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NATO, Russia and Ukraine: Roulette or Reset?

Given their tensions over Ukraine, can NATO and Russia avoid a new Cold War? Samir Tata believes that Germany might be able to broker a suitable détente, especially by 1) promoting a two-sided embargo on military aid, 2) calling for parliamentary elections, and 3) ruling out any future NATO relationship with Ukraine, Georgia or Belarus.

By Samir Tata for ISN

At least since 2008, NATO and Russia have been engaged in an extraordinarily dangerous tug of war over Georgia and Ukraine in their struggle to establish spheres of influence along Russia's southeastern border. At NATO's Summit Meeting in Bucharest in April 2008, President Vladimir Putin warned against further NATO expansion.[1] The brief war in August 2008 between Georgia and Russia has left no doubt that, as a practical matter, Georgia falls within the Russian sphere of influence, although NATO and Georgia are loath to acknowledge this reality. [2] In the current impasse over Ukraine, the struggle for influence has become a potentially self-defeating game of Russian roulette, in which a 'slippery slope' of retaliatory sanctions could lead to a 'new Cold War'. In order to avoid this, Germany must now assume responsibility as the leader of Europe, push the reset button, and help to carve out a path back to détente between NATO and Russia.

The Root of the Problem: Asymmetric Interests

Asymmetric interests lie at the root of the problem of demarcating the respective spheres of influence of NATO and Russia. From Russia's perspective, vital national security interests are at stake. From NATO's perspective, the interests at play are political rather than strategic: the promotion of social democratic norms and values in former Soviet satellites through closer integration with Europe.

Realpolitik , not revanchism, drives Russian policy with respect to Ukraine. Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula is the home of the Russian Navy's Black Sea fleet. Crucially, it is the Russian Navy's only warm water port and sole outlet, via the Turkish Straits, to the Mediterranean Sea. The Crimean Peninsula dominates the northern shore of the Black Sea. Ukraine stretches along the length of Russia's southeastern border and is the backdoor to Crimea. It is inconceivable that any sovereign Russian government, whatever its political orientation, would willingly accept the national security risk associated with the loss of effective control over the Crimean Peninsula (particularly when the southern and western shores of the Black Sea are already under NATO's control).

Crimea, Russia and Ukraine: The Historical Context

Historically, Crimea has been under effective Russian (or Soviet) control since 1774 when it secured

Crimea's independence from the Ottoman Empire and soon thereafter Russia formalized sovereign control through annexation in 1783.[3] Following the breakup of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, Crimea (which was nominally transferred from the Russian SSR to the Ukrainian SSR by a 1954 Soviet decree) became an autonomous republic within an independent Ukraine, while the naval base at Sevastopol remained under Russian control pursuant to a long-term lease (which was renewed in 2010 to extend the term of the lease to 2042). On March 18, 2014, Russia formally re-annexed Crimea, following a referendum two days earlier in Crimea that overwhelmingly supported secession from Ukraine and re-annexation to Russia. [4]

It is not at all surprising that Crimea opted to rejoin Russia, although the referendum was most likely orchestrated and coordinated by Russia. About 60 per cent of the population is ethnically Russian and over 75 per cent of Crimea's population is Russian speaking. [5] Crimea's economy revolves around the Russian naval base at Sevastopol. Its ties to Russia were literally forged in blood on the anvil of two sieges of Sevastopol - during World War II (by Nazi Germany), and the Crimean War (by Great Britain and France). Despite NATO's harsh denunciations of Crimea's re-annexation, it is simply not credible to believe that Crimea's incorporation into Russia is reversible. [6] Ukraine's rejection of Crimea's divorce in the hope of reconciliation is wishful thinking.

Since late 2013, Ukraine has been wracked by internecine conflict over closer ties to Europe, which has morphed into a burgeoning civil war pitting the pro-European ethnic Ukrainian majority of western Ukraine against the ethnic Russians minority mainly concentrated in eastern Ukraine. [7] On November 21, 2013, President Viktor Yanukovych announced that he would not sign an Association Agreement with the European Union which had been the subject of lengthy and difficult negotiations, and instead would pursue an alternative agreement of economic cooperation with Russia.[8] President Yanukovych's volte face, presumably under Russian pressure, unleashed a firestorm of street protests that rapidly spun out of control. A panicked government responded with violent repression, and Yanukovych was forced to resign and flee to Russia in February 2014. Following presidential elections in May 2014, Petro Poroshenko was elected President. On June 27, 2014, Poroshenko finally signed the EU Association Agreement (which has yet to be ratified by the Ukrainian parliament). [9]

Why Germany Must Press the 'Reset' Button

Germany holds the key to 'resetting' NATO-Russia relations and averting a 'new Cold War.' Détente with Russia has been critical to Germany's political and economic success. Germany is the economic engine of the European Union and the ultimate economic guarantor of the Euro currency zone. Confrontation with Russia over Ukraine risks upending nearly half a century of détente.

Since the late 1960's, beginning with Chancellor Willy Brandt (1969-1974), détente with the USSR (and then Russia) has been a constant of German (originally West German) foreign policy and has been referred to as Neue Ostpolitik (New Eastern Policy).[10] In a fundamental sense, Neue Ostpolitik has its roots in the 19th century *realpolitik* of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's "Reinsurance Policy" towards Russia: Germany must strive to ensure peaceful relations with Russia so as to prevent the emergence of an anti-German coalition on Germany's eastern and western fronts.[11] Despite the various tensions and crises around the world during the Cold War, Brandt and his successors - Helmut Schmidt (1974-1982), Helmut Kohl (1982-1998), Gerhard Schroeder (1998-2005) and the current chancellor Angela Merkel (since 2005) – never wavered in their commitment to détente.

Certainly, Neue Ostpolitk has yielded rich dividends for Germany: the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, normalization of relations with East Germany and other member states of the Soviet bloc, and – most importantly – the reunification of Germany (while remaining in NATO). Furthermore, Neue Ostpolitik

has been underpinned by a crucial economic bargain: Germany has gained greater energy security through reliable Russian supplies of oil and gas, and in return, Russia has gained greater economic security (through Germany's commitment to purchase Russian energy and through German investments in the Russian energy, industrial and financial sectors). Indeed, Russia is now the single most important source of energy for Germany (supplying 39 per cent of Germany's oil and 36 per cent of its gas).[12] And revenues from oil and gas exports to Germany and other EU countries fund over half of the Russian government budget.[13]

Reset for Détente: All Winners, No Losers

Germany must take the lead in returning to the path of détente. Berlin should outline a proposal that has five key elements. First, there needs to be an immediate and unconditional ceasefire in Ukraine. Chancellor Angela Merkel has issued such a call during her recent visit to Kiev on August 23.[14] Moscow has also insisted on an unconditional ceasefire. [15] Second, Berlin should call for an embargo on military assistance to both the Ukrainian government and insurgent forces (provided by NATO and its member countries or Moscow).[16] This would reinforce the call for a ceasefire. Third, there should be an unconditional ceasefire in the embryonic sanctions war between NATO and Russia. Specifically, the sanctions imposed on Russia by NATO member countries would be suspended, and likewise, Russia would suspend its reciprocal sanctions. Berlin should announce its decision to suspend German sanctions on Russia in return for simultaneous suspension of Russian sanctions on Germany without waiting for agreement of other NATO members. The objective is to get off the escalatory sanctions ladder.

Fourth, Germany should declare that it welcomes President Petro Poroshenko's recent call for new parliamentary elections for the end of October 2014. [17] A ceasefire would be essential for elections to take place in eastern Ukraine. Berlin should note that the recently signed EU Accession Agreement has yet to be ratified by the Ukrainian parliament, and the new parliament would have the opportunity do so after October. Berlin should stress that its favorable vote (as a practical matter, a veto) on ultimate Ukrainian membership in the European Union would depend upon satisfactory political arrangements negotiated among the various political groups in Ukraine. Such a German reminder would underscore the requirement that Ukraine's political arrangements reflect EU social democratic norms. Ukraine can be firmly embedded in Europe only if it can get its house in order in a peaceful manner. Ukraine should seize this opportunity.

Finally, Berlin should declare that it would not support any NATO relationship with Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus – the three countries along Russia's southern and southeastern border. It is critical to convey the message that from Berlin's perspective these three countries do not fall within NATO's sphere of influence. NATO has not made such a declaration, and it is precisely this ambiguity over the reach of NATO's security umbrella that has raised concerns in Moscow. Kiev should be under no illusion that it might have recourse to NATO protection or assistance. Without such a message from Germany, Ukraine will drag its feet in reaching an accommodation with Russia. Also, an unequivocal message from Berlin that it would not support NATO involvement in Ukraine would provide an exit ramp for the United States to avoid further entanglement – after all, no American (or German) vital national interest is at stake in Ukraine. NATO is first and foremost a military alliance, not an ersatz multilateral political organization.

Détente has proved its value during the Cold War and the post-Cold War unipolar period. It will be just as important to deal with the challenges of the emerging multi-polar world. NATO's détente with Russia should not be sacrificed on the altar of Ukraine.

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