

Cold War Shivers. US-NATO clash with Russia

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Sense is returning to East-West relations, despite the US and NATO

2008 will be remembered as a turning point in Russia's relations with the West. It was a tumultuous year, with Kosovo, missiles in Europe and NATO's seemingly relentless march eastward like thunderclouds gathering on Russia's horizon, which finally burst 8 August over South Ossetia, bringing tragedy to Georgians, triumph and tragedy to Ossetians and Russians, as the Russian army stopped short of Tbilisi in their defence of the plucky Ossetians.

Poland, in a tizzy, quickly signed up for US Patriot missiles; the EU and NATO, in a snit, suspended relations with Russia and did their best to undermine Russia's fragile economy. US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates made a grand tour of countries supposedly threatened by Russia (in addition to visiting his new friends in Kosovo), though only the woe-begone Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili bothered meeting him at the airport. This darling of the West - and Israel - suddenly found himself friendless after his disastrous altercation with his neighbour. Even Israel pulled in its horns, cutting off its lucrative arms sales out of fear of Russia.

Little more than a month later, the storm clouds over Russia seem to have dispersed. Europe again began improving relations, with a Euro-Russia summit in November, followed by renewed negotiations on a strategic partnership and a renewal of Russian-NATO dialogue in December. The Bush administration was not amused, but then lame-duck President George W Bush has about as many friends these days as Saakashvili.

It was amusing watching NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer jumping through hoops, so to speak, in early December after a NATO foreign ministers meeting, as he explained the alliance's decision to begin "a conditional and graduated re-engagement" with Moscow, despite strident disapproval from Washington, not to mention Moscow's own strident disapproval of NATO moves to absorb Ukraine and Georgia, and after its spectacular assertion of authority in its "near abroad" with the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Hoop argued, "Russia is such an important factor in geopolitical terms that there is no alternative for NATO than to engage Russia." He innocently claimed he had no idea why Russia felt "victimised, not to be taken seriously, but if that is the perception, we have to discuss it, because I have to try to convince them that democracy and the rule of law coming closer to Russia's borders - why should that be a problem?"

As if he actually believes that NATO is about the tired clichés of democracy and freedom that are used to justify this Cold War relic, and not about US empire and its attempt to end

any residual opposition, especially in the oil-rich Eurasian space, which Russia just happens to control.

So why the sudden courtship of the Russian ogre? De Hoop said it was because of Afghanistan, fighting terrorism and narcotics. We could add the financial crisis as well. But towering over even that is the very frightening spectre of another arms race between the two – yes two – superpowers which Europe is uncomfortably sandwiched between.

It's as if Don Juan realised too late that his latest flame – his true love this time – was wise to him and had decided the jig was up. Defying the US, de Hoop Scheffer and his Euro diplos realised their place was the tried and true middle path between the two big guys. He did his best to pretend that nothing really was wrong, but no one was fooled. "I'm basically an engager," de Hoop Scheffer said. "But engagement can't take place in the context of spheres of influence. We have to see if Georgia is a watershed or not. I hope not, and I'll do my best that it will not be." Sorry, de Hoop. You closed the barn door too late. Your beloved has bolted.

The emissary of the spurned lover, Russian Ambassador to NATO Dmitri Rogozin, welcomed the decision to resume informal talks with Russia, saying, with not a little sarcasm, "I personally do not see the difference between formal and informal sittings, except that you don't have coffee in an informal meeting but you still can order one." Rogozin also said that the decision not to give a formal action plan to Georgia and Ukraine showed that relations with Russia were more important to NATO than either applicant. He predicted that NATO would retreat from admitting Georgia and Ukraine, a prospect that "does not cheer anyone in the alliance." Rogozin said that "there is an open split within NATO, and it will widen if NATO tries to expand further. The schemes of those who adopted a frozen approach to Russia have been destroyed." Words that left Don Juan apoplectic. The Hoop shot back that Rogozin could say what he liked, and American officials dismissed his comments as bluster aimed at a domestic audience.

Upping the ante, in the NATO meeting's final communiqué, which went through 22 drafts, the foreign ministers gave their unanimous support to the planned deployment in Europe of US missile defenses, which Washington continues to say are for protection from Iran, not Russia. Reading from a script retrieved from history's dustbin, the ministers called the missile system "a substantial contribution" to defense and encouraged Russia to take up US proposals for cooperation on missile defence, oblivious to US president-elect Obama's own scepticism about the system, or the comments last month by French President Nicolas Sarkozy that the missile defense would "bring nothing to security" but "would complicate things and make them move backward," or Russia's threat to install short-range missiles of its own in Kaliningrad.

As for Russian President Dmitri Medvedev's proposed talks on a new "security architecture" for Europe – which Sarkozy agreed to in November – de Hoop Scheffer said that NATO members were "quite happy with the security structure as it exists in Europe. There is not a shimmer of a chance that NATO could or would be negotiated away." The Euro fans of America and foes of Russia see the Russian president's proposals as a direct attempt to undermine NATO. And so what? The only way to make peace with Russia is to do what should have been done 17 years ago, when the Warsaw Pact was disbanded: dismantle its twin and build a European partnership from the Atlantic to the Pacific, minus the US and Canada. There is something called the United Nations where everyone can get together. The

EU and Russia are already working together on peacekeeping – through the UN – as seen with the current EUFOR mission in Chad, which includes 320 Russians. I repeat: Who needs NATO to police the world?

De Hoop drew his line in the sand at a news conference with Georgian Foreign Minister Eka Tkeshelashvili. She expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the meeting, in which ministers reconfirmed that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become members of NATO and said NATO would accelerate cooperative reform programmes with both countries through existing NATO commissions. Don't hold your breath, Eka. A lot can happen between now and "eventually". The US and Germany are at odds over how further expansion of NATO can proceed, with Germany insisting on a MAP (Membership Action Plan) and Bush's team arguing that "MAP has been fetishised". Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Daniel Fried said that this "is not the only way to get there," wherever "there" is. Instead of a MAP, he has in mind the NATO-Georgia Commission established hurriedly after 8 August, modeled after the NATO-Ukraine Commission established in 1997 – "MAP without MAP", as the German fetishists drolly put it.

But the bottom line on Georgia is that it can't join NATO if it is not at peace with its neighbours, as this would oblige NATO to go to war to "defend" it. This argument could even encourage Russia to make a move on Crimea, putting Ukraine in the same predicament, making it, too, ineligible. How ironic this would be, given NATO's pretensions to be a bastion of peace.

As the Hoop performed his verbal acrobatics, the EU was performing its own highwire act with Russia, renewing negotiations on a new strategic partnership. But with a nod to US desires to keep moving eastward come hell or high water, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso also outlined to the press the EU's proposed new "Eastern Partnership" with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, the latest move into the ex-Soviet bloc since the EU expanded in 2004 and 2007 to embrace the Baltics and all the former Warsaw Pact nations. The partnership offers free trade deals, closer energy ties, easier access to visas and financial assistance programmes worth a total of €600 million over two years. To their bitter disappointment, EU-member hopefuls Ukraine and Moldova were lumped together with the others, indicating that their applications were on hold.

Interesting, the supposed rush to get Ukraine and Georgia into NATO and the procrastination over them joining the much more important economic organisation. The Eastern Partnership was a response to Sarkozy's Mediterranean Union, bringing all the Mediterranean countries together with the EU in a loose economic club, and was put on fast track after the war in Georgia in August. Barroso denied suggestions that the EU was seeking to establish itself as an alternative power centre to Moscow. "The Cold War is over," said Barroso, "and where there is no Cold War, there should be no spheres of interest." Who does he think he's kidding?

But Russia has no beef with EU expansion, which can only benefit Moscow in the long run. In fact, it is not inconceivable that Russia itself could join this economic pact, which clearly benefits one and all, at least economically. This cannot be said of NATO. De Hoop Scheffer understandably wants to keep his prestige (and pension), but this is one endangered species that deserves extinction.

As NATO prepares the fireworks for its big 60th anniversary, its plans for Georgia and

Ukraine are in disarray and its war in Afghanistan is a nightmare which could tear the organisation apart in 2009. Happy anniversary.

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