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2009-12-10

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Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

http://hdl.handle.net/10945/38808

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December 10, 2009

Moscow's European Security Gambit

by Mikhail Tsypkin

The gestation period for the Russian draft Treaty of European Security was unusually long. Newly elected President Dmitry Medvedev announced on May 8, 2008, that he was going to come up with a new plan for European security, and the draft treaty was published only on November 30, 2009.

Now Moscow has begun promoting its Draft Treaty on European Security in meetings of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and NATO. The treaty has a somewhat dreamy character typical of various projects associated with Medvedev's presidency: its goal is laudable, but it lacks workable implementation mechanisms.

Moscow's proposed treaty is open to all countries and existing alliances and international organizations (NATO, EU, OSCE, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization) in the Eurasian-Atlantic space, including the United States and Canada. But there is an interesting exception: the one organization of which both Russia and China are members -- the Shanghai Treaty Organization -- is not mentioned. Apparently, China is not invited.

The issue of membership by itself will create a tremendous obstacle: Russia and several other Euro-Atlantic nations don't recognize Kosovo, while no one in the treaty's region but Russia recognizes the independence of Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

The invitation to alliances and international organizations to become signatories has two objectives. One is to strengthen the legitimacy of the weak organizations founded and supported by Russia (the CIS and CSTO).

The other goal is to dilute somewhat the collective security obligations of NATO members. According to the draft treaty, the policies of existing "military alliances" are not supposed to impact negatively the security of other parties. It is not clear at all how the approval of the treaty by alliances/organizations would affect the relationships of their members vis-a-vis the treaty.

Undefined Threats

Avoiding a negative impact on the security of the signatories is the central point of the proposed treaty. In fact, it would primarily establish a forum for its signatories to complain about actions by other signatories (or parties outside the treaty) that the aggrieved party finds threatening. There is no definition of what may constitute a threat.

The draft-treaty language is exceptionally broad in this regard: the treaty is to ban not only any military actions (or preparations for such) by one party against another, but also any "action [by one party] significantly affecting" the security of other parties to the treaty. Thus, any party to the treaty could complain about nearly anything.

The draft's enforcement mechanism is quite weak: the Extraordinary Conference of its members, called in case of a crisis, can make decisions only if more than four-fifths of the treaty signatories are present. This provision is in fact more favorable to NATO, which could in a crisis simply boycott the conference. Russia, which has no reliable allies, would have trouble doing likewise.

The Extraordinary Conference's decisions must be unanimous, but the party whose behavior has caused the conference to be convened has no right to vote. This goes against the practice of Soviet and Russian diplomacy, which has consistently relied on the right of veto in the UN Security Council.

The UN Security Council, however, is not left out of the picture: a party to the treaty, if subject to aggression, could receive military aid from another party -- until the Security Council resolves the situation. Parties to the treaty are under no obligation to help a victim of aggression. Thus, NATO would continue to be the only reliable mechanism of collective defense in Europe.

New Approach To Europe

Russian policymakers can hardly be unaware of the problems inherent in their proposal. So why are they pushing it? One likely reason is that Medvedev, in order to maintain his presidential image, needs a foreign-policy initiative of his own.

The other (and more long-term) reason is probably the dead end that the Kremlin policies have reached in Europe: Russia's relationship with the three bodies encompassing much of Europe (the EU, the OSCE, and NATO) is chilly and, at times, confrontational.

None of the existing European structures fits Moscow's needs. Moscow has severely criticized the OSCE for its election-monitoring practices. The EU does not want to accommodate Russia's energy-policy preferences. And NATO, from the Russian standpoint -- rather than accepting former Warsaw Pact members and even worse, former Soviet republics -- should have dissolved itself once the Soviet Union -- its raison d'etre -- ceased to exist.

By staking its hopes on the creation of a new organization, the Kremlin continues to avoid dealing with the basic problem of its European policy: Russia's ambiguous attitude to the outcome of the Cold War. On the one hand, Russian leaders have proclaimed since 1991 that by playing a crucial role in ending the Cold War, Russia (as the successor of the USSR) was one of the victors. On the other hand, Moscow often claims that Russia is the victim of the end of the Cold War, having "lost" its rightful possessions.

The naturally growing Western engagement with the former Soviet republics and client states aggravates this complex. Russia the victorious power promotes cooperation with the Western victorious powers, while Russia the defeated power proclaims itself the successor of the Soviet superpower and engages in nostalgic and revisionist rhetoric and sometimes actions.

Russia's smaller and weaker neighbors, still unsure of their independence from Moscow, find such conduct alarming. Even worse, this dynamic pushes the politics of these nations away from the European ideals of tolerance and stability and toward nationalism and militancy. These dynamics of the relationship between Europe's largest state (and nuclear superpower) and its neighbors creates an atmosphere of mistrust that no organizational gimmicks can cure.

Only the passage of time and the genuine recognition by Russia that shedding the empire has been beneficial to its people can result in the qualitative improvement of Russia's position in Europe.

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