country's international policies are determined in the first place by its internal problems and ambitions. Insofar as Western decision makers have thought of Russia as a country in transition, their disillusion with the reality of its transition not being towards European norms but to authoritarianism has been tardy. Political and military thinking within Russia as publicly expressed is based on inherited Cold War assumptions, with rivalry with the United States at its heart. Security thinking has become an increasing and dominant preoccupation for Russia's governing group since President Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012. The myth that Russia needs buffer zones to keep it safe is of long standing, though repeatedly exposed as building in insecurity for Russia itself because

“Any country's international policies are determined in the first place by its internal problems and ambitions.”

of the Kremlin's need to keep such zones under tight control. The urge somehow to preserve the interests of the presently powerful as the constitutionally prescribed period for Putin's legitimate tenure of office ends in May 2024 reinforces that preoccupation, with regard to Ukraine not least. Russia's rulers form a continuum between protecting their country's domestic as well as international security, seeing both to be at risk from what they instinctively regard as hostile activity from abroad. Minister of Defence Shoigu's interview of 22 September 2019, his first comprehensive public account of how he sees his latest role, was rife with comments on what he considered as Western intervention in internal Russian affairs, and the importance of the Russian armed forces in assuring the internal stability of the Russian state. Russia's Ministry of Defence plays a particular role in this overall process, public discussion none. Strategy documents are published from time to time, but concrete decision making is inherently secretive.

A recent analysis by Finnish experts¹ reported: "In its attitude towards NATO and cooperation with it, Russia is systematically seeking a position where the political systems of Russia's Western partners bow to solutions that conform to Russia's security needs.... However, these perspectives that take Russia's needs into account and the solutions based on them often seem to totally ignore the fact that Russia's own actions are destabilising the international security system.... Russia considers the post-Soviet space to be the most important area for its foreign and security policy, as well as the area most likely to see military conflicts." These convictions are bolstered by the increasingly repressive Kremlin response to domestic protest movements likely to become more widespread as 2024 and its undecided regime outcome loom ever larger. Fear for the future at home fuels fear of the outside world.

What is to be done?

The omens for re-building a general framework for managing NATO/Russia confrontation similar to that which developed between NATO and the USSR do not look good. Extending the New START agreement on nuclear weapons for another five years in 2021 by Russia and the USA remains uncertain. President Putin oversaw the latest armed forces wide-scale exercise involving nuclear forces beginning on 17 October this year, designed partly for testing

Russia's readiness in case of war, and partly in pursuit of the quarrel between Washington and Moscow as to who was responsible for the 2019 demise of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces agreement of 1987. He has also announced that Russia is helping China to develop the ability to track incoming strategic missiles as part of their developing 'partnership'. China has helped Russia to build up its internal security apparatus, for example by improving its facial recognition technology, used to scan recent protests in Moscow and beyond. The last proposal from Moscow for a review of European security issues was put forward by President Medvedev during his brief tenure of office, but it was so empty of solid content that it gained no traction. Suggestions that cooperation on matters of, in principle, common concern like terrorism or controlling cyber risks, whether by Moscow or other capitals, have not been pursued either by Russia or by NATO powers, not least because of the difficulty of defining their nature.

NATO powers, too, have found it difficult to suggest ways of improving international security. This may in part be because of the inherent difficulty of finding a common language and set of values, including with Russia. The Alliance is, moreover, no longer the major actor on the stage that it was in the Cold War. It is indeed hard to decipher at present who is: there are differing voices from Washington; the European Union has its External

Action Force but is also composed of nations with differing attitudes towards Russia and different claims to international authority. Alliance powers and members of the European Union have shown solidarity at critical moments, such as the seizure by Russia of Crimea and that country's military intervention in Donbas in and after 2014. Sanctions on Russia have been maintained and strengthened since then. But intentions over the longer term have been less clear. The temptation to reach for a compromise solution over Ukraine, as was arranged by President Sarkozy on Georgia after Russia seized parts of that country in 2008, is there despite the fact that the chance of Russia being true to its word is no more credible now than it was in 2008.

There would, in principle, be a case for leading NATO powers to reach for a common understanding of where Russia may be heading domestically as well as in its foreign policies. There may perhaps be some movement in this direction at the next NATO Leaders' Meeting presently scheduled for December in London. Such a search might also in due course include other Western states like Sweden or Finland. Some form of consensus as to the nature of Russia's government and its prospects would be essential, as it was during the Cold War, if NATO leaders are to go beyond addressing particular international issues and to take full account of the tensions within today's Russia that inform such problems. The

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blunt truth of the matter is that neither NATO as an Alliance nor any of its individual members have or have ever had plans for military action against Russia but that the Kremlin today, as it did in Soviet times, fears that the principles that make the countries of the Alliance in large measure more prosperous and more securely based are a threat to Russia's rulers. They are so, but Putin and his group can never admit this, even to themselves. Hence their adherence to Cold War propositions. Hence also the necessity for NATO and its individual member states to refuse to be bound, as they are tempted to be, by a present-day Russia-induced framework of assumptions governing the proper relationship between them and Russia's ruling group. It will take time, talk and effort within and outside NATO to move beyond the present impasse, as it did during the Cold War, but there are no quick fixes.

Conclusion

Pleas for the revival of dialogue between Russia and the West such as that recently published by a group associated with the European Leadership Network² are not uncommon. But if as is argued above, there is little present likelihood of making tangible progress towards the eventual development of some sort of over-arching and enduring security arrangement for Europe as a whole, then the present choice is limited to particular security issues. It is not just “the West” however defined and Russia that would need to be included in a process that might begin to move us away from a less acrimonious relationship. Other formerly Soviet countries as well as non-NATO member states have interests that need to be respected too. Arguing for dialogue and mutual trust in the abstract is empty of meaning.

If New START could be extended for a further period beyond 2021, that might perhaps do something to persuade both the United States and Russia to see whether there might possibly be mutual advantage in other nuclear-related options. There is perhaps an argument for such issues to be reviewed in a select NATO context in due course, if only to reinvigorate internal Alliance debate on wider security issues. Bilateral US-Soviet discussions and eventual substantive negotiations on nuclear matters were

“There are particular risks inherent in the present state of militarised confrontation between Russia and NATO in Europe..”

instrumental during the Cold War in widening the more general agenda.

There are particular risks inherent in the present state of militarised confrontation between Russia and NATO in Europe, around the Baltic states and potentially in Georgia as Russian border creep forwards there continues. It is evident too that the situation in Ukraine is still serious. It could in that context be sensible for NATO to look into ways to avoid accidental clashes with Russian armed forces and to consider what can be done to moderate them without somehow by inference implying that existing Russian actions are legitimate. The European Leadership Network report of 7 February³ suggests some possible approaches. There have been precedents in Syria, which did not, however, extend to Russia’s “private” forces. The Russian armed forces have a record of reckless behaviour subsequently denied that needs to be

kept in mind, to say nothing of warfare conducted over a wider dimension than has been traditional that makes it questionable how far any initiatives in this general area can be used to further wider security interests in the longer term. NATO's Military Committee would have the judgement and contacts to advise how far exploring possibilities in the area might be useful.

There might also be a case for discussion within NATO of how Cold War confidence building measures that still exist, including those stemming from the 1975 Helsinki Accords, might be brought up to date. NATO's Secretary-General confirmed in a speech of 23 October that NATO allies and partners had put forward a package of proposals in the OSCE to modernise the Vienna Document. There could well be mutual benefit in re-establishing agreed standards for the way that military exercises are reported and verified, or how armed forces are to be deployed. Russia has also signed onto obligations affecting, for example, human rights. The Kremlin's respect or disrespect for those obligations is a basis for trust or mistrust of Russia in the West and beyond it.

These last references to a wider spectrum, based on what was in the end achieved as the Cold War proper evolved over time, and as interchange between the West and the USSR developed in the context that then prevailed, remain relevant not so much because they are likely to make for

“..how Cold War confidence building measures that still exist, including those stemming from the 1975 Helsinki Accords, might be brought up to date.”

concrete results in discussion with today's Kremlin but as a means for NATO or other western organisations to ponder an agenda that might become to a degree practicable as and when Moscow begins to look for a more productive relationship with other European states. That will depend on what is at present unpredictable, how and when Russia may emerge from its present authoritarian cul-de-sac.

Endnotes

1. Russia of Power: ISBN: 978-951-663-065-9 print ISBN: 978-951-663-066-6 pdf, pp55
2. <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ELN-Contact-Group-Statement-on-Stereotyping-and-Dialogue-October-2019.pdf>
3. <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ELN-Contact-Group-Statement-on-Stereotyping-and-Dialogue-October-2019.pdf>



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