

The Prospects of the West-Russia Security Dialogue: Wishful Thinking or New Hope?

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The conventional wisdom of the Cold War era was that, even in times of ultimate tensions, arms control served as a kind of bridge over seemingly intractable differences between two rival alliances - ostensibly immune from ideological or geopolitical rows. In the period of the post-Cold War "New World Order" illusions, with their maverick schemes of the "End of History" or the "Clash of Civilizations", arms control seemed to be eclipsed by wider geopolitical ambitions or hopes that it was just a relic of the Cold War and did not need judicially enforceable mechanisms in the era of collaboration and trust between the West and Russia (predictably, that ended quite soon). The "End of History", even if it really happened in its initial Hegelian sense, only meant the advent of a new set of crises, competition and conflicts in a new phase of international development.

Where We Are

Now we are in a kind of "back to the future" process once again, in which Moscow has found itself in a stark confrontation with the major Western states. This is caused not just by the Russian annexation of Crimea or support for irredentists in the Donbas region of Ukraine, but also by the dire differences in approaches to all major issues of world politics. Actually, the rift started much earlier when the West was appalled by some laws adopted by the Russian parliament that, in its view, contradicted fundamental Western values and were leading Russia in an authoritarian direction. Contrary to the opinion of many liberal "gurus", both in Russia and in the West, the respective elites do not share common major values - their approaches are often even polar opposites with respect to all the basic tenets of social order, democracy, governance, world politics or diplomacy.

This has transpired in the new structure of international relations which, while chaotic in a way, resembles the standoff of the infamous Cold War times. Moscow has continuously lashed out at the United States and the West for destabilizing the world order of checks and balances for its own gains. Russian political science pundits have started saying that the West has, once again, chosen the strategy of containment of Russia, which is still regarded as a foe. All this has exacerbated old Moscow grievances, first succinctly formulated by President Putin in his famous 2007 Munich speech, to the point that the West uses double standards and does not regard Russia as an equal partner. Moscow now also accuses the West of destabilizing the situation in Ukraine for its vested geopolitical interests and of imposing new dividing lines in Europe.

Russia is not going to request entrance into NATO as it has done in the past. It perceives the Alliance as a major threat to its essential security interests, if not to the basic existence of Russia as a sovereign free state, and is gearing its solid defense rearmament efforts to offset any new infringements from this bloc. NATO's much criticized advance closer to the Russian borders and the current upgrade of its presence in the adjacent countries are seen as a kind of new encirclement strategy and, though limited and not critically dangerous for a nuclear-weapon power, this looks like an indication of unfriendly intentions. Moscow still deeply regrets that it was intentionally misled under Gorbachev when the USA allegedly made an oral promise of a non-bloc status for the German Democratic Republic (though the former Soviet president himself has denied this).

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Russians Tu-95 jets have, once again, resumed their flights in the Atlantic in the vicinity of NATO borders as a response to similar patrols by US nuclear bombers and Moscow is even promising their appearance in the Gulf of Mexico. The current renewed self-assertiveness is portrayed domestically in Russia as sustaining its vital geopolitical interests and as a kind of revanche for the alleged humiliation by and inattention from the Western side in the 90s. Moscow has pretensions of becoming the leader of the parts of the world where the elites and masses are tired of the “eternal” American *diktat*.

For its part, the majority of the Western political class now sees Moscow as an adversarial state that rejects the legitimacy of the existing international system and an alarming threat unpredictably looming over Europe. NATO members nurture no hopes of admitting Russia to the family of the free world’s democratic nations. As in the times of the American “wise men”, Dean Acheson, George Kennan or George Marshall, the Kremlin is accused of latent expansionist intentions. The only difference is that, unlike the case in the Brezhnev era, many experts and politicians agree that Moscow’s expansionism can never be eradicated as it is in the Russian “genes” and in the mentality of its ruling elite. Thus, no “convergence” theory processes or even the advent of pro-Western or basically friendly forces in Moscow is possible for now. It is, perhaps, senseless to debate whether Moscow is a “traditional” and struggling or “revisionist” state. Clearly, its latest moves have seriously changed the geopolitical constellation in the entire world. The minimum wished for now is the start of some kind of accommodating process, the outlines of which are, however, so far unclear.

The Ukrainian crisis of 2014 has brought a new distressing dimension to the entire outlook of international relations. It has not only collapsed the general state of East–West relations, but has also drastically worsened the arms control situation, including eventual „deep cuts“. This new status of the Moscow–West relationship, dramatically changing the post-Cold War paradigm, has even forced many experts to speculate about Cold War 2.0 being in the offing. We have still to define where we are and need a brilliant new foreign policy and international relations theore-

tician who could tell us how to deal with the present status of world politics, which is now at its nadir.

Russia has not only not budged from its stance on Ukrainian affairs in the face of various Western sanctions, but has continuously showed exemplary intransigence in preparing to tighten the belts of the masses in anticipation of new domestic economic hardships—in the vein of famous Lenin’s slogan “the country as a united battle camp”. Moreover, there are distinct signals that Moscow, though proclaiming its support for Ukrainian unity as a state, would not, ultimately, even hesitate to use direct military force interfering in Donbas in order to prevent a kind of “final solution” or complete destruction of the self-declared Donbas entities by military force (if Kiev forcefully opts for this in contravention of the Minsk protocol).

The Consequences for Arms Control

This makes any new moves toward SNW reductions absolutely impossible until the general environment in bilateral relations can be settled. Broad political differences may have caused Russia to reject any support for the United States’ initiatives after 2014. Under these conditions, any hopes of moving forward with further developing arms control initiatives or making reductions under the currently achieved agreements are basically naïve and wishful thinking. The much-touted mention of possible new arms control steps at the Valdai seminar (that Moscow insists “on continuing negotiations” and “on negotiating further nuclear arms reductions” also being “ready for a most serious talk on the issues of nuclear disarmament”) is a masterful PR move that has agitated the now-frustrated arms control community. Moscow seemingly just wants to show how much good-will remains - despite the obvious deterioration of relations and the painstaking “sanctions war”- and its determination not to let Obama remain as the only, though long-forgotten, global peacemaker. However, simultaneously stressing that “the discussion should be with no double standards” and, thus, being conditioned on the entire list of necessary steps to be executed in order to move forward, it makes any feasible progress impossible and smacks of the Soviet linkage strategy of the early 80s.

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Unfortunately, there is no new Mikhail Gorbachev in sight to untie this package and to single out a theme for possible negotiations as happened with the start of talks on the INF treaty in 1985 (which is also strongly criticized nowadays by the conservative Moscow military as having been overtaken by the arms race developments). The Russian position on deep cuts of nuclear weapons features a certain “dualism”, if not a kind of policy schizophrenia. On the one hand, trying not to lose its image as a long-time nuclear disarmament proponent, Moscow proclaims its adherence to the notion of complete elimination of nuclear weapons when conditions are ripe. On the other hand, Russia is against any new reduction (such as proposed by Barack Obama in his 2013 Berlin speech) until the complete set of prerequisites has been executed. Thus, in Russian diplomatic wording, the world – in terms of shoring up its security and even survival – is currently “at the crossroads”.

Any further moves in arms control are currently blocked by the so-called Moscow “conditionality package”, which makes the complete resolution of the following issues the prerequisite to any novel arms control steps:

- gradual involvement of all NW states;
- prevention of space weapons deployment;
- guarantees against “breakout nuclear potential”;
- no unilateral deployment of ABM systems;
- no qualitative or quantitative imbalances in conventional arms ;
- implementation of the CTBT;
- viability of the key multidimensional instruments for disarmament and non-proliferation.

In the logic of Moscow, Russia has approached “a threshold” where “all aspects of strategic stability in the general context” should be accounted for. Further steps on “accountable and irreversible” reductions of nuclear weapons in compliance with Article VI of the NPT should be taken on a phased basis with the ultimate objective that this long-term process should lead -sometime - to complete disarmament, and

“equal and indivisible security for everyone”. Russia seem to be prepared to flatly reject any new suggestions on further reductions of nuclear armaments as it has done with Obama’s proposals over the last year or to simply try to ‘filibuster’ them on any pretext.

What We Need

What is needed and can, apparently, be realized are step-by-step, cautious measures which are targeted at the restoration of the climate of trust and cooperation in the security sphere. They are to be centered on the range of confidence-building measures and transparency-promoting mechanisms, primarily in the European theater. This could arguably mend the current crisis and bring us into a new and safer dimension of “hard” Euro-Atlantic security. Of course, at the same time, nothing is preventing the expert arms control and WMD non-proliferation community from working on new initiatives or ideas, thus preparing the “critical mass” of intellectual capital for eventual “deep cuts” or drastic breakthroughs in lowering the general level of military threat in a brighter future. And, generally speaking, the situation is not completely precarious. At the end of the day, Moscow, like the West, does not wish to see the creation of a new black hole of turmoil and instability in the center of Europe and on its borders. At the same time, it is vitally important for the West to prevent “Bosniazation” of the Ukrainian East or the creation of another “frozen conflict” in Europe.

Russia is deeply interested in good, solid relations with the West as it desperately needs its capital and, especially, modern technology for its much-coveted modernization which, alone, can really bring it into the ranks of great industrialized powers of modernity. It will spare no effort to avoid marginalization, not to mention isolation, and strives to claim a revered role in global governance, by, for example, suggesting a dialogue and cooperation between its pet project of Eurasian economic union and the EU or Moscow’s collaboration in meeting new challenges – from Afghanistan, to WMD non-proliferation, to fighting the “Islamic State” or dealing with the new economic crisis. In so doing, Russia sticks to the Westphalian norms of state sovereignty and its primacy in dealing with domestic affairs, while trying to present a new attractive model of modern development and to capitalize

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on the remaining assets of its “soft power”, attempting, for example, to develop controversial ideological concepts of modern conservatism or “the Russian world”, enhancing its say in the UN, BRICS, G-20 or IMF. The much publicized “Pivot to Asia-Pacific” in Moscow’s policy was more a frantic reaction to not being properly and respectfully treated by the West and more an instrument of diplomatic game playing – as even friendly China, now being strategically courted, is not always prepared to make new loans or investments in the Russian economy and is deeply interested in the stability of European politics.

Moscow tacitly counts on Western lassitude with the current sanctions already criticized as counterproductive by some marginal Western politicians or certain Central European or Southern members of the EU and Turkey being enamored of the powerful Gazprom. Thus the window of opportunity still exists, although it is narrow. President Obama is broadly considered by the Moscow expert community as (almost) a “lame duck”, unable to grasp the complexity of global politics, beleaguered by Republican critics and not a reliable partner for any new arms control projects. That is why it seems that the initiative to breach the current stalemate must come from Russia’s European interlocutors rather than from Washington.

To be realistic, no doubt, even such timid progress needs a kind of preliminary agreement on the events in Ukraine and Western acceptance of the inevitability of the new Crimean status (even if it has been achieved through a questionable referendum secured by notorious “polite green men”) – as if the USA were to deal with the Kremlin not recognizing the status of the “enslaved peoples” in the Baltic. Amid the latest reports of developments in Ukraine’s east, the current confrontation between Russia and the West seems to be far from over. However, we should continue to stay optimistic and work toward a consensus solution. This could include:

In general, a joint group of experts who can suggest some new mechanisms, as it is clear that the Yalta order and the Helsinki spirit- of the 70s have now been largely overtaken by events.

In the current environment, the only possibility of “filling the gap” and preventing suspicion and

misunderstandings is a kind of unofficial dialogue (double track or “old wise men” venue) between strategic thinkers. Structured as a comparison of Russian and Western approaches describing not just the present state of relations, but also the outlines of a suggested future, this mechanism could develop new principles and ideas on what practical measures could be introduced for greater transparency and pragmatic, efficient confidence-building measures, to start making the strategic doctrines of the two sides more compatible and less mutually threatening – in short, how to disassemble the material remnants of the Cold War. This is a unique time to thoroughly examine the differences in perceptions and positions between NATO and Russia and to suggest the workable consensus solutions.

Discussions to suggest the new outlines of strategic stability (including, on the thorny issues of EPAA and NSNWs) could be envisioned – when the political climate allows all sides to continue the meaningful strategic discussions in good faith.

Some Possible Measures

Currently, the experts can explore the principles and outlines of the envisioned future Euro-Atlantic security architecture as well as major challenges on this path and a program of step-by-step accomplishments to ease the present-day tensions in relations, the role of institutions in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture (NATO, NATO-Russia Council, OSCE, EU, CSTO, Eurasian Union, etc.) and also the way toward improving the security of areas and states in the Euro-Atlantic region that are not members of CSTO, EU or NATO.

We can also suggest the establishment of new set of communication links between the Russian and the NATO military that could enhance mutual predictability and foster the promotion of better comprehension and greater trust, based on timely notifications of future moves.

It would be especially useful in conventional arms control in Europe, which suffers from ongoing deterioration and where efforts to revive the dialogue have failed, to aim at an enhanced successor to the CFE Treaty.

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Both sides could, for example, examine what kind of positive security guarantees from Moscow, NATO member states, such as Poland and the Baltic countries, could await – in such terms as sub-regional transparency and confidence-building measures, greater openness about large-scale military exercises in border areas and strengthening of the inspections regime in a cost-effective way.

Moscow could, in turn, demand more guarantees against rapid deployment of NATO forces or even an increase in no-troops-zones along the NATO-Russia borders, if real steps in demonstrating good will and restrictions in the military sphere are shown from its side. It could, for example, declare the non-stationing of “Iskander-M” missiles in Kaliningrad and give guarantees for non-deployment of tactical nuclear weapons there.

The experts could develop the outlines of the system of notifications on military aviation flights and maneuvers of naval vessels in the waters close to the borders (in the Baltic and Black Seas). Russia could also make its military activities in Crimea more transparent.

Both NATO and Russia could practice a broader system of inviting representatives to their respective maneuvers and envision more joint peace-keeping and terrorist-fighting operations.

The outstanding role in the process of normalization of relations and establishing lasting collaboration between Moscow and its Western partners definitely belongs to Germany, despite the current cooling of Russia-Berlin relations over Ukraine. This could eventually lead to a European security environment which could be acceptable and attractive both for Moscow and the West, while effectively precluding or quickly mitigating the outbreak of any major conflicts (such as the present one in Ukraine or the earlier “frozen” ones). It is important to concentrate on the issues of implementation of existing arms control instruments, such as New START, INF, or the OSCE’s Vienna Document – preventing the outbreak of a possible new arms race.

P5 is the only remaining venue (despite the evident cooling of relations among the nuclear-weapon states) where the Western members can push Moscow to be more receptive to new ideas

on how to save the face of nuclear weapons stakeholders, including the idea of a future multilateral dialogue on further reductions of strategic weapons in view of the 2015 NPT Review Conference. This set of proposals may be too far-reaching for the moment. However, launching such a discussion process could lead us to the stabilization of the current situation.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Deep Cuts Commissioners or organizations associated with the Deep Cuts project.

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