

## Proceedings of a Workshop “Russian Security Present and Future”, 9 June 2009 \*

*By Baltic Defence College faculty*

The workshop held at the Baltic Defence College was not the first of its kind, but as the College continues to develop its functions as provider of high-end knowledge provider for students and policy-makers alike, it is possible that the success of this endeavor will trigger a series of workshops yielding booklets like this one, and articles in specialized journals. These products, in turn, may find their way into the curriculum of the College. More importantly, however, it is necessary to take stock, occasionally, of the security developments that shape the regional strategic environment.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2009, specialists from various Baltic ministries, Tartu University, St-Petersburg University and the Finnish National Defense University met with their counterparts at the Baltic Defence College to discuss the wider implications of Russia’s search for security in a changing world. The workshop focused on region-to-region security dialogues, on the ways and means at Russia’s disposal to determine its own security unilaterally, and on the state of Russia itself. In other words, the premise was not of *military* security but of *wider* security. The underlying theme was that structural readiness (the amount of military equipment on hand) is not a guarantee of safety or a threat in itself. Such capabilities are less credible in today’s interdependent world than they were during the Cold War days. Security is very much dependent on societal and economic factors. How these factors play out in Russia hypothetically have implications for Euro-Atlantic relations and for Baltic security as well.

### 1. Russian Wider Security and its Impact

“Wider” security is often thought of in geographic terms. For example, wider Russian security is very much dependent on the status of relations between Russia and Euro-Atlantic partners. And because Russian decision-

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makers believe firmly that the policies and positions of Euro-Atlantic partners is dictated by the United States, then Euro-Atlantic/Russian relations (or NATO- Russia relations) are in fact summarized by the kind of relations Russia has with the United States.

The workshop yielded that the post-Cold War history of U.S.-Russia relations was mixed. A certain number of friction points were inherited from the Clinton administration. President Clinton's administration was overwhelmed by the problems of the Middle East and in the Balkans, and foreign policy in general, or with major actors such as Russia, suffered as a result. The audience was reminded that the USSR's collapse was due to crass mismanagement, and the new Russia should have reformed its economy, something it hasn't done.

While U.S.-Russia relations remained acceptable, the trend is unmistakable; each new American President arrived in office buoyed by the belief that harmonious *personal* relations with the Russian leadership will achieve the desired effects. Ultimately, each of these administrations' hopes turned out to be illusory. When Mr. Clinton entered office, Strobe Talbott, a renowned expert on Russia (he translated *Khrushchev remembers* in the early 1970s), was motivated by the same enthusiasm, which seemed to be reciprocated at least until the abrupt conclusion of the Balkan wars in 1995. The 1998 currency crisis and the Kosovo air war in 1999 sealed the relations between U.S./NATO and Russia for the next few years. The Bush Administration that succeeded Clinton's was less inclined to compromise, and was definitely more realistic. Yet, it is at the infamous Ljubljana meeting in 2001, that Mr. Bush "saw Mr. Putin's soul", and decided that he could do business with him.

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 lent credence to this belief, as the perceptions of Russia and the United States about what constitutes a terrorist (and how to deal with the problem) suddenly found reconciliation. In this sense, the trend of the Bush Administration with Russia is atypical. This yielded unprecedented cooperation between the two giant countries in the pursuit of the war on terror. When resource revenues became lucrative enough to allow Russia to recover, however, the accompanying self-confidence of the Russian leadership started to strain relations. When the issue of energy resources became confused with the war on terror, relations took a turn for the worst.

On Iran, for example, Russia and the United States were never able to find compromise. The U.S. strongly opposes the development of nuclear potential in a rival that has repeatedly stated that it viewed the U.S. and some of its allies (notably Israel) as hostile powers. As far as Russia was concerned, Iran is an important partner, because on its assent lies Russia's use of the Caspian Sea for oil and gas exploration. In addition, Russia has been supplying technology and know-how to the Iranians in the development of their civilian nuclear reactors.

For years, U.S.-Russia relations have been deteriorating, and factors of disagreement have begun permeating areas where there had been long-standing cooperation. As Russia continues to block United Nations resolutions on Iran, it is no surprise to see that the European Union is no more able to sway the former superpower to re-establish harmony in the Euro-Atlantic world. As was explained, the Common Security and Foreign Policy of the European Union is ill-adapted to deal with a centralized and authoritarian power like Russia. The disagreement at what to do with Russia in the European Union relative to energy security in particular is palpable. While certain countries fear Russia's influence, others adapt to it, and yet other EU members leverage it for their own advantages, suggesting fragmentation within the EU. This fragmentation supplies yet another reason for the EU's tendency to "muddle through", and find consensus on the lowest common denominator.

This tendency means that even when the EU acts "together", Russia can still negotiate from strength. As evidence of this strength becomes more tangible, the risk is that national policies within the EU will tend to predominate over common ones. Because the variety of members means a variety of views on Russia, the prospect of "deeper" integration is held hostage to better relations in general. Of course, it does not help that Russia finds the EU less relevant as a partner than the U.S. (because Euro-Atlantic relations are shaped by the Americans). Somehow, the only solution the EU has to salvage its unity is to decide on the lowest common denominator, but individual security will be perceived to be based on bilateral deals. Although this was not developed further during the discussions, it is possible that EU-Russia relations, when examined from the energy security standpoint, are dependent on what Russia believes to be leverage by the EU in its old "sphere of influence". For example, in 2006 and 2009, Russia repeatedly cut gas flows to Ukraine, a move that had repercussions in Central and Western Europe. The EU's implication in

attempting to craft an energy security regime involving Ukraine may be seen by the Russians as interference in favor of Ukraine.

Obviously, other non-related statements about Ukraine's NATO prospects play on Russian fears. The Bucharest Summit declaration on Georgia and Ukraine one day joining NATO without a Membership Action Plan (MAP) finds itself integrated in what Russia sees as an integrated discourse of politico-military-economic expansion detrimental to Russia. It must be said that too little is being done to evacuate the zero-sum mentality currently at work in the Russian leadership. In any case, too many international events have taken place to lead the Russians to believe that integration is beneficial to them. As a result, Russia seems to have embraced relative isolationism. This isolationism carries the prospect of unilateralism.

When coupled with the fragmentation of policy-making on energy security, Russian unilateralism, as recently demonstrated in Georgia, is a factor that acts on straining relations not only between the Euro-Atlantic partnership and Russia, but within the Euro-Atlantic framework as well. The Baltic States rightly reacted with alarm at what was happening to Georgia, and not only because they had invested a lot in terms of foreign aid and advisory assistance. Russia's foray into Georgia was based on the precedent set by the Kosovo air war. Although it has been said that there is no such "rule of precedent" in international law (which is true), it nevertheless remains equally true that precedence is based on a generalized understanding of what is "equitable".

The Russians, in their minds, based their intervention on what was thought of as a perverted "responsibility to protect", and although NATO condemned the action as "disproportionate", and claimed that this was contrary to the Helsinki Final Act (in particular), it did not condemn the illegality of the action, because this would mean that the Kosovo air war could suffer from unfavorable revisionism. It is not the first time that Russia had acted in reciprocity and copy-cat mode to Western actions; there is no coincidence between the 1956 Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Crisis that same month. One permitted the other because it demonstrated a split between NATO allies for one, and because it created a precedent that would cast Western camp in a bad light if the Invasion of Hungary was condemned. Similarly, in 1968, the Prague Spring followed U.S. escalation in Vietnam, and similarly played on a widening split within

NATO (France had left the integrated military structure two years before). So Georgia's case today can be blamed on the occurrence of the Kosovo air war.

In the end, the Baltic States had cause to worry, as the eruption of the first international conventional war in Europe since 1945 only highlighted their exposed geographic position. While it is not clear what the Baltic States hope to gain by supporting Georgia's entry into NATO, the "Russia fact" cannot be ignored, and a proper internationalization of the problem may occur only through the multiplication of allies, and the leverage that isolated partners like Georgia and Ukraine can get from the newer NATO members. Still, the fragmentation at work within the NATO and EU members plays into Russian hands. As the world moves ever more into a realistic mindset, small powers like Georgia find themselves increasingly at risk of being ignored by larger powers.

This trend had been evident since the early 2000s. The abrogation, ignorance, or violation of many international treaties and conventions buttressing international relations has promoted self-help attitudes over cooperation. For example, the United States abrogation of the ABM Treaty in 2002 was reciprocated by Russia in part by not extending the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty. The actions of private military companies in Iraq (Abu Ghraib) and of the United States in Guantanamo have called into question the value of the Geneva Conventions and the 1948 Declaration on Human Rights, meaning that matters of interest are not based on norms and values, but on the exercise of coercive power. Not only does this asymmetry of values affect intra-Alliance relationships, but within the European Union, the enlargement fatigue has prevented the deepening of the most successful European regime of all time when the EU Constitution failed to be ratified in 2004, on the opposition of Turkish membership. As a result, precedents for self-help are set that are easily reciprocated by Russia. Furthermore, the fragmentation of the political spectrum allows Russia to act as overwhelming power in any bilateral combination.

Domestically, Russia's position is abysmal, but this is counting on a Western view of affairs. In fact, there are many features of its society and economy that support self-help trends. First, the economy continues to produce higher standards of living than ever before in Russian history, and this even in a cooling economic environment. At the same time, the

standards of living remain low enough to prevent any widespread discontent that could threaten the regime in place. Furthermore, taxes are being collected more regularly, and while taxes are being paid, the average life expectancy means that workers live out their useful lives without being a burden to the state. This contributes to the stability of domestic energy consumption, eases the state burden on pension payments, and allows the state to concentrate on external ventures. Without a credible opposition, or with a credible opposition based on a civil society unwilling to risk what it has got for dubious advantage, the state has a free hand internally and externally.

To generate the kind of revenue that maintains internal stability, the Russian state has sought to centralize power and decision-making, and, to its credit, has focused on a few areas of success. The manner in which this focus was applied is less creditable, however. The Russian state has been engaging in neo-mercantilist practices, enabling foreign firms to explore, develop and exploit oil and gas on Russian territory, until the state acquires a controlling stake in the exploiting firms. Mitsubishi, Shell, TNK-BP, Exxon and many others have been expelled one after the other, and their activities have been seized by Russian interests close to the central power. Similarly, the arms industry found itself concentrated into a clearing house called “Rosoboronekспорт” which supplies the Russian state with weapons for free (occasionally) and trades with partners that are unpalatable to the United States and the European Union. A similar control of chemical and metallurgic companies in Russia has been taken through this clearing house. At the same time, most of the leadership of these firms and the government are related to the old Soviet KGB and Mr. Putin’s East German connections. While this is not a problem unto itself (many countries, more democratic than Russia, operate on the same principle), the unity of command that this affords presents risks in troubled socio-economic times.

It also presents opportunities. Unity of command and centralization of assets and revenue allows the state to focus its energies. Unfortunately, Russia is short on “soft power” by habit. For the Baltic States, this is an unacceptable factor of risk. The advantage for Russia is that the economic windfall of energy revenue has helped fund the recovery of the armed forces. The Russian Federation’s armed forces train more often and with greater vigor than ever before, and although serious social problems remain, the forces are generally better equipped in some localities. For

example, security sector “reform” has been successful in the Pskov Oblast experiment, which has seen the life of conscripts there dramatically improve, thanks to new barracks, equipment and infrastructure refurbishment. Elsewhere, in the Caucasus, for example, the 58<sup>th</sup> Army has been engaging in large scale annual exercises, making the 76<sup>th</sup> Airborne Regiment and the 58<sup>th</sup> Army the highest in terms of readiness.

In Georgia, this readiness was put to the test in the largest operation since the Chechen Wars of the mid-1990s. Although the operation revealed severe shortcomings in the use of the 4<sup>th</sup> Air Army based in Engels, it manifested the Russian ability at *maskirovka*, otherwise known as political-military deception, and the use of combined arms. The jury is still out as to whether the Russians applied any precise doctrine in their expedition in Georgia in 2008. Some commentators believe that the 76<sup>th</sup> Airborne, for example, started pursuing the adversary until contact, giving the impression that Russia aimed at taking control over the whole of Georgian territory. In discussions, it was agreed that this was not in fact the case. It is far better for Russia to maintain a political buffer zone between itself and NATO for which it is not responsible for (i.e. through occupation) than to take over the burden (and create the precedent for) neo-colonization. One of the conclusions of the discussions over Georgia is that not too much case should be made about the capability of the Russian leadership to prevail over the deployment of troops implementing doctrine dogmatically.

Even if the Russia-Georgian war has isolated Russia further into the camp of “proto-pariah” states, the realistic, self-help ambiance at work in international relations means that its actions are not detrimental to future dialogue. Although it has lost much credibility as a partner, those now at a disadvantage are Georgia and South Ossetia. Georgia is temporarily, if not permanently (NATO enlargement requires consensus among existing members, lest we forget) disqualified from membership, and there is evidence that this disqualification extends to Ukraine as well. The real loser is South Ossetia, who has cast its lot with Russia. Only now are the South Ossetians realizing that there is no benefit from being in the middle of two recognized powers, and their association with Russia has not triggered the independence that was hoped for.

Nevertheless, the message is clear. When and if needed, the Russian political leadership has the will and power to implement a military solution. In Georgia, it has succeeded in preventing NATO enlargement for the

time being. The use of force did provide the solution sought by the political class. The Baltic States are somewhat shielded from this outcome through the benefit of article 5 of the NATO Treaty, but as the economic crisis takes hold and self-help becomes the new norm, we must guard against the undue isolation that small powers may suffer.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

If the Euro-Atlantic partners are wrestling with their own economic demons and fall prey to further fragmentation, then the post-war and post-Cold War security regimes could be at risk. When statism becomes resurgent and governments seek to control their civil societies to avoid the consequences of crisis, they may tend to become more assertive (if not authoritarian) in all aspects of governance, even in their external relations. As this puts the equality of EU and NATO members under pressure, it would be prudent to forestall this fragmentation by initiating a dialogue on renewed multilateralism within the Euro-Atlantic region.

At the same time, this fragmentation has been fuelled in small part by the centralization of power and control over strategic resources in Russia. At present, there is no incentive for Russia to seek greater integration in supra-national structures as it would limit room for maneuver. The fact that Russia seeks no further integration either means that it thrives on self-help, or that it already has very limited space to maneuver and influence developments in what it likes to call the “near-abroad”. No recommendations as to *how* Russian integration into supra-national structures (such as the WTO, for example, or a resumption of the CFE and INF Treaties) during our discussions. The fact is that it has.

At the same time, Russia holds much of the resources that Europe needs to fuel itself, and if not, to keep energy prices at acceptable levels. Russia holds the key to conventional non-proliferation in its hands as well, and a lot of stability can be purchased if Russia can be convinced to stop trading arms with potential Euro-Atlantic adversaries. As a system of threats will only serve to confirm Russian fears about the intentions of its neighbors and NATO, a system of inducement could be developed to bring greater incentive for further dialogue.

Developing a set of carrots will require greater Euro-Atlantic cooperation, and here, the lowest common denominator could provide an acceptable set

of incentives to “reset” Euro-Atlantic and Russian relations. The litmus test of this attempt would be to have common measurements to determine whether Western largesse is being properly reciprocated, or whether advantages or unilaterally seized for further concessions. Paradoxically, it may still prove too attractive to Russia to allow for intra-European and Euro-Atlantic relations to consolidate however.

One of the solutions proposed was the revitalization of “neglected” multinational forums, such as the OSCE and the UN. In any case, multilateralism must meet the needs of the greater number, and the greater number of greater powers. One can never fully evacuate power-based realism from international relations, no matter how many cooperative systems are developed. Nevertheless, it seems that bringing sense and predictability to Russian actions must go through a renewed or reinvigorated multilateral system. If we want Russia to forego the military side of diplomacy and allow her to develop the “soft-power” which it lacks, it seems logical that other multilateral agencies – agencies that are trustworthy to all sides – be developed or used more often.

Both for Russia and the Euro-Atlantic world, however, the greater security framework will continue to evolve, and with globalization reaching regions of the world subject to instability, a multilateral security framework that does not rely on military coercion as primary mode of communication must nevertheless be effective and show results.

Although it would be logical to let NATO concentrate on the challenge of Afghanistan for a while rather than on the inertia of enlargement, in the absence of a reformed UN or a truly capable OSCE, it is unrealistic to expect any other agency but NATO to provide access to common values and principles. Yet, the military factor looms large in Russia’s mind, and this is why NATO remains unacceptable.

It was said that NATO could not do more for Russia than it already has, that it had done all it could, and that any steps forward in NATO-Russia (or NATO-U.S., or NATO-Euro-Atlantic) relations were the business of Russia alone. It was said that the only thing more that could be proposed to Russia was NATO membership itself (an issue that emerged in the press in the mid-1990s and again in the middle of 2001). This has been ruled out by then-President Putin. It would be furthermore unreasonable for the Baltic States to agree to this, as it would water down the guarantees of

article 5 (it would in fact turn article 5 into a threat for them). Nevertheless, NATO is not without solutions, and conditional participation of Russia (as a non-voting member, or as a non-veto voting member) in the North Atlantic Council, could be put forward.

But this would need to be connected to a wide set of reforms and potential memberships for Russia that would need to be guaranteed and monitored in some way. In a fast-changing world, this may be too much for slow-moving consensual bureaucracies to undertake. The new strategic concept of the Alliance could look into this possibility.

This could also be the subject of a future BALTDEFCOL workshop on the shape that the next NATO strategic concept (post-60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit) could take. The questions that could be tackled could investigate how the Baltic States will have their voices prevail in the formulation of that concept so that their concerns are more adequately reflected. Another question could be as straightforward as at what cost can Russian participation guarantee greater security for the Euro-Atlantic region if it were admitted to the North Atlantic Council. Evidently, such a carrot would need to be conditioned, and what those conditions should be can also be examined at the next workshop.