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ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ & ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ
HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY

Athens Security Forum 2016: Searching for a Modus Vivendi in Relations between the West and Russia

Report

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NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION

Athens Security Forum (ASF) 2016 builds on last year's ELIAMEP Conference on "Back to the Cold War or forward to a stable relationship? Political and energy relations between Russia and the West in the Black Sea". Athens Security Forum aims at becoming a platform of debating diverse perspectives on European security. This year the Forum gathered high level officials, experts and diplomats on an exchange of views on the future of West-Russia affairs under the shadow of proliferating instability in Europe's Eastern and Southern neighborhoods.

NATO and a revisionist Russia

The Euro-Atlantic Alliance is concerned over a revisionist Russia. Twenty five years since the collapse of the USSR, the aptness of Western policy of integrating Russia in international institutions (among others in World Trade Organisation and the G8) as an equal partner is questioned. Instead of converging with its western allies, Moscow has opted for the dissolution of existing common security structures undermining the post Cold War European architecture. Moscow's efforts to hold European security hostage to its veto, its military build up and military intervention in East European countries threatens to destabilize global security order.

Given the number and plurality of security related structures that have preserved global and European order for several decades it would be an inaccuracy to blame current instability on the failure of institutions. It is the withdrawal of political commitment and of respect to their mission and norms by a key global player, namely Russia that has caused an unprecedented turmoil and instability.

NATO is not in favor of isolating Russia acknowledging that Western and Russian security are intertwined.

Despite the current downturn in its relations with Moscow and the suspension of NATO-Russia Council as a consequence of Moscow's aggressive policy in Ukraine and Crimea's illegal annexation, NATO is not in favor of isolating Russia, acknowledging that western and Russian security are intertwined. The Syria crisis and the ISIS threat have clearly indicated West-Russia interdependences. With regard to the future of West-Russia relations, the transatlantic community deems dialogue with Russia as a necessity imposed by the long list of issues upon which both sides must work together. But the prerequisite of a meaningful dialogue is mutual trust built on the basis of respect for international rules. Rebuilding trust will be a long process that cannot be based merely on legal foundations but would require a minimum adherence to shared values in addition to political commitment. A starting point on this trust building path would be the implementation of and respect for the provisions of the Minsk Agreements.

According to the Russian narrative, key to the current downturn on its relations with the West has been the indefinite NATO eastwards enlargement of the last twenty years that has reached Moscow's 'near abroad' area of privileged interests. The Russian perception of NATO's expansion as an 'existential' threat is dismissed by the Euro-Atlantic Community as inaccurate and deceptive. NATO stresses, on the contrary, that the alliance's enlargement has always taken place on a voluntary basis, has brought stability, and was never imposed but it has rather been the result of the 'freedom of choice' by sovereign democracies. It is the firm position of NATO that its future enlargement with interested partner countries such as Ukraine and Georgia remains on the table.

Security developments in Europe's arc of crisis: The Eastern and Southern neighborhoods

'Crisis' has become a recurrent feature of European reality varying from financial crises, to migration crises and armed conflict crises. Along with the dominant element of frequent crisis eruption, there is a mutual, i.e. between West and Russia, perception of 'unpredictability' with regard to each other's policy.

Though the institutional set up that governs European and global security in the last twenty five years has broadly remained intact, the security agenda has been transformed substantially. Security threats increasingly involve non-state actors (such as terrorist groups and non-recognized state like entities) rather than states. Terrorist acts and military attacks are not confined to peripheral zones but take place in the heart of NATO members or in Moscow. Focusing on threats harbored in Europe's eastern and southern neighborhoods the list has been an expanding one justifying the claim that Europe has entered the most dangerous period in the post Cold War era or even in the last forty years.

The *Ukrainian conflict* which erupted in November 2013 is at the top of the European agenda. It remains unresolved despite the mobilization of the international community. The narratives of the conflicting parties with regard to the roots and resolution of the problem remain diverse. The Ukrainian issue should be better framed as a systemic crisis, reflecting a clash of Western and Russian views on world order rather than on Ukraine itself. From one point of view, Moscow's Ukrainian play is about halting the expansion of western institutions and in particular EU and NATO eastern reach. Accordingly, Russian political elite has come to realize that "the West and Russia have been living in parallel worlds in the last 25 years" giving fundamentally different replies to key security issues. Both (i.e. Western and Russian) narratives blame current instability on the other's behavior, disregarding the impact of their own policies.

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None of the *protracted conflicts* in South Caucasus and the Black Sea has been resolved becoming a permanent source of instability that undermines trust building in the region. Peace in Transnistria and Nagorno Karabakh seems as fragile as ever. Given regional circumstances there could be a resumption of conflict. Moscow's role in maintaining the protracted conflicts and its military intervention in Georgia and Ukraine have raised security dilemma in the region and pose Moscow as an 'existential threat' to some of its neighbors. The wider Black Sea region is still in flux as the political turmoil in Moldova, a frontrunner in the Eastern Partnership framework, manifest. The destabilization of Chisinau will have wider implications in EU's eastern policy and it will definitely impact upon the Transnistria issue.

The remaking of the political map of *Middle East* along with the *radicalization* of sections of Islamic communities bring instability for the years to come. According to a future scenario of the new Middle East, Syria will be a weak, probably con-federal state, the Kurdish state-like entity in Iraq will be further recognized and competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia will intensify. Summarizing the compounds of instability in the Middle East, these are i) the transformation period in which societies in the Arab world are going through, ii) the accumulation of competition of regional powers and iii) competitive interests of global powers. There are no simple and straightforward solutions to the current instability in the Middle East. Syria may constitute a window of opportunity to set the new rule of world

order. A regime change under preconditions and in line with the international law is feasible. Peace in the Middle East would require a lengthy process of state capacity building and the engagement of a variety of actors. Building democratic societies in the Middle East should not be dismissed as the case of Tunisia shows.

Another point of concern is *Ankara's* ambiguous policy in the Middle East and the deterioration of its relations nearly with all its neighbors. The downing of the Russian jet by a Turkish jet in November 2015 brought to a sudden break down of the 'strategic alliance' between Ankara and Moscow and raised concerns among Euro-Atlantic allies on NATO's future stand to a possible repetition of a similar accident that could further derail NATO-Russian relations. Despite the relatively restrained Russian reaction, regional instability and uncertainty has increased following the downing of the Russian jet. Regional players such as Turkey have been inclined to an unpredictable attitude or one non-coordinated necessarily with their allies. This unpredictable action of Turkey has come as a result of its resentment with Western (and Russian) disrespect of Turkish policy concerns, interests and its role in European and Middle East security.

The *migration* and *refugee* crisis which comes as a consequence of the civil war in Syria and continues instability in Iraq and Afghanistan threatens the European project in many respects. What has been estimated as the continent's biggest wave of displaced people since World War II has created new divisions and social tensions within European societies. The cost on human lives has been enormous and it has raised strong criticism on the role of the West, Russia and the rest of the international community in addressing the sources of the problem. Reintroducing border controls in EU could trigger a countdown on European integration project and European solidarity. Thus, the (geo)political implications of the refugee crisis might be wider than those originally anticipated.

Another set of crises results from deteriorating conditions in the *economy* of Russia and the continuing financial instability in Europe. Russia's economic problems are the result of lack of domestic reforms rather than the result of western sanctions. Still, one should not expect that economic hardships will in any way lead to fundamental shifts in Russian foreign policy.

What can be expected next? The narratives over the sources of the current multifaceted crises might differ between various international players, but all share the same perception of the unprecedented nature of the unfolding instability. The international community is faced with serious threats against the sustainability of multilateral institutions and the established norms regulating global governance. In addition, a lot of threats cannot be resolved militarily. There is a fundamental challenge of state building in the European neighborhood and wider Middle East that required other than military solutions, coordinated efforts and time.

Re-examining the European security architecture

The post-Cold War system is crumbling and a new one has yet to emerge. In this transition period there are some urgent questions put on the table. Can the West build a new security architecture with Russia or it will have to be built without Russia? What is Europe's architecture going to look like? How will the new security architecture be designed? Is the world moving to a new great powers' agreement? Will Europe be divided in new spheres of influence (as Moscow seems to pursue) that would end the post-Cold War paradigm of a Europe free and whole? Given the complexity of today's world, it might not be wise to think

of Europe through a great powers' perspective of the previous century. There are three parameters which frame the new security architecture. First, Moscow has been putting efforts in building a 'Russian world'. The resurgence of Russia is part of a global trend where the West is losing its monopoly on the globalization process and a 'multiple values centres' world is emerging. Second, Europe seems unable to handle on its own the ring of instability in its periphery, thus, the strengthening of the transatlantic alliance seems inevitable. Third, the future of the Arab world cannot be unilaterally determined by the West or by a West-Russia paradigm. The chaos in Middle East will be lengthy and the new political map will be drawn along with the regional powers, namely Iran, Turkey and China.

Since a resolute response to the new security threats -including the one coming from radical Islam- would have to be a political rather than a military one, a common front by the West and Russia is not an option but a necessity. The answer to security threats will not come from structures that exclude Russia as a co-designer. One of the most expedient steps that the West and Russia must take is to fill in the institutional vacuum of arms control. The framework has been reduced to confidence building measures in the conventional domain in Europe (the Vienna document). In 2001, USA withdrew from the 1972 Russian-US ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) Agreement. Later on, in 2007, Russia decided to suspend the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe as a response to the refusal of the West to ratify its adapted version on the grounds of Moscow's non compliance with its Istanbul (1999) commitments. NATO suspended the CFE towards Russia in 2011. Currently, there is a, limited, military escalation between Russia and NATO following Ukrainian crisis in terms of budgetary spending, enhancement of the rapid reaction force of NATO and military posturing of Russian army which could lead to an accident of unrestrained consequences. Common efforts to ensure strategic stability should thus be taken by both sides. A new comprehensive security framework may not be feasible yet, but maintaining links of communication and coordination is expedient.

A recurrent question while examining the European security architecture is why NATO enlargement poses a threat to Russia. NATO's eastern enlargement was the result of post-Cold War geopolitical realities and the outcome of bilateral negotiations and agreements with interested parties, not a forced choice. To relax Russian concerns, the western allies established a NATO-Russia Council and on several occasions reassured Moscow that NATO's military presence was not against Russia but was rather aiming at stabilizing a democratic, free Europe. The Bucharest Summit of 2008 constitutes a turning point in West-Russia relations as countries in Russia's 'near abroad', Ukraine and Georgia, were given the prospect of future membership once a MAP would be concluded. The MAP was not offered, but Russia's fears over further NATO enlargement on former Soviet space were raised. To Moscow, NATO enlargement does not constitute a military threat but a political one. Furthermore, Russia was expecting that its consensus on the unification of Germany and the withdrawal of Russian troops from East Germany would be acknowledged by the West and Russia would be invited as a co-designer, not as a junior partner, in global and regional security governance. The West, on the other hand, had the illusion that Russia would consent to an indefinite enlargement of NATO and western institutions close to Russian borders.

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Russia and the West: Is it realistic to look for common ground?

The foundations of today's confrontation between West and Russia go beyond the Ukrainian crisis and rest on years of mistrust and mutual misunderstanding regarding post Soviet politics and the foundations of new European security architecture.

The question of whether it is realistic to look for a common ground between the West and Russia can only be answered in one way; it is imperative to look for a common ground. Differences among NATO members might be present with regard to how to deal with Russia or how to prioritize threats coming from the South and the East but these should be anticipated in a democratic collective security alliance. The debates within the alliance should also be expected to increase as NATO Warsaw Summit approaches.

Divisions with regard to how Russia should be treated exist also between EU members which broadly form four categories (varying from the 'indecisive' ones, to the 'accommodators', the 'measured' and the 'hostile' ones) The Ukrainian conflict and the annexation of Crimea by Russia have exaggerated these differences. Moscow seems to take advantage of these differences to undermine European unity and effectiveness. Still, despite the differences in the strategic assessment on Russia's policy, the Euro-Atlantic community has stood firm in its response to the Ukraine/Russian crisis.

On several occasions both the Euro-Atlantic Alliance and Moscow have emphasize the need to maintain communication despite their security claims. This provides some ground for the identification of shared interests upon which both sides can work. The fear of unintended consequences of an accident or miscalculated action is strong enough a reason to find a common ground. Both sides bear a heavy weight of shared responsibility for international order and stability. The relationship between the West and Russia is of outmost importance for a number of counties while their common stand on issues such as arms control, cyber security, maritime security and anti-terrorism activities is of vital importance for global security. At this stage, a 'realist' approach, one looking for common interests rather than emphasizing the role of personalities or values, could help to take West-Russia relations out of the deadlock. It would be unwise to expect that the West can pursue its international agenda working only with those who share the same values. Maintaining communication, avoiding game changers and working on a comprehensive agenda could restart the rapprochement.

Obsolete perceptions or the legacy of the past do impede West-Russia rapprochement and undermine trust building. Framing countries in a West-Russia choice and Cold War parameters or opting for zero sum game decisions is superseded by realities.

How important is NATO in finding a common ground between the West and Russia? Is it a central institution or its role is secondary to the importance of economics and energy?

Is more military force needed as an effective deter today? Does NATO need a comprehensive strategy towards Russia that goes beyond conventional arms control to economic challenges and global security structures? Would such a comprehensive strategy be a distraction from a dominant military threat?

NATO's role remains irreplaceable for the defense and deterrence capacities of the Euro-Atlantic community. It also becomes crucial in Western defense of the rules of engagement with Russia. In the months to follow and as NATO Warsaw Summit approaches, more debates on the 'Russian issue' should be expected, while the new US administration after the Autumn elections will probably set a new era in West-Russia relations. Until then no major shifts should be expected in US foreign policy.

As a concrete step forward a major Security Conference could identify a roadmap on future West-Russia relations. A new paradigm would accommodate both elements of cooperation and competition. Divergence over the Ukrainian issue should thus not preclude cooperation in the Syria front. Dissolving previous misunderstandings is a first step to restarting West – Russian relations. A new roadmap on West-Russia relations would start with a settlement of the Ukrainian conflict. The settlement would allow for a minimum of trust to rebuild as it would require common actions. At the same time, Ukraine would be able to complete its modernization process. Second, the European security structures would need to be revisited (reconsideration of the Helsinki principles, new conventional arms control agreement, confidence building measures). In this respect, there can be more reflection on the recommendations included in the Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on confidence building measures (as in avoidance of accidents).

A parameter often overemphasized in West-Russia relations is that of China. Russia just like the US has a pivot in China but it would be unjustified to expect that China will replace EU or the US in Russian agenda. As a European power, Russia is "doomed" to prioritize its relations with the West.

Russia's evolving foreign policy means

Contrary to Western perceptions that Putin's foreign policy goals have gone through evolution during the years, these have remained solid. What have been changing are the means to pursue the set goals. The rebuilding of the status of Russia as a big, global power has been the core goal in Russia's foreign policy and in its relations with the West since 2000 and the coming of Putin into power. During the first period of Putin's rule, Russia's status as a global power was built through a pro-European vocation which included the upgrading of Russia's strategic partnership with the EU and a positive consideration of NATO's enlargement (to include Russia) especially after the September, 11 security shifts. However, this approach failed as there was no common ground between the Western and Russian patterns of forging this strategic partnership. The West failed to understand the links between domestic politics and foreign policy in Russia, dismissing Moscow's threefold strategy of keeping a stronghold in domestic affairs, raising its assertiveness in the post Soviet space and building a strategic alliance with the West. Building a global power Russia through a strategic partnership with the West failed. Following Putin's second term in 2012 the pursuit of building Russia's global power status was taking place in a fundamentally new security and economic environment. At this stage, Putin developed the Eurasian Economic Union project as a means to rebuild Russia's status. This decision was underpinned by Putin's perception of EU as a declining civil and normative power which was under financial constraints and could not any more pose as an example of good governance. EU's sympathy to opposition movements in Russia raised also doubts on the role of West in Russia's domestic affairs. West and Russia were further alienated following the Ukrainian crisis as a result of Western policy of isolating Russia. The Eurasian Economic Union project became also redundant without Ukraine's participation leaving Moscow without any effective means

to meet its foreign policy goals. The Syrian crisis and the unrest in Middle East have presented Putin with a new opportunity to reshuffle its foreign policy means and restart relations with the West. Working with the West on the anti-terrorism operation and presenting Russia as (the only) credible military ally in stabilizing the Middle East is part of Moscow's far-reaching global power goal. If this is matched with a settlement in Ukraine, the lifting of western sanctions and cooperation in arms control then there is a real basis of a new state of West-Russian relations. But this is not going to be a straightforward process as the downing of the Russian plane has reminded us. One aspect that should be kept in mind is that trade and business are only secondary to serving Putin's geopolitical goals.

How important are values in building a common ground between the West and Russia?

"No shared values, no common ground for cooperation. Nations cannot change their value system".

"Values do not matter as long as governments focus on interests that allow for win-win situations".

"Cooperation does not start with shared values but it builds shared values".

Beyond the Minsk Agreement(s): Long term solutions to the Ukraine/Russia crisis

The future of the Minsk Agreements remains under question. The second Minsk Agreement expired in December 2015 but it was decided to be extended in 2016 as there is no alternative for the de-escalation of the conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine. The impact of a failure of the implementation of the Minsk Agreements would be felt well beyond Ukraine. On the one hand, the Minsk Agreements are at the moment the only framework for the resolution of the crisis and for Ukraine's return to stabilization. On the other hand, derailing the Minsk process would put an end to any plans on a new European architecture of inclusive security structures and would further isolate Moscow.

The ongoing instability and ceasefire violations in Eastern Ukraine indicate that the hybrid war between Ukraine and Russia is still unfolding. What has emerged as an essential problem is the interpretation of the Minsk Agreements by the parties involved. Conflicting views between Kyiv and Moscow on the sequence of the provisions to be implemented impede any step forward despite the declared intention by all parties to abide with the agreements. Of course the disagreement is well beyond the sequence of the steps to be taken. The current stalemate is a result of a deep mistrust between the conflicting parties and of the inability of the international community to impose or facilitate the implementation of the Agreements. Moscow and the Russia-backed separatists blame Kyiv on non-compliance and delaying the constitutional reforms on decentralization and on a special status of Donbas region. The Russian argument develops around the imperative of a special status of Donbas for any further step towards a sustainable resolution of the conflict to be taken. Kyiv, on the other hand, blames Moscow as being counterproductive, acting provocatively and asking unilateral concessions on the part of Kyiv while attempting to disengage the international community from the conflict resolution. Given Moscow's poor record in its compliance with arms withdrawal in previous conflicts (as in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Kyiv prioritizes the withdrawal of arms from Eastern Ukraine as the first step in implementing the Minsk Agreement.

The success of Minsk agreements seems uncertain unless Moscow sees an interest in the effective settlement of the current conflict in eastern Ukraine. Kremlin can maintain the

conflict to pressure Kyiv away from its European and Transatlantic links and ensure that Donbass will return under Ukraine's rule on its own conditions.

After all, the Minsk Agreements can only partly address the roots of the Ukrainian/Russian conflict. The Ukrainian/Russian conflict has been portrayed as one over different values and views of the new European order and not merely over the control of Eastern Ukraine. It is thus perceived as a tool at Moscow's hands to push the West into a Yalta 2 agreement. The Minsk Agreements in this respect are too narrow in their scope and cannot provide the conditions for a long term viable solution to the security problem that Russia poses.

The conditions that hinder the successful implementation of the Minsk Agreements are:

- The complexity of the conflict. The conflict has three layers. It reflects difficulties in (nation) state building in the post-Soviet space. Second, it is a conflict between Ukraine and Russia reflecting the latter's determination to use any means (diplomatic or military) to prevent Ukraine's convergence with EU/NATO. Third, it is an indicator of West-Russia rivalry on the conditions of the new European security architecture.
- The mistrust on the intentions of Moscow to accept a free and sovereign Ukrainian state and to accept full authority of Ukraine over Donbas.
- The inefficiency of Kyiv to move on with the modernization of the Ukrainian state.

There is a common understanding that the process of rebuilding trust and finding a solution to the Ukrainian/Russian crisis will be a lengthy one. During the 'non solution' period, the channels of communication and contact between the West and Russia need to be maintained. In this regard the progress made in economy and energy issues at the trilateral (EU-Russia-Ukraine) meetings is a positive element to be preserved. Building strategic stability will require durable efforts, durable patience and a cautious assessment of short and long term implications of any policy choice. Reducing unpredictability between West and Russia is a first step.

The crisis in Ukraine has indicated the important role of inclusive organizations such as the OSCE in post-Cold War Europe, especially for those countries that are not under a collective security umbrella. Despite the difficulties that the OSCE has met in operating in Eastern Ukraine, it has played the most constructive role in the conflict resolution through its presence on the ground and its role in the trilateral contact group. OSCE's role is only to be strengthened in the next phase of resolving the conflict.

For Ukraine, its further convergence with the EU and the implementation of the Association Agreement can provide the means for the country's modernization and state building. The European vocation of Ukraine does not need to disturb the links with the Russian neighbor too. Ukraine's NATO accession may be viewed positively as the only defense option for Kyiv today, but on the other hand, it could trigger an uncontrollable escalation of instability in Europe.