

CAN RUSSIA DO IT ALONE IN THE CAUCASUS?

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In the heat of the NATO enlargement debate in Moscow, one issue was mentioned in passing by such different personalities as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Alexander Lebed and Grigory Yavlinsky. The focus was misplaced. They pointed out that the protracted argument had turned attention away from where the real security problems were—the Caucasus. Indeed, the geopolitical challenges in the west, which Russian policy makers have been speculating about for months and months, can seem quite hypothetical when matched against Russia's physical involvement in several violent conflicts in the south and the threat to its very territorial integrity in Chechnya. This apparent paradox could perhaps illuminate one general trend. Russia's failed efforts to block NATO expansion and the deadlocks of its policy in the Caucasus are parts of the same process of geopolitical retreat.

This process is fundamental since the scale and dynamics of economic dislocation in Russia reduces objectively and progressively the resource base for its foreign policy. The devastating degradation of the armed forces denies Russia the possibility of relying on its traditional and, until recently, most useful instrument of power. In Moscow's chaotic domestic political arena, the predetermined retreats and defeats have produced few signs of intention to learn the lesson and re-evaluate Russia's external interests. Instead, they have brought an urgent psychological need to find compensation through symbolic victories, to re-assert Russia's Great Power status. Hence the desire to be a major player in the Balkans; hence also the strong drive to accelerate 're-unification' with Belarus.

Certainly, no amount of political rhetoric and diplomatic activities could compensate for the lack of basic foreign policy resources. That is why Russia's relations with European security organisations remain so ambivalent. On the one hand, Moscow is trying to exploit its residual international profile and to attract attention to its needs. On the other hand, policy makers in the Kremlin are afraid that the increasing involvement of international organisations in conflict management in the 'Near Abroad' might reduce Russia's role and contribute to its marginalisation. Russia's ambivalent attitudes there are well-pronounced.

DEADLOCK IN NAGORNO KARABAKH

Russia had found itself caught in the interplay between the OSCE and NATO by the autumn of 1994. On the eve of the OSCE Budapest summit, Moscow was pushing hard the proposal to strengthen the all-European organisation as the alternative to NATO enlargement. At the summit, President Yeltsin discovered that the proposal had zero support and indeed was dead on arrival. What was worse, Russia itself was called on to deliver on its proposal by giving the OSCE a chance to prove its value in Nagorno Karabakh. Nothing could have been more irritating for Moscow, since it expected to reserve the central role in handling this conflict for itself, thereby building on the success in negotiating the cease-fire in May 1994. Nevertheless, Russian diplomacy found it difficult to backtrack on its major proposal and had to give its consent for the OSCE enterprise. The underlying assumption perhaps was that financial constraints and bureaucratic muddle would provide sufficient brakes for the first-ever all-European peacekeeping operation. It has indeed proved to be the case, particularly since the OSCE in late 1995 had to divert its attention elsewhere. According to the Dayton agreements, it was requested to do a major job in election monitoring in Bosnia—a job not sufficiently financed and not much appreciated. And Russia was quite content with the deadlock in Nagorno Karabakh, which allowed it to preserve some 9,000 troops in Armenia as a major lever in the regional setting.

AMBIGUITY ABOUT CHECHNYA

Just two weeks after the OSCE Budapest summit, Russia went into the disastrous Chechen War which inevitably affected its relations with European organisations. The initial reactions in Western

capitals were cautiously negative. The European Union blocked the ratification of its framework agreement with Russia. The Council of Europe put Russia's membership application on ice. NATO went forward with developing its enlargement plans. Moscow had to acknowledge a massive loss of prestige and influence, but already in summer 1995 the picture started to change. The West apparently decided that Yeltsin's re-election was more important than all human rights violations and abuse of military force in a far-away rebellious province. Not only was Russia admitted to the Council of Europe in early 1996, but tranches of the multi-billion dollar aid package started to arrive, which implicitly meant that the IMF was financing the continuation of war. The only organisation that was able to penetrate into the zone of conflict was the OSCE, but its mission in Grozny was definitely unable to influence the dynamics and the character of hostilities. The main conclusion that Moscow has drawn from this experience is the irrelevance and ineptitude of European organisations.

SCRAP THE HOUSE, MAKE A CONCERT

This disillusionment in 'architectural' designs has brought a noticeable change in Russia's European policies. If Moscow occasionally makes statements concerning strengthening the OSCE, it is rather to pay symbolic tribute to tradition. In fact, Russia is one of the most difficult members of this organisation, not missing a single opportunity to make trouble and undermine consensus. The Council of Europe is perceived merely as a public forum for settling scores between factions in the State Duma. Where Russian foreign policy efforts are really concentrated is in bilateral relations with the USA, Germany and France, and all the way through the list to Ukraine and Belarus. The assumption is that you can make meaningful deals only with a real partner, and then only in bilateral dialogue in which Russia could feel itself to be at least an equal partner. Moscow was visibly disappointed by its failure to split NATO's common front on the issue of enlargement, despite all its attempts to exploit for instance special personal relations between Yeltsin and Kohl, or France's instinctive opposition to any plans produced by the US, or Norway's concerns about the neglected northern flank. NATO enlargement itself could still create new opportunities for Russia's one-to-one intrigues in the near future.

There is no comprehensible conceptual framework for Russia's state-centred European policy, except for Foreign Minister Primakov's vague and repetitive speculations about a 'multi-polar world'. One relevant model from a not too distant past is the 'two-plus-four' arrangement for handling German re-unification. A similar model from yesterday was the Contact Group for Bosnia, which produced remarkably little but secured Russia's role as a major player. Moscow is consistently seeking similar arrangements for every European problem. Hence the sincere enthusiasm about President Chirac's proposal (duly dismissed by allies) for a mini-summit of five major powers on NATO enlargement. Hence, also, its obsessive desire to make Russia the eighth member of the G7, even if the scale of economic disaster leaves it with very little cards to play in the global macro-economic game.

Certainly Russia has very limited possibility of advancing its idea of a new European Concert, but it could still gain momentum due to possible failures in reforming and enlarging key European security structures. Somewhat paradoxically, the weakest link here at the moment seems to be the European Union—the most solidly built, bureaucratically developed and economically successful institution. The EU is definitely lagging behind with its reforms, and the lowest common denominator for the Inter-Governmental Conference has proved to be very low indeed. It is possible that the time gap between the EU and NATO enlargements will be about 7-8 years, which could cause serious friction in both mechanisms. Not that Russia is counting on the EU to fall apart, but it perhaps expects that certain re-nationalisation in the security domain will develop. The political distance between Brussels and the Caucasus may be more than geographic, but the region still is sensitive to possible shifts in European security.

A CAUCASIAN CONCERT?

In Russia's view, international organisations will not be able to introduce any security structure for the Caucasus or even to provide a framework for conflict resolution. They are rather perceived as vehicles for penetration into the region for such real players as the US, France or Turkey. Recognising its current political weakness, Moscow perhaps admits that the straightforward 'deny

access' strategy for the Caucasus is no longer feasible. Dominance—which remains the paramount goal—must be secured by a more sophisticated policy which involves, for instance, playing the international consortium against Azerbaijan, or Iran against the US. Russia's corner in such a game should be secured by its military preponderance. The only power that could challenge Russia militarily in the Caucasus is Turkey, and that is why so much political effort is focused on pushing it out of the arena.

As for NATO, Moscow is not seriously concerned about its hypothetical expansion to the Caucasus. Secretary General Solana's visit to Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in February heard some protests from the Kremlin, but that was more a reflection of the somewhat hysterical over-excitement about NATO at that moment. In fact, it is reassuring for Russia that the US National Guard exercises in Georgia scheduled for this autumn, are going to be about repairing hospitals and building orphanages, which Tbilisi finds a bit disappointing. If there is a good thing about NATO enlargement, from the Russian point of view, it is that it will keep the Alliance busy and away from where the real problems are.

What the Russian strategy fails to take into account, is the progressive paralysis of its own capabilities. The economic recovery of the three Transcaucasian states, however uncertain, is driven almost entirely by the international markets. The debilitation of Russia's military might is not going to be reversed by any reshuffling of the top brass—and its military groupings in Armenia, Adzharia and even in the North Caucasus are going native and gradually switching allegiance to their respective hosts. Facing the fact that its military presence is becoming unsustainable, Russia might abandon its present conflict freezing policy in favour of a more cost-effective conflict playing strategy. A possible new bout of destabilisation would require from the international organisations and the NGO's, who are now supporting Russian conflict management by delivering humanitarian aid, much more serious involvement. The basic scheme for the Caucasus is not filling the vacuum left by Russia's retreat. It is building bridges to Europe through a concerted effort and silencing the Concert.