

Russia's New Euro-Atlanticism

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Russian-U.S. relations in the post-Cold War era have had their ups and downs, but the trend has generally been toward a reduction in spheres of cooperation, already limited just to security matters. Russia's immediate and unquestionable support of the United States after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has not led to a wider partnership or greater mutual trust.

Nonetheless, the United States, visibly or invisibly, has remained a key factor in Moscow's foreign policy decisionmaking, including in its relations with the European Union and its post-Soviet neighbors. Russian views on the United States' global role differ depending on one's vision of Russia's own future in global politics. Still, the dominant view is that the United States, in spite of the problems in Iraq and Afghanistan and its current financial crisis, will not become isolationist but will continue to pursue a strategy of global leadership. Russian political leaders recognize the global scale of U.S. interests, but argue that it is precisely their global nature that makes it impossible for the United States to address them alone. According to Russian minister of foreign affairs Sergei Lavrov, today's problems and concerns can be "regulated only on a collective basis."

Introduced as a liberal to both the West and Russia, President Dmitry Medvedev arrived onto a relatively smoother international playing field. Then-president Vladimir Putin's February 2007 speech in Munich and the December 2007 moratorium on the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) framed a visible deterioration of Russia's relations with the West. Subsequently, however, Putin made a significant effort to "de-Putinize" Russia's relations with the EU and the United States by returning to a more formal and less assertive form of diplomacy. Putin signaled this through the declaration he signed with U.S. President George W. Bush in Sochi on the eve of Dmitry Medvedev's presidential inauguration, as well as the more important Russia-U.S. Agreement for Cooperation in the Field of Peaceful

Uses of Nuclear Energy (still to be passed by the U.S. Congress). In an interview with the French daily *Le Monde* on May 30, Prime Minister Putin said there were more positive elements in Russia's relations with the United States than areas marked by controversy.

A New Beginning?

Other than a change in approach (and even this, not always), Medvedev's presidency has not brought any surprises to Russian foreign policy. Instead, there has largely been continuity in priorities, interests, and levers. The Putin-Medvedev tandem of Russian foreign policymaking has been a main element of this continuity. The geography of their trips (Kazakhstan twice, China, Germany, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, France, and the G8 summit in Japan) as well as their public speeches (in Berlin and Paris) demonstrate that both the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the EU remain key foreign policy priorities. After a rather long period of disarray in Russia-EU relations, a summit in the Russian city of Khanti-Mansiisk marked the start of negotiations on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.

Both Putin and Medvedev also agree on fundamentals. First, the duo stresses the dominance of the domestic socioeconomic agenda – the need to improve living conditions, modernize the economy, and shift Russia to an innovation economy – as a basis for foreign policymaking. Second, they consider independence (*samostoiatel'nost*) in foreign policy decisionmaking both a key principle and one of Russia's main achievements. Third, with Russia having restored its position as one of the key players in global politics, it has a responsibility to promote global stability and peace and is open to cooperation in different international formats, from the United Nations to ad hoc groups for the Middle East, Iran, North Korea, and other diplomatic troublespots. In the new global situation, Russia also needs state-to-state networks, along with traditional international forums, to achieve its goals and defend its interests. Fourth, Russia strongly prefers to use soft power levers; by no means will it invest in an arms race, which would be devastating for its socioeconomic development. Fifth, Russia adheres to a pragmatic and realistic approach to international affairs. While admitting differences of interests, it is ready to engage in a routine game of cooperation and competition with its partners but on the basis of fairness, transparency, equal terms, and its own self-interest.

In addition to these not so new fundamentals, one novel element has been injected into Russian foreign policy discussions. Rejecting the U.S.-European view of Euro-Atlantic cooperation, which Medvedev has deemed "obsolete," the new Russian administration has accepted and developed the concept of a broader Euro-Atlantic civilization which includes both Russia and the United States as the two wings of European civilization. By this understanding, Russia's development adds value to the development of Europe as a whole. At a time when the West has lost control over certain processes of globalization, the Kremlin considers it necessary to restore the unity of the whole European civilization, including Russia, the EU, and the United States, in order "to strengthen our common competitiveness."

To some European specialists, this ideological paradigm is something Moscow

has begun to invoke in order to obtain an equal position vis-à-vis the West. In fact, Russian Euro-Atlanticism is more of a defensive lever, first against the isolation of Russia in “a regional shell” (in the words of Lavrov); second, against its “Asianization” (*aziatchina*), still a vision of some Russian politicians but rejected by the European-oriented Medvedev and Putin; third, against the imposition of a choice between Europe and the United States; and, only finally, as an instrument to legitimize a continental or even global scale for Russia’s activities. At the same time, the Kremlin wishes to demonstrate that such a paradigm reflects a large segment of popular Russian opinion: according to a June 2008 opinion poll conducted by a polling organization with ties to the administration, more than 30 percent of respondents wished Russia was an EU member.

Because of its non-bloc, non-institutional nature, this new Euro-Atlantic concept could facilitate the non-confrontational management of different national interests. It could also help counter a destabilizing trend of re-nationalization of foreign policy, which challenges and even threatens European integration and transatlantic relations.

Accompanying this search for a new Euro-Atlanticism has been an increase in creative initiatives. Putin’s assertiveness – blaming the West for neglecting Russia and its interests, violating the promises of the 1990s, and so on – has given way to a more proactive and positive kind of Russian foreign policy (such as Medvedev’s proposal for a new pan-European security pact and for a new global financial center in Moscow). After many years of predominantly reactive policy, such initiatives may be a sign that Russia and its leadership are gradually overcoming their inferiority complex and diffidence noted by some Western observers. One element of such a proactive policy has been an attempt to demonstrate that Russia has assets precisely in the areas needed to help overcome today’s global energy, financial, and food crises. The overall goal, even if subconscious and unarticulated, is to underline Russia’s attractiveness as a partner to both Europe and Russia’s post-Soviet neighbors in the CIS. But will it work?

The European Union

Lately, Europe’s divisions can hardly be blamed on Russia. The problems associated with the Lisbon Treaty must be solved through a profound rethinking of the EU’s socioeconomic policy and only after a long process of adaptation by new EU members. The Iraq war and the operations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Afghanistan are what prompted European debates on regional and global security, including the role of the United States. The last and strongest U.S. “bastion” in Europe, Poland, caused a small revolution in July by refusing to unconditionally allow antiballistic missiles on its territory.

In fact, Russia is becoming a prominent factor in European political life – and in a way that could boost the notion of a broader Euro-Atlantic civilization. As German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said a day after the Russian presidential election, European *Ostpolitik* involves the construction of a “peace order” encompassing NATO allies and eastern neighbors alike. Russia is and will remain an indispensable strategic partner should such a pan-European peace order become

reality.

Meanwhile, while Russia sticks with the rhetoric and diplomacy of state-to-state relations, it in fact desires closer and binding cooperation with the EU as a regional institution. Russia may use its warm bilateral relations with key partners in Europe (like Germany and Italy) to secure its interests in the EU. However, those interests are fundamentally multilateral, including a deepening of economic interdependence, overcoming barriers for Russian investments, and securing EU support for Russian membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

At the same time, Russia has no illusions regarding its ability to pressure EU states into supporting its interests, especially if they collide with those of the United States. It understands that such pressure can rapidly prompt transatlantic consolidation based on anti-Russian sentiment.

The CIS

The notion of a broader Euro-Atlantic civilization encounters more challenges closer to home. Even aspirationally, the CIS remains a rather symbolic abbreviation for the post-Soviet space. Putin and Medvedev have not had any plans to reintegrate the post-Soviet states. Officially, the current strategy in this vast region is one of “diverse cooperation.” The Russian leadership stresses that it respects the sovereignty of its neighbors, even on controversial matters like NATO membership. While calling for legitimacy and transparency, Russia also does not oppose the activities of the EU and the United States in the post-Soviet space.

Still, the CIS is split into two distinct regions: the Euro-East (including, among others, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova) and Central Asian—Caspian. The Euro-East is following a path that bears a striking resemblance to that of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The states of the Euro-East long for NATO and EU membership, hyperbolize the “Russian threat” and its imperial ambitions, and appeal to the West (especially to the United States) to contain Russia. In so doing, they nourish anti-Russian feelings and stereotypes.

Moscow has very few positive and no effective negative levers to bring the Euro-East over to its side. A problematic shared past, current controversial and counterproductive immigration policies, and recent nationalist and xenophobic tendencies in Russia have not helped improve Russia’s image. Even its more recent “pragmatic” economic approach to CIS states has been perceived by the Euro-East as another imperial attack. Russia has cooperated with the United States and NATO on Afghanistan and Iran, articulated that it does not intend to challenge Georgia’s sovereignty (provided that its interests, mainly financial-economic, in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are respected), and compromised with the EU on Transdniestria. While new humanitarian activities undertaken by Russia might help roll back its neighbors’ negative perceptions, they cannot change them overnight. In particular, it is naïve to expect that elites in Kyiv or Tbilisi will divert from their pro-NATO course.

Whether it shares the Euro-East’s NATO zeal or not, the United States faces the challenge of estimating whether the risk of alienating Russia is real and significant.

A few Western politicians and experts have articulated this risk and called for taking Russian concerns into account, particularly when the EU and the United States require Russia's cooperation on Afghanistan and Iran. Certainly, NATO expansion is a major stumbling block to the promotion of a broader Euro-Atlanticism.

Although the situation around Central Asia and the Caspian is more complex due to the region's huge energy resources, it paradoxically contains less potential for spurring such conflict. The states of the region, including Kazakhstan, Russia's key regional partner, are open to the best commercial offers they can get and publicly declare diversification of their energy policy as a key principle. They are also far more willing to deepen political and security relations in all directions – with the United States, Russia, the EU, and China. In addition, common U.S., European, and Russian security interests make cooperation on Afghanistan, Iran, and Middle East inevitable and, hence, help keep a reasonable balance of interests in this nearby region.

Conclusion

It would be an exaggeration to overestimate Russia's impact on Euro-Atlantic relations solely based on its policy towards the EU or the CIS states. Still, it is undeniable that Russia is becoming a stronger factor in European policy. The Medvedev administration, though stressing its independent foreign policy, is simultaneously looking for a more stable and long-lasting pattern of cooperation with the West. The fact that the new Russian president has put forward the concept of inclusive Euro-Atlanticism suggests that modern Russia can be instrumental not only in solving security issues, but also in strengthening Western civilization in the face of its current crises and uncertainties.

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