

## **KNOWING WHEN TO STOP: NATO'S OVEREXPANSION AND THE NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE OF EUROPE**

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Almost 18 months after the fall of the Yanukovich regime that precipitated the dramatic events leading to the annexation of the Crimean Peninsular by Russia and the loss of Ukrainian control over almost half of the Donbass region, the second truce agreement negotiated in Minsk on 12 February 2015, provides all parties with another opportunity to, at the very least, freeze the ongoing conflict in the East of Ukraine. Whether the ceasefire will hold and whether it will lead to a more stable settlement that would require the deployment of a peacekeeping force under OSCE auspices remains unclear.

Yet, even if complete tranquillity were to reign over Eastern Ukraine in some miraculous way, the economic and more notably the energy parameters defining the power relationship between Moscow and Kiev and the way this relationship affects the stability and longevity of the Russian-EU energy trade, argue for a policy of strategic compromise on the part of Kiev and of realistic reassessment of the part of the EU, especially with regards to the effectiveness of the energy sanctions imposed on Moscow in July 2014.

Given the fact that Germany and France oppose both in the EU and NATO frameworks the militarization of their response to Russia and are separating their approach to the Ukrainian issue from the more dynamic US attitude, which seriously entertains the possibility of arming Kiev, the pressure to impose more severe punitive measures against Russia's energy industry is likely to increase within the EU. Most "older" European powers -to use a relatively forgotten euphemism initially use by US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld to describe the block of EU powers that opposed the US invasion of Iraq- are adamant in their rejection of more hostile US measures that would lead to a massive build-up of Ukrainian forces with European weapons, weapons the Americans themselves are not willing to provide Kiev so far.

Despite this increasing pressure the EU would be highly unlikely to vote unanimously for a 4<sup>th</sup> round of sanctions that would jeopardise the core of the EU-Russian energy trade which brought Russia an annual income of approximately EUR 400 billion in 2013. The reasons for this EU unwillingness do not only relate with the realization on the part of most Europeans that there is no cheap or readily available alternative to Russian oil and gas imports. They also illustrate a growing European hesitancy, at least between the major Continental European powers starting with Germany, Italy and France, to follow the more militant

example of US policy vis-a-vis Russia as *a matter of a realpolitik principle*.

In order to understand this growing dichotomy, clearly underlined by the rejection of Ukraine's greatly unrealistic EU accession aspirations during the recent EU Council meeting in Riga (April 2015), we need to go back to the core of debate on how to restructure Europe's security architecture at the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. In the early 1990s the very existence of NATO was questioned. The disappearance of the communist threat and the disintegration of both the Warsaw Pact and the USSR created the perception that NATO would no longer be needed as a counterweight to what was perceived as an aggressive revisionist military superpower.

For a very short window of opportunity ideas of European unity and defence integration going back to the European Defense Community-EDC of 1954 were resuscitated. For the pro-EU federalists a new EDC would complement the initial steps towards a more politically centered European Economic Community-EEC. The initial steps towards the establishment of what would become the European Monetary Union in 1999 as well as the promise of enhanced security cooperation are clearly engraved in the core of the famous Maastricht Treaty of 7 February 1992 which also rebaptized the EEC to a European *Union*. In short it gave the European experiment a clearly political connotation.

Ironically enough the very dynamics that would shatter this window of opportunity also appeared in 1992. The flames of the Wars of the Yugoslav disintegration that continued to burn until 1999 destroyed the somewhat naive yet well intentioned ambitions of EU federalists. By 1995 when NATO interfered in the former Yugoslavia most Europeans had realized that the Union would remain an essentially non-defense related political experiment. The federalization dynamic within the Union would be primarily economic or to be more accurate, monetary through the EMU, although it has been subsequently proven -following the 2008 crisis- that the EMU was also very poorly constructed.

Security would remain something the EU would basically consume. So the big question was who was going to provide it and how would that be connected with the EU's enlargement process, a policy directive warmly endorsed and supported by all three major European powers, Germany, Britain and France, although for different reasons:

- (i) France supported enlargement so as to further dilute Germany's weight within a heavily bureaucratized institutional framework of checks and balances that included a plethora of new players. It tried to create such a institutional framework that would act *per se* as a check on Germanic power through the EMU (1999) and the Treaty for a Constitution of the European Union (2003). Ironically, as it exactly happened with the EDC in 1954, this elaborated plan was vetoed by the French people in a 2005 referendum, while the management of the Eurozone crisis since 2010 indicates that the *sine qua non* vote

within the EMU is likely in the hands of Berlin, not Paris.

(ii) Britain also supported enlargement not only because it partially agreed with the French goal to dilute or balance out German power by expanding EU "club" membership. Britain was *equally* opposed to European federalization *and* the nightmare of a *Germanic* Europe. For Britain federalization would not contain Germany's power as the French thought. It would do the exact opposite. Germany's weight would be more not less felt through a federalized decision-making process in the EU and that is exactly why London opted out of any core federalized EU policy initiative, including the EMU and the Schengen Treaty.

An enlarged EU would be far more difficult to federalize. Moreover most of the new members, especially if they would *first* become NATO members, would also be more likely to follow the American lead in issues of European and International security as it was clearly indicated by the 2002-2003 Iraqi crisis. This would make an enlarged Europe more pro-Atlanticist and less likely to agree to the emergence of EU policies and EU capabilities that would not be automatically aligned with US options and prerogatives. In any case the re-emergence of NATO as the only procurer of security for the EU guaranteed a preminent American role in European security that both the French and the British welcomed after the re-unification of Germany.

(iii) Germany also supported enlargement because it saw it as a strategic opportunity to expand its economic, financial and diplomatic sphere of influence throughout the former communist Eastern Europe. The integration of these states would not only provide Germany with a plethora of commercial and investment opportunities. The integration of Eastern Europe into the EU would consolidate the newly established democratic institutions of the new states of Europe, some of which, like Slovenia and Slovakia, first acquired their independence in the early 1990s.

Such an institutional "anchoring" of Eastern Europe in the EU would also consolidate its post-1991 borders and suppress other existing ethnic conflict flashpoints especially those surrounding the state of Hungary. It would also make sure that this area would escape the vicious circle of being transformed into a *cul-de-sac* of Russian-German competition as it did in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and during the interwar period. Germany knew that she was not strong enough to create such a security environment in Eastern Europe by itself.

It also understood that if she tried to achieve such a goal *in solo* its intentions would have been "misunderstood" even by less historically "suspicious" EU leaders than President Mitterand and PM Thatcher or her

conservative successors under PM Major. Germany's interference in the initial stages of the Yugoslav ethnic wars, through its hasty recognition of the independence of Slovenia and Croatia, was misinterpreted as the first sign of a new German "nationalism" that neutralized the Anglo-French efforts to stop the Serbo-Croatian and Bosnian Wars before spiralling out of control. Germany even refrained from joining the NATO campaign in 1995.

NATO would resolve all of EU's problems. A NATO security guarantee over Eastern Europe would effectively confront all the hard-security issues Germany was both unable and unwilling to tackle by itself. A post-Cold War NATO would both modernize and democratize each country's armed forces thereby *indirectly* increasing the viability of their democratic institutions. NATO would freeze existing borders by providing a disincentive for the internal break-up of existing multiethnic nations states and would at the same time protect these states from the largely theoretical threat of a resurgent Russia, which under President Yeltsin was still fighting to protect its own territorial integrity from the spreading viruses of ethnic nationalism and Islamic Jihadism. Moreover NATO made sure that Germany would not be the only beneficiary of such an enlargement since it would still act as a check on Germany's ambitions.

NATO would essentially kill many birds with one single stone. For France, a NATO expansion that would *precede* the EU enlargement would represent the strategic equivalent of the EMU or the now defunct "European Constitution". For Britain NATO's Eastern expansion would, to paraphrase Lord Ismay's famous statement for the Cold War necessity of NATO, "keep the Americans in, the Russians out and the Germans in check". An Expansion of NATO would guarantee Europe's "Atlanticism" and the special role Britain enjoys as the principal champion of this "Atlanticism" within the EU. For Germany, who was to benefit the most from European enlargement, NATO's expansion prepared the ground for the EU and also kept its emerging relationship with Russia intact, since the expansion would be primarily championed by (and blamed on) the Americans and the British.

It was a win-win situation for all interested parties. NATO went ahead to prepare the ground for European enlargement and played a crucial role in re-integrating Eastern Europe to the EU's political and economic community. Different EU powers benefited differently by such an enlargement but it is unquestionable that the enlargement benefited all EU powers. Even when this geostrategic "Janus" crossed the old Soviet psychological borderline to incorporate the three Baltic Republics in 2002 that also joined the EU in 2004, Russia's reactions under President Putin were measured.

The Russian President was more keen to emphasize the common security interests joining Russia, Europe and the US in their war against the Taliban and the "War on Terror" rather than castigate NATO's expansion. To put it plainly Russia would not like its medicine but it would swallow it. It would complain, it would certainly bark but it would not bite. Russian-Western and even Russian-US relations would survive both NATO expansion rounds of 1997 and 2002. Until 2004 NATO expansion and the concomitant benefits for EU's enlargement had proven to be a low-cost and low-risk exercise that did not seriously jeopardise the post-soviet security architecture of Europe.

NATO was soon to become victim of its own complacency and Ukraine would be the litmus test which destroyed the self-delusion created up to 2004 that a perpetual NATO expansion beyond the Dniester river would not have a detrimental effect on Russian-European or Russian-American relations. The continued success of NATO's expansion up to 2004 unfortunately convinced many "Cold-War" hawks in the neoconservative establishment which dominated the Bush Jr. Presidency that NATO would just keep expanding in the former Soviet East without any real cost or danger. They underestimated both Russia's ability and willingness to react in order to defend its historic interests in the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, protect the millions of Ukrainian citizens that were ethnic Russians or culturally identified themselves with Russia, and above all secure its military presence in the Black Sea region.

Bush Jr. and his neoconservative Cold Warriors, of whom Mrs. Neuland is a prominent member, were emboldened in their belief that Russia would not effectively react against a potential Ukrainian or Georgian bid for NATO membership by the rise to power in both those countries of radically anti-Russian and supposedly reformist leaders. The triumphal accession of Mr. Shaakashvili and Mr. Yushchenko to the presidential office following the revolution of the roses in Georgia (2003) and the orange revolution in Ukraine (2004) was misinterpreted by Washington as a sign of Russian weakness that in turn reinforced the perception that Mr. Putin would play along and that the Europeans would almost automatically align themselves with American policies. In 2003 despite French and German reactions the majority of EU and NATO members not only supported but also participated in the extremely controversial US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

By 2008 these erroneous perceptions were shattered, even before the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008. The Russian-Ukrainian gas crisis of January 2006 reminded the Europeans the sensitivity of their import dependence on Russian gas and the Ukrainian transit of that gas. As Russian oil exports to Europe expanded by displacing Persian Gulf exports many European governments realized that following the 2007 enlargement which included Romania and Bulgaria, there was no vital European interest at stake to the East of the Vistula and Dniester rivers

other than the security of EU gas imports.

Germany, France and Italy moved fast to eliminate the Ukrainian transit risk by constructing Nord Stream which by 2013 exported directly to Germany and the central European gas grid the totality of their Russian gas imports in ways that bypassed Belarus, Ukraine *and* Poland. In April 2008 during the NATO Bucharest Summit, despite US pressure to grant Ukraine and Georgia Candidate Member status in the Atlantic Alliance, the old European powers effectively vetoed the American proposal. In August 2008 they also refused to materially support Mr. Saakashvili and denied to apportion the entire blame for the War to Russian Imperialism. Most European powers refused to impose any sanctions against Russia and in general did not substantially penalize Moscow for its actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

By early 2009 the polemical anti-Russian rhetorics of the "Georgian War" had essentially disappeared. The second, much more serious Russian-Ukrainian energy crisis of January 2009, left most EU states puzzled over their energy security options. Even staunch US allies that had supported (Austria) or benefited (Bulgaria, Hungary) from NATO's expansion were joining the pro-Russian South Stream pipeline project that would further diminish Russia's transit dependence on Ukraine and thus increase the effectiveness of Russian coerciveness.

Moreover, the Eastern Partnership policy was conceived in 2009 in order to act as a substitute to any further membership dynamic that might exist for the former Soviet Republics that lied to the East of this new "geopolitical Rubicon". Even after the dramatic events of 2014, neither Ukraine nor Georgia were offered anything more substantial by the EU Council during the Riga meeting of the Eastern Partnership strategy that took place in April 2015. Even their request for Visa Free travel to the EU was politely declined.

Given the experience of Russian assertiveness and European reactions in the 2008-2009 period it is truly mind boggling that the Europeans or for that matter the Americans were "shocked" by Russia's decision to annex Crimea and systematically stoke the fire of the Donbass insurgency. The important question now is not how to resolve the Ukrainian problem in ways that would turn the clock back to before February 2014.

President Poroshenko and Mr. Yyachenyuk, his more combatant pro-American Prime Minister, need to understand, as Mr. Shaakashvili can certainly assure them, that any attempt to militarily reconquer Crimea or the Donbass region will fail. If Kiev attacks the Russian positions in the Crimea it would provoke an all out Russian invasion whereas if Kiev attacks the Donbass insurgents it would probably end up by losing even more territory to the separatists. This is at least what has happened on the ground before any of the two Minsk Truce Agreements were struck. Mr.

Poroshenko needs to understand that the optimum scenario for the Donbass region is to allow it to become the Ukrainian analogy of South Ossetia so as to *ad minimum* freeze the ongoing conflict.

Moreover pro-NATO rhetorics or any serious effort to approach the Atlantic Alliance with the purpose of gaining Candidate Membership status is likely to backfire even more violently than the 2008 attempt. Europeans are unlikely to further harden their opposition to Russia other than renewing existing sanctions and even if more sanctions are imposed they will most likely stay away from the core of the Euro-Russian trade so as to not have a paralytic effect on the Russian economy. Europe understands that it has no interest whatsoever in declaring economic war on Russia without seriously undermining its own energy security. More importantly Europe and the US need to reassure Russia that there is no membership option to Euro-Atlantic institutions for either Ukraine or Georgia. This may actually be the most important precondition for deactivating the Ukrainian ticking bomb and freezing existing hostilities in the long-term.