

Towards a Common Transatlantic Strategy in Dealing with Russia?

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The conflict over Georgia has had one positive implication: the United States and Europe are forced to think strategically in dealing with Russia. Since the end of the cold war, Russia – and this is sometimes hard to understand for Europeans – has had little salience to US foreign policy. The selective cooperation on nonproliferation issues and on fighting transnational terrorism does not amount to a strategic policy. For the Europeans, despite the higher importance attached to Russia, developing a common policy was never easy, but has become more difficult because of EU enlargement to the East. Although the EU and the United States have shown a rather high degree of unity in the immediate response to the crisis over Georgia, we are still far away from a transatlantic convergence of perceptions, interests, and preferred strategic approaches in reacting to an assertive Russia.

How are the United States and Europe going to deal with a resurgent Russia; a power that guided by the notion of multipolarity has embarked on a policy of countering American preponderance; a power that is ready to use military force in order to shore up its claim of a “sphere of influence” in the former Soviet space; a power that nevertheless is essential to international energy security and to international cooperation on major security issues? Looking at US and European debates, one can distinguish three competing ideal-type approaches towards Russia:

Competing Approaches

Neo-Containment: For proponents of this option, the Russian invasion into Georgia is nothing else but the final evidence that Russia has embarked on a policy of rolling back Western influence on its borders, thereby posing a fundamental challenge to the European political and security order. Implicitly, this approach rests upon an “essentialist” view of Russian foreign policy, a prism through which the authoritarian turn in the Russian polity and a strong-handed assertiveness in Russian foreign policy are two sides of the same coin. From this perspective, the “West” should signal political resolve and sanction Russian

behavior through such measures as withdrawing support for Russian membership in the WTO and restricting the access of Russian companies to the international financial market. Moreover, the Western allies should respond with a policy that in substance if not in name amounts to military containment, reassuring NATO members in the East through credible defense commitments and speeding up enlargement of NATO. Ukraine and Georgia and potentially other aspiring countries would be accepted as new members whether they have fulfilled the political preconditions for membership or not, whether they are already stable democracies or not.

Hedged Cooperation and Integration:

Proponents of this strategic approach are agnostic about the long-term intentions of Russia. They do not share the assumption that Russia's incursion into Georgia is really proof of an imperial scheme to seize control over oil and gas pipelines and to topple pro-Western regimes on the Russian periphery. The possibility that Russia might be bent on reasserting imperial control in the region is not discounted, but a Western reaction that takes a return to a Cold War style confrontation for granted is seen as leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy. This approach is clearly based upon an "interactionist" view of Russian foreign policy.

According to this view, the "West" has to accept that Russia is a great power with security interests, a power whose cooperation is needed for the management of pivotal security problems. Thus linking cooperation on vital issues to one controversial issue is inappropriate. Cooperation wherever possible, confrontation wherever unavoidable: this should be the guiding principle. In this interest-based approach, priorities have to be clearly set. Since it is in the Western interest that Russia is further integrated into the institutions of the international system, sanctions like barring Russian membership in the WTO, expelling Russia from the G 8 or restricting trade and investment flows are counterproductive.

Rather than changing Russia's security driven behavior on its periphery, these measures are likely to hurt Western economic interests and hindering Russia's further economic integration, which may dampen political conflicts. Georgia's and Ukraine's membership in NATO would not be taken off the agenda, but Russian concerns would have to be taken into account in a process of consultation – a position that reflects a sober view of the national security priorities of the United States and other major Western powers.

From this perspective, the rush to further enlargement has to be avoided, while the concept of NATO enlargement should be re-evaluated. For current members, the Article 5 commitment is to be taken seriously, which might mean contingency planning for the defense of Poland and the Baltic states. But the EU, not NATO, is seen as the appropriate and primary institution for engaging Georgia and the Ukraine. The guiding assumption is that Russia's concern is about NATO as the instrument of US global strategy and not about democracies per se on its periphery.

"Realpolitik"-Management of Great-Power

Relations: This option rests on a "mechanist" view of Russian behavior: Russia acts like a great power, pursuing its security interest and claiming its "sphere of influence" which, in the interest of international stability, should be respected. From this realist geopolitical view, "spheres of influence" are well established instruments of managing great power relations, fostering stability and decreasing the scope for miscalculation. Thus, on the one hand, NATO should renounce its principal openness to Georgia and Ukraine, since opening the alliance to those two countries will do nothing but provoke Russia. On the other hand, the West should clearly communicate that any aggression against a current NATO member would lead to a military response. This strategy accepts geopolitically defined Russian security interests and tries to reduce the potential for miscalcula-

tion during a crisis over a contested territorial space. In contrast to the integrative approach, it does not share the liberal expectation that ever deeper economic interdependence and ever denser political linkages between the West and Russia will lead to the resolution of conflicts and stable peace.

Assessing the Approaches

How are these strategic approaches to be assessed? The realist management of great power relations would imply a fundamental reconsideration of US policy towards Eurasia. The United States has not been willing to concede a “sphere of influence” to Russia in the former Soviet space. The United States administration rhetorically states that it wants “to respect Russia’s legitimate security interests.” But it has never spelt out what these legitimate security interests might be. From the liberal US self-perception, its policies are per se non-threatening, and democratic nations along the Russian periphery, nations either integrated in NATO or EU or closely associated with those organizations, are indeed in “Russia’s best interest.” Granting Russia a “sphere of influence,” which is politically and economically open but off limits with respect to the further enlargement of NATO, would be heavily denounced as appeasement, not only by many in the United States, but also among the new European allies that tend towards a containment approach.

But neither will containment be the strategic approach the “West” will be able to agree upon. Germany, together with France, Italy and Spain, has been the vocal proponent of a strategy that builds a partnership through integrating Russia into international institutions and creating mutual economic interdependencies that give the Russian government and society a stake in a cooperative relationship. For some time there has been a debate in the German political class and the public about policy towards Russia, about balancing

values and interests. But even after the crisis in Georgia this debate stays very much within the broad parameters of a strategy of integration. This strategic preference does not simply reflect energy dependence and economic interests as many in the United States tend to assume. It is based on the view that European security and stability are best served by integrating Russia as a “responsible stakeholder” as much as possible into the international system – to use a term that originated in the US debate about dealing with China.

Yet proponents of containment expect that Germany and other countries in the “partnership” camp will over time be nudged to support a more containment-like posture simply by the fact that NATO and the EU, working by consensus, have to take the position of those members such as the “new Europeans” as well as Sweden and the UK into account, which prefer a more confrontational policy. No question: The “new Europeans” will likely push for offering Ukraine the clear perspective of EU membership, and they have a strong interest in re-orienting the European Security and Defense Policy towards dealing with problems on the Eastern periphery – and not so much with far-away conflicts. Within NATO, the “new Europeans” will continue to act as the advocates of Georgia’s and Ukraine’s membership and of a new focus on territorial defense. Germany and France will have to take the concerns of the “new Europeans” into account, but they will try doing so in a way that a cooperative approach towards Moscow will not be constrained.

In addition, proponents of neo-containment underestimate the fact that in the wake of the Georgian crisis the context of the NATO enlargement debate has changed. No one can any longer downplay the seriousness of the security commitment a NATO membership entails. How credible would it be to Russia that NATO and the United States would be ready to risk a major war over Georgia or the Ukraine? To be credible, a security commitment would

have to be tangibly demonstrated by deploying multilateral troops as sort of tripwire and reassurance to countries exposed to a potential Russian threat – a step many NATO members might be very reluctant to undertake. Speeding up the track to NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine will not only stir up concern among some European NATO members. During past rounds of NATO enlargement, some members of the US Senate also worried about the credibility of extending the range of security commitments. With the Article 5 function of NATO gaining new salience, these concerns will certainly be articulated in the US Senate.

holder,” an approach that will involve some conditionality in engagement and some degree of “hedging.” Whether cooperation or hedging will dominate the agenda will to a large extent depend on Russian behavior. But at the same time, it can reasonably be expected from the US that the geopolitical game in Central Asia and the Caucasus is being played with some restraint in mind.

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Problems and Prospects

Hence the only feasible common transatlantic approach is a version of hedged cooperation and integration. The range of cooperation and of hedging will remain a matter of dispute. Coordinating a common approach is certainly not helped by a US policy that uses bilateral relations with European nations as a lever to influence European-Russian relations, most notably in order to block the Nord Stream Pipeline from Russia to Germany.

The prospects of a coordinated transatlantic approach will very much be shaped by the future course of US Russia policy. Should the US move towards a neo-containment policy and ideological view of the geopolitical conflict with Russia, a common approach would be doomed from the beginning. One should be cautious to elevate the geopolitical conflict to an ideological struggle of democracy versus autocracy. The argument that an authoritarian Russia cannot live in a world surrounded by democracies is highly questionable; there is much to the argument that the geopolitical competition with the United States over influence is at the core of the conflict.

If policy coordination should have any chance, it will have to revolve around a realist cooperative strategy which aims at Russia becoming a “responsible stake-