

Russia and NATO: Cooperation or Confrontation?

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Medvedev's presence in Lisbon was more a show of Russia's importance than of subservience to the Euro-Atlantic alliance

The results of the NATO summit were as predictable as a Soviet Communist Party congress, with the word “peace” replaced by “war”. NATO’s embrace of the US agenda of missile defence, nuclear arms, and its new role as global policeman surprised no one. No word about the [United Nations or peacekeeping](#). In deference to Russia, the only mention of eastern expansion was continued “partnerships” with former Soviet republics Ukraine and Georgia. Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand and Japan were also offered special status. The new Strategic Doctrine, replacing the more modest Euro-centric 1999 model, really just reaffirmed US control of the foreign policy of what Zbigniew Brzezinski called its “vassal states”.

There were a few ripples. France’s new defense minister, Alain Juppe, openly said the Afghan conflict was a “trap” for NATO and called for an exit strategy, unlike Head of the British Armed Forces Sir David Richards, who opined, “NATO now needs to plan for a 30 or 40 year role.” The Euro-spat continues over the continued presence of nuclear weapons in Europe, between France, which prides itself on its *force de frappe*, and Germany, which was denied any such private nuclear toys during the Cold War.

But they agreed to disagree and the summit was all smiles and photo ops, at least centre-stage. On the sidelines, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev told a warm United States President Obama Barack that he was ready to [cooperate on missile defence](#) but only in “a full-fledged strategic partnership between Russia and NATO”, and Afghanistan’s President Hamid Karzai told a frosty Obama that he should scale back military operations and night raids that inflict heavy civilian casualties.

Through NATO’s integration into the Pentagon’s world command structure, it can be said that now, officially, the US rules the world. NATO has its Istanbul Initiative, attempting to militarise the [Mediterranean Dialogue](#) and Gulf Cooperation Councils covering the entire Middle East, including Israel. Even in Africa, only Eritrea, Libya, Sudan and Zimbabwe do not (yet) have relations with USAFRICOM. But then, NATO’s two major “out of area” police roles — Kosovo and Afghanistan — are not encouraging signs, nor are the Pentagon’s efforts in Iraq. The bigger NATO gets, and the more far-flung the US military, the more unwieldy and expensive both become. How do Malaysian soldiers in Afghanistan converse with Albanians? As Muslims, they may know their prayers in Arabic, but only by rote. And can they be trusted to kill their Afghan brothers?

What Russian strategists really think of NATO’s “new” doctrine is difficult to tell. The

professed preference for closer relations with the West by [Atlantist Medvedev](#) and the Russian elites he represents differ markedly from his predecessor Putin's. Despite Medvedev's assurances, his appearance at the NATO conference did little to dissipate the confusion about relations with NATO. His offer of a joint missile defence network is not the one that the US has in mind. He told the gathering that Russia won't join NATO missile defence as "piece of furniture". A senior Russian diplomat told *Kommersant*, "Yes, we will defend countries to the west of Russia. Equally, NATO must commit to the same responsibilities — any missiles that fly against us over Europe, they must all be shot down by American or NATO forces."

Despite Russia's apparent weakness, it still casts the biggest shadow over the alliance. There are signs of meaningful cooperation in the Russia-NATO Council Action Plan as described by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Russia's Black Sea Fleet is taking part in NATO's antiterrorist Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean Sea and fighting against piracy off the coast of Somalia. Rather than a will-o-the-wisp missile defence, he emphasised the joint radar system near completion along Russia's western borders "to prevent seizures of aircraft by terrorists" and the ongoing assistance "during floods, fires and man-made disasters".

But Lavrov said there are "international problems on which we do not see eye to eye", that in any missile defence system there must be "no actions that may adversely affect the legitimate interests of each other". He was more concerned about reducing conventional forces in Europe and "a systemic discussion about military restraint". NATO "must be guided by the UN Charter, especially in regard to the possible use of force in international relation, and by international law". Meaning, of course, that at present NATO policies adversely affect Russia, and NATO and the US are operating outside of international law.

Quite possibly more significant than the hot air emitted in Lisbon was the tete-a-tete between Medvedev, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Germany Chancellor Angela Merkel a month earlier on 18-19 October at their own mini-summit in Deauville, calling on the EU to launch a "modernisation partnership" with Russia, establishing an economic space with "common security concepts", including visa-free travel and cooperation on European security. The United States was pointedly not mentioned though the security issues involved "the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian zones", a half-step towards Medvedev's proposal for a new [European Security Treaty](#) in 2008.

Despite the professed devotion of the French and German leaders to the US and the war in Afghanistan, this clear outreach to Russia by the EU's most important members is an expression of the geopolitical logic at work as the US flounders and Russia matures into an unavoidable and increasingly desirable Eurasian partner. It is Russia that provides Europe with access to a large market and source of raw materials — a peaceful gateway to the entire continent. This contrasts with the US/NATO forced march from Eurasia's underbelly, creating enemies from the Middle East through Iran to China. Spoiler Britain was pointedly left out of the Deauville summit. Even at its most Atlantist, Russia is establishing a new configuration without the Anglo-American empire at the centre.

Both the power struggle among Russia's political elite and the developing facts-on-the-ground in Afghanistan and Washington, where START is probably not going to be ratified by the Senate, will determine just how US-Euro-Russian relations fare, and whether calls for Putin to run for president in 2012 result in a return of Russian geopolitical strategy to the [Eurasian path](#) it was taking prior to Medvedev. Medvedev's abrupt cancellation of the [S-300](#)

[missile deal with Iran](#) was not a popular one; it “undermines Russia’s prestige and erodes its security, making the world less safe for every one of us. At the moment, the Islamic world has reasons to believe that Moscow has switched to the camp of its foes,” warns former Russian Joint Chief of Staff member General Leonid Ivashov.

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, taking a leaf from both Lavrov and Ivashov, insisted at the summit that any missile defence shield should protect NATO members from real threats, which translates into Turkish as “protecting NATO members from Israel, not Iran”. He called for a nuclear weapons-free zone ranging from Iran to Israel. Davutoglu might have felt more comfortable outside the summit with members of the “No to War – No to NATO” alliance, who continued their tradition of using NATO summits as platforms of protest against war and militarism. They installed a Square of Peace and held a counter summit and International Anti-war Assembly, suggesting their own Strategic Doctrine for NATO — euthanasia.

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