

# European Rim Policy and Investment Council (ERPIC)

## **Nadia Arbatova - The Russian Response to Western Strategy**

### INTRODUCTION

The recent Caucasus crisis has become a culmination of the Russia-West security differences and raised fears of a new Cold War. Given that "Cold War" is not so much a scientific but rather a journalistic term; any serious confrontation between Russia and the West can be labeled as "a new Cold War". It is often used to describe any heightened tension between states, but this interpretation does not indicate any starting point from which the rise in tension can be measured and its probable consequences and dangers assessed. As we know from our recent history, the Cold War was a period of conflict and competition between the US and the Soviet Union that began in the 1940s and lasted until the early 1990s. This period can be characterized by several distinguishing features which are in fact missing in the current situation.

Nonetheless, the last decade of mutual dissatisfaction and mistrust has deeply affected the Russia-West relations. After the end of bipolarity these relations passed through several stages beginning with euphoria in early 90s and ending with the recent flare-up in tensions between Russia and the United States during the Caucasus crisis. Why did it go wrong? And what should be done to avoid a new confrontation, whatever the name, between Russia on the one side and the United States, NATO and the European Union on the other? What are the possible scenarios in the Russia-West relations?

### THE COLD WAR AND ITS EFFECT ON RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

The Cold War begun in the 1940s, and lasted until 1990 and it was a conflict that had several distinctive features, namely:

1. The main parameter of the Cold War was the bi-polar structure of the international system. The world was divided into two camps and the track of this confrontation was a USSR-US military confrontation.
2. Global conflicts, how local they may have been, were one way or another connected to the Cold War. As a result the world was locked down on opposite sides of the East-West barricade.
3. The arms race was brought to an unprecedented scale in cost and intensity.
4. The East-West ideological confrontation was directed at demonizing each other.

Due to these circumstances, all the classic conditions were in place for potentially unleashing a world war.

If we look at the situation today it is completely different to the cold war period. Most importantly, the main component of the cold war system, namely bi-polarity, is missing. The world is multi-polar and besides from the United States and Russia, the

European Union, India and China have all emerged as new power centers and regional actors.

Russia and the West are no longer on different sides of the barricades in regional conflicts. They co-operate in Afghanistan and the Iranian nuclear program. They even co-operate regarding the issue of North Korea. As for the arms race, despite the increase in spending by the US and Russian defense over recent years, there has been nothing even remotely resembling what went on during the cold war.

## THE POST-SOVIET ERA AND WHO LOST THE COLD WAR

The end of the Cold War coincided with the collapse of the communist ideology and the two events have led to a divide which has developed between North and South, between globalism and anti-globalism, and between modernization and conservative values.

Despite the fact that two serious crises happened after the end of the cold war, namely the Yugoslav war of 1999 and the Caucasus crisis of 2008, there has not been any risk of a new world war. Nonetheless, the last decade of mutual dissatisfaction and mistrust has effected Russia-West relations and created a risk of new confrontation whatever name may be given to it.

There is a distinct nostalgic notion in the west when the 90s are concerned. However, the causes of many of the problems that Russia-West relations face today have their roots in the 90s.

If we are to look at the Cold War from a world war perspective, it should have ended with a peace conference that would have established the new world order. This was not the case. Russia was too weak and too involved in its domestic turmoil and post-communist revolution, and the West did not see any need to change the existing system because it was the USSR and the Soviet pact that had collapsed. The opportunity to create a new world order adjusted to the post-bipolar realities and identify a new agenda for Euro-Atlantic cooperation was therefore lost.

In a way, the post bi-polar order was replaced by the US, savoring the euphoria when unexpectedly finding itself in the role of a sole super power. The US increasingly began to substitute the role of superior power for the role of international law, and replacing the legitimate UN Security Council decisions with their own agenda and ignoring the prerogatives of those overseas in favor of NATO actions. The US has in many ways failed in its role as "world leader" due too its reluctance to take the opinions of other states into consideration. When the issue of international law is concerned, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and secret prisons in Europe are just some examples of why the US can not be considered as a role model to follow.

In the last twenty years, the most tragic expressions of the US policy are the military operation in Yugoslavia during the 1990s, its unsuccessful military operations in Afghanistan and its equally unsuccessful invasion of Iraq. These are all expressions of the US plan to enforce a policy that fits its own economic, political and military interests. Lately, it has become involved in the post-soviet area and exacerbated its relations with Russia.

The West often portrays itself at the victor of the Cold war and Russia was to a certain degree treated in the same way as Germany and Japan were after the Second World War when the USSR collapsed.

However, for the Russians, Russia was the real winner of the Cold War. Even the USSR did not lose the Cold War. The USSR lost due to the emerging multi-polarity and not due to Gorbachev's political thinking. It also became very difficult for the top leadership to justify the huge waste of resources diverted from the nation's wealth in relation to Cold War activities. As Russia was the main driving force for the dissolution of the USSR, however strange it may seem today, Russia played the same role that Croatia played in the breakup of Yugoslavia. Still, Russia was portrayed as the loser and as expressed by British political scientist, Lawrence Friedman:

*"There is now no particular reason to classify Russia as a great power. It cannot therefore expect the privilege, respect and extra sensitivity to its interest normally afforded to a great power."*<sup>[1]</sup>

## NATO EXPANSION

The Yeltsin leadership sincerely believed in Russia's integration into the West and accepted the Western model of this relationship offered by the US and NATO. The Russian liberals understood, even in the 90s, that the pendulum would swing the other way when Russia became stronger. This has indeed proven to be the case.

NATO expansion has proven to be the biggest mistake in the relations between Russia and the West. It is interesting to note that NATO is neither a new security institution nor exclusively a military organization. It is something in-between. Had NATO started its internal reforms before its enlargement, Russia's critical position would never have developed. As a result there is a deep distrust towards NATO in Russia.

Putin's 2007 Munich speech can be seen as a kind of watershed in Russian-West relations. It was received as a manifestation of anti-western sentiments but it had a very distinctive message, namely he appealed to the West to reconsider the order that was established in the 90s.

In most post-communist states, communism was not defeated by democracy but by nationalism. This was not the case in Russia which was the only country where communism was defeated by revolutionary liberals. The main reason for this was that Russian nationalists were in favor of the Soviet empire. But very soon nationalism in the states neighboring Russia had become the main driving force in the state formation and it spread into Russia.

Again the west made a terrible mistake. When the problem of The Soviet nuclear legacy was resolved, the west started to picture a new Russian empire and it started to encourage these integrationist trends in the CIS space. This message was picked up by the new independent states of the CIS and to them it became better to go with the west than with Russia. At the end of the day it fuelled Russia's suspicions about the real goals of the US and NATO, and in some respect the European Union, in the post-soviet space.

## RUSSIA AND THE WEST TODAY

Russia has been debating its national identity for the last 200 years<sup>[2]</sup> and it bought up endless arguments over whether Russians are Europeans or Eurasians. This debate is still going on but it has taken the form of a fierce ideological struggle between modernizers and conservative forces. This debate has nothing to do with geography, it has nothing to do with religion, and it has nothing to do with culture. It's about a model for our post-communist development.

The criticism of Putin's administration by Russian and foreign politicians, analysts and journalists is fair in many aspects. However, in the context of a historic analysis it is important to identify clear reference points. Russia started its post-communist evolution from scratch. It didn't have any impressive democratic past like most of the European countries. Despite this, Russia does not differ very much from the rest of Europe. It does lag behind the European countries in its evolution, and Russia could be reminiscent of Germany in the 20s with its intense feeling of unfair treatment by others. It is also similar to France in the 40s when it was trying to heal its troubles or Italy in the 60s as far as the nexus of power, money and crime is concerned.<sup>[3]</sup>

Looking back in time one can't help but recognize that Yeltsin's role was to get rid of the legacy of the Soviet past. Putin's mission was to stabilize the country which was falling apart after Yeltsin's reform. Both achieved their goals but with heavy losses to Russia's democratic evolution.

Today the goal is to modernize the country. The over-reliance on exports of raw materials creates obstacles not only for Russia's economic modernization but also for Russia's integration with the European Union. The model of an economy based on exports of raw materials is a model which is in need of a stable political system. However, the current model fits its role as a dominating factor in the post-soviet space as it ensures control over energy pipelines.

In the 90s a lot of people in the West naively believed that the new generation of Russian politicians could solve all the problems. However, without radical changes in the system itself, it will only be reproducing the same pattern and the same political forces. This is what has happened now.

Meanwhile, Russia has already reacted to Western strategy. President Medvedev's proposal to build new security architecture in Europe should not be seen as a Soviet initiative to drive a wedge between Europeans and Americans. It is an appeal to the West to do the job as it was supposed to have been done after the end of bi-polarity. It is encouraging to see that some EU countries, including Cyprus, have already supported this proposal. The criticism of the opponents in the West is revolving around the substance of a new treaty and that the proposal establishes general rules of behavior and that it will be established on just general rules of behavior.

A new treaty should be constructed which should address three fundamental contradictions of the post-bipolar era:

1. Nations rights for self determination and territorial integrity. The Helsinki Final Act has given a clear priority to territorial integrity. So we should address this issue and understand whether territorial integrity is still more

- important than the nations' right to self determination. And we should define clear conditions for self determination and in turn amend the international law.
2. A contradiction between nations' right for sovereignty and consequently non-interference with other states and their domestic affairs and a nation's right to humanitarian intervention. In 1999 NATO and the US used this principle to prevent humanitarian tragedy in Yugoslavia but they did not consider the fact that other nations may apply the same right. In the Caucasus crisis, Russia applied this right to prevent tragedy in the Caucasus.
  3. Contradiction between nations rights to freely choose security alliances and nations right to oppose expansion of these alliances if they're perceived as a security threat. This is a very serious contradiction and usually it is seen through the prism of a NATO enlargement but in principle it can be referred to the existence of the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization).

It seems that the only solution to this problem would be to redistribute the functions between the existing institutions. This ideal system will not happen over night. We can adjust our new security architecture to meet out post-bipolar needs if this is subject to discussions. The necessary precondition is to change the model of relations which exists today between Russia and The EU. Now the existing model is absent because it is based on two approaches which cannot be reconciled by definition as each of these approaches contains deep internal contradictions.

## CONCLUSIONS

So what does the EU and Russia want from each other? The EU wants Russia to be a reliable energy supplier. Then it wants Russia to be democratic and not to create problems in the post-soviet space. Russia wants a modern economy, based on the most advanced Western technologies. It wants to remain a sovereign democracy, and it wants to maintain its special interest in the post-soviet space.

All of these goals are, however, incompatible. If Russia remains a sovereign democracy and if it continues to exercise its influence in the post-soviet space, it will never become a modern democracy without Western help.

In the multi-polar world other centers of power (China, India, Pakistan, Iran) are likely to use the differences between Russia and the West to their advantage. This could have negative consequences on the non- proliferation activities.

As regards the East Mediterranean, its Eastern part together with the Black Sea was always a border land between Russia and the West and since NATO is still a military alliance which is expanding, it is expanding traditional security perceptions. NATO's new bases founded in Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, has increased Russia's interest in the region. Obviously, Russia will not be able to reinstate the Soviet-like presence in the Eastern Mediterranean but it will create new tensions between the West and Russia and between Russia and Israel because one of the places for a support base is in Syria.

As for Turkey, it has shown dissatisfaction with NATO and the US, for different reasons. Therefore, Russia and Turkey have already manifested unilateral conduct. They oppose NATO and US efforts to expand anti-terrorist activities to the Black Sea area. In my view, this model has one deficiency. It cannot last forever as you cannot

balance between the West, Israel and the Arab states. At the end of the day you have to choose sides, which mean that this will lead us again to the worst scenario and to a new confrontation.

In order to conclude my analysis I would like to refer to a quote from a Chinese philosopher, "even standing still, one can make a lot of mistakes". So with this in mind I think it is time to step out of the Cold War shadow.

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[1] Freedman, Laurence "Traditional Security," Russia and the West: The Twenty First Century Security Environment, Ed. Alexei Arbatov, Karl Kaiser, and Robert Legvold. Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1999. p. 26.

[2] The debates began with the "Westernizers" and the "Slavophiles" back in the nineteenth century

[3] Trenin, D. "Russia Redefines Itself and Its Relations with the West." The Washington Quarterly. Vol. 30, № 2 (March 15, 2007).

*Source:*

*[http://www.erpac.eu/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=255%3Anadia-arbatova-the-russian-respose-to-western-strategy&catid=1%3Alatest&Itemid=1](http://www.erpac.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=255%3Anadia-arbatova-the-russian-respose-to-western-strategy&catid=1%3Alatest&Itemid=1)*