

## NATO and Russia: Post-Georgia Threat Perceptions



Aurel Braun

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## Summary

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The 2008 war in Georgia is but a milestone on the downward curve in NATO-Russia relations, one that has been characterized by misunderstandings, misplaced expectations and missed opportunities. This is not a new Cold War, but there is an obvious need for new ideas rather than repackaged old ones. NATO has to be sensitive to genuine Russian security concerns, and the latter should appreciate that manipulation, intimidation and attempts at dividing the Alliance are not shortcuts to superpower restoration. There is ample room for cooperation if the right lessons are learned, the gap between rhetoric and reality is reduced, and policies are governed by patience and pragmatism.

## Introduction

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The August 2008 war in Georgia is but one milestone in a downward curve in NATO-Russia relations, one that has been characterized by misunderstandings, misplaced expectations and missed opportunities. Further complicating matters, today we are facing an era of global disruption, uncertainty, dangerous economic recession, and conflicts on the periphery of what had been hoped would be a new zone of security stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Add to this the current specific perception of threats in Russia and in NATO, and threats may too easily transmogrify into a deep crisis.

All parties bear considerable responsibility for the deterioration in relations. NATO, an alliance that has enjoyed a remarkable longevity and which, instead of going out of business, has gone “out of area,” too often seems and operates as a dysfunctional entity. It has yet to fully resolve its identity crisis, effectively address the tensions between a preference by some West European states toward collective security as compared to the Alliance’s original purpose of collective defense (one still most strongly favored by the new NATO members) or be able to formulate a unified policy—a failing that was so evident in the wake of the war in Georgia. Moreover, the Alliance frequently has been insensitive to Russian fears and pride in the manner in which Brussels has pursued enlargement and has been rather inept at accurately gauging Russia’s significance.

There is little doubt that Russia, a state that stretches over eleven time zones, possesses vast natural resources, and has a highly educated population, can only be ignored at the Alliance’s peril. Moscow, for its part though, has allowed its fears and ambitions to shape and drive both its domestic and foreign policies in a way that many of its neighbors find threatening. The Kremlin’s domestic policies are largely moving away from democracy in favor of what the Russians call “the power vertical” (based on an authoritarian election culture) and are increasingly alienating the country from the Alliance democracies. Russia’s *Weltanschauung* is increasingly perceived as not just assertive, but as aggressive. This view was strongly reinforced by Russia’s actions in Georgia and by Moscow’s ready use of energy as a means of international pressure and manipulation. President Dmitry Medvedev’s proposal or “doctrine” (obviously supported and approved by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin) first enunciated in June 2008, that argues for a new legally-binding treaty for a system of mutual security guarantees in Europe,<sup>1</sup> does suggest a potential for improved security and threat diminution, and appears to have the support of some West European

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<sup>1</sup> B. Whitmore, “Russia: Medvedev, Putin Launch ‘Two-Headed’ Foreign Policy—But Who’s Winning?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*, 6 June 2008, <[www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1347817.html](http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1347817.html)>.

states. Nonetheless, there are also considerable worries within NATO that Medvedev's proposals are an attempt to sow division within the Alliance, and particularly to weaken transatlantic ties.<sup>2</sup> There is then a growing concern, even in some sympathetic Alliance capitals, that at best, Moscow is engaging in gamesmanship rather than pursuing partnership.

Yet, perceptions of enhanced threat to multidimensional security (political, economic, as well as military) need to be put in context: this is not a new cold war; Russia is not the Soviet Union. Though the risks of deteriorating relations are real, and NATO on the one hand, and Russia on the other, can ill-afford to function as two solitudes, bad relations are undesirable, but are not preordained.

Nonetheless, the volatile situation, with due respect to US Vice President Joseph Biden, cannot be resolved by just pressing "the reset button."<sup>3</sup> Structural problems and recent developments demand considerably more than that and require new thinking and new policies. To illuminate the problems and possibilities, three crises in NATO-Russia relations will be addressed: the attack on Georgia; the dispute over missile defenses; and differences of approach on issues like counterterrorism and Iran. By way of conclusion, the possibilities and the impact of reassurance and cooperation will be considered.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; "European Leaders Split on Russian Security Plan," *Deutsche Welle*, 7 February 2009, <[www.deutsche-welle.de/popups/popup\\_printcontent/0,,4009723,00.html](http://www.deutsche-welle.de/popups/popup_printcontent/0,,4009723,00.html)>.

<sup>3</sup> A. Aslund, A. Kuchins, "Formula for Rebooting Commercial Relations," *Moscow Times*, 25 February 2009, <[www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=374781.htm](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=374781.htm)>.

# The Georgian Crisis, Indicative of Testy NATO-Russia Relations

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In assessing the Georgian crisis of August 2008, the purpose here is not to conduct a historical analysis but to illuminate how this event and its aftermath reflect and shape threat perceptions. It should also be possible to better understand the interplay of domestic and external variables as they interact both in terms of perception and politics and to gauge, especially in the case of Russia, the melding of domestic fears and foreign ambitions.

## Russia

Though the proximate causes of the Georgia conflict continue to be the subject of considerable dispute and the claims of pure self-defense by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili seem rather problematic,<sup>4</sup> these are less important than it may seem in terms of NATO-Russia relations because they involve snapshots of a complex process. The long-term causes of the conflict, however, are likely to tell us considerably more about the perceptions, problems, and prospects of that relationship. Here Russian fears and ambitions, its *Weltanschauung* and the “frozen conflicts,” are prime.

### Fears and ambitions

First, we need to appreciate how deeply wounded Russia has felt by NATO enlargement. Moscow’s acquiescence should not be confused with willing consent. There have been few occasions when the Kremlin has not expressed its strong reservations or opposition, beginning in the 1990’s. During President George W. Bush’s presidency, which roughly coincided with that of Vladimir Putin, NATO added seven new members, including the former Soviet republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Georgia and Ukraine’s avid aspirations to join the Alliance then, could only raise alarm or at least, cause great displeasure in the Kremlin.

Second, as Putin solidified his increasingly centralized and authoritarian rule, he persuaded both himself and his countrymen that chaos or even political uncertainty was the enemy of economic progress and social stability. Therefore the “Orange” and “Rose” revolutions, in

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<sup>4</sup> C. King, “Georgia Without the Spin,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2008, <[www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=4559.htm](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4559.htm)>; C.J. Chivers and E. Barry, “Georgia Claims on Russia War Called into Question,” *New York Times*, 7 November 2008, <[www.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/world/europe/07georgia.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/world/europe/07georgia.html)>.

Ukraine and Georgia respectively, were not only political developments that the Kremlin deplored, but also potential sources of contamination that would be best stanchd.

Third, the tremendous growth of the Russian economy, fueled by rapidly rising energy prices, not only reinforced confidence in Putin's approach but strengthened Russia's hand in dealing with its neighbors and with NATO. Oil prices reached their peak just before the war in Georgia,<sup>5</sup> Russia's economy grew at a rate of 7 to 8 percent over the previous several years, and its currency appreciated 20 percent.<sup>6</sup> Further, Gazprom, Russia's natural gas monopoly, became one of the three largest companies in the world and was supplying over 40 percent of Germany's natural gas,<sup>7</sup> while Moscow's combined financial reserves reached about 600 billion US dollars by August 2008.<sup>8</sup> Yet, when Russia with its large, seemingly successful economy, tried to pursue its World Trade Organization (WTO) accession process, it would find itself in the humiliating position of needing the permission of such members as Georgia and Ukraine to join the organization.

Russian grievances, ambitions, and growing capacity did make Russia more assertive, and this is vital to an understanding of the conflict in Georgia and subsequent perceptions of threat in the region. Several months before the Georgian conflict, Russia, for instance, began to encourage the independence of the breakaway Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia following Moscow's outrage over the recognition by Western democracies of the independence of Kosovo. Russia fully restored economic ties with Abkhazia over the strenuous objections of the Georgian government which labeled this an unacceptable encouragement of separatism.<sup>9</sup>

Further, Moscow, in a move that has been viewed as highly provocative by its neighbors, had been, and is continuing to, confer Russian citizenship and grant passports to millions of ethnic Russians and non-Russian citizens in the successor states, and specifically to the separatist South Ossetians and Abkhazians.<sup>10</sup> In the case of the Georgian regions, the protection of "Russian citizens" was one of the excuses for Moscow's military intervention.<sup>11</sup> Such Russian assertiveness fits in with a perception in neighboring states that whatever threats Moscow may have felt it was under, now buoyed by skyrocketing energy prices and encouraged by Western energy dependence, it was returning to expansionism and an attempt to recapture its previous status. This was certainly the view

<sup>5</sup> J. Bachman, "State to Spend Big Chunk of Stabilization Fund," *Moscow Times*, 2 February 2009, <[www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=374139.htm](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=374139.htm)>.

<sup>6</sup> M. Goldman, "Petrostate: Putin, Power, and the New Russia," Kennan Institute Meeting Report, Vol. XXVI, No. 1, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> C. Ryan, "Rethinking Russia and US-Russian Relations: Russia's Role in the Global Economy," Kennan Institute Meeting Report, Vol. XXVI, No. 9, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Associated Press (AP), "Abkhazia Appeals for World Recognition," *New York Times*, 7 March 2008.

<sup>10</sup> G. Peach and M. Danilova, "Russian Passport Handout Stirs Fears," *Moscow Times*, 25 February 2009, <[www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=374765.htm](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=374765.htm)>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

expressed in 2007 by Ukraine's current Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko.<sup>12</sup>

Presciently, Tymoshenko warned that "in the name of peacekeeping in places such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, Russia has sought to reestablish its tutelage and the West has largely not objected."<sup>13</sup> She further noted that "Moscow is treated as the de facto imperial center – which is also how it conceives itself."<sup>14</sup> Her contention that Moscow was devoting much of its energy to restoring its former political influence, if not control, bears further analysis of how Russian fears and assertiveness have combined to shape Moscow's current security concerns and policies in its relations with NATO.

### The Kremlin's Weltanschauung

It is certainly not the contention that Russia's worldview, which conditions its threat perceptions, reflects a defined master plan or is immutable. It is possible that under President Medvedev there could be both domestic and foreign policy changes that will greatly alter perceptions. Medvedev has shown a far greater understanding of the meaning of the rule of law in a democracy and has indicated in a January conversation with President Barack Obama that he wished to improve the strained relationship between Moscow and Washington.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Medvedev has repeatedly expressed a desire for genuine democracy (rather than Putin's hyphenated euphemisms for authoritarianism—"sovereign-democracy" or "directed-democracy") and has shown personal empathy over the January 2009 murder of Anastasya Baburova, a reporter at the liberal newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*.<sup>16</sup>

The problem here is that even if Medvedev truly wishes to build pluralistic democracy in Russia<sup>17</sup> and despite the fact that he has constitutional supremacy, he still lacks a substantive power base. Consequently, the reality is that the most crucial decisions (including the invasion of Georgia) in fact continue to be made by Prime Minister Putin and his tightly controlled group of *siloviki*.<sup>18</sup> Even the occasional impression of a diarchy of the two men is mistaken, for Putin maintains control of the power ministries and the Duma. It is Putin's vision that, at least for the time being, remains prime.

Putin's views, however, have also evolved and for an appreciation of Russia's *Weltanschauung* we need to go back to former Russian Prime

<sup>12</sup> Y. Tymoshenko, "Containing Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2007, <[www.foreignaffairs.org/20070501faessay86307/yuliya-tymos.htm](http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20070501faessay86307/yuliya-tymos.htm)>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> "Kremlin: Obama, Medvedev Vow to Seek Better Ties," *New York Times*, 26 January 2009.

<sup>16</sup> V. Ryzhkov, "Medvedev the Sham Liberal," *Moscow Times*, 3 February 2009, <[www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=374171.htm](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=374171.htm)>.

<sup>17</sup> There is uncertainty about Medvedev's commitment to democracy and to a new style of relations with Russia's neighbors. For instance, in December 2008, he did not hesitate to threaten Ukraine with sanctions and a "whole arsenal of possibilities" if it did not pay off its gas debts. "Medvedev Threatens Ukraine with Sanctions over Unpaid Gas Bills," *RFE/RL*, 25 December 2008, <[www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1363558.html](http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1363558.html)>.

<sup>18</sup> *Siloviki*: members of the so called power structures (the armed forces, intelligence services, Ministry of the Interior, etc.).

Minister Yevgeny Primakov who expressed it in a cohesive form more than a decade ago.<sup>19</sup> Primakov, a man who seems to dislike democracy and the West in equal measures, expressed supreme confidence that Russia would regain its position as a pivotal power, fully competitive with the US, if it successfully pursued a foreign policy of maneuver and manipulation while building up its domestic strength. He drew for inspiration on a nineteenth century Russian Foreign Minister, Aleksandr Gorchakov who, following the debacle of the Crimean War rebuilt imperial Russia's power and influence. The key to success in Primakov's view was a policy that would exploit the resentment of smaller powers, turn them against Russia's opponents, or at least neutralize them, and play the great powers off against one another as Russia rebuilt itself. Specifically, he contended that learning from Gorchakov, Russia should do everything to create a "single economic area" led by Russia on the territory of the former Soviet Union – something that of course also necessitated political hegemony in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Initially, Putin, a pragmatist who told the Russian people that they lived in a poor country where it would take a long time to reach prosperity, seemed to have little patience for Primakovite fantasies of grandeur. Yet, the trappings of his office, his own widespread popular approval, and perhaps most significantly, the vast increases in oil revenues that allowed the Russian economy rapid (if unidimensional) growth, seem to have convinced Putin, at least in the past few years, that there could be shortcuts to success and that the Primakovite "restoration" was possible.

In fact, with seeming Russian economic success, the Primakovite ideas deeply have permeated the thinking of the military and foreign policy elites. For instance, a fairly recent study of the views of students from the four main universities that supply Russia's Foreign Ministry with the next generation of diplomats shows that they not only look to Primakov as a powerful role model, but few favor Western style democracy and over half consider the United States as the greatest threat to Russia.<sup>21</sup> Such views are very much congruent with a study by Timothy Colton which found that in every dimension, elite opinion in Russia was more hostile to NATO than mass public opinion.<sup>22</sup> Other experts, such as Lilia Shevtsova, have contended that Moscow's "new idea is an anti-Western ideology [that] has become an important factor that legitimizes the highly centralized state" and fuels anti-Westernism in foreign policy.<sup>23</sup>

If the above assessment of the Kremlin's views is correct, and as noted, there is considerable evidence to support it, then this has major implications for Russian threat perceptions and its relations with NATO or NATO aspirants such as Georgia. Moscow would view the extension of the Alliance's influence into former Soviet territories as a threat to its security. Similarly, it would perceive the strengthening of NATO's presence on the

<sup>19</sup> Y. Primakov, "Russia in World Politics: A Lecture in Honour of Chancellor Gorchakov," *International Affairs (Moscow)*, Vol. 44, No. 3, 1998, p. 7-13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11-12.

<sup>21</sup> Y. Biberman, "Generation Putin," *Foreign Policy*, January 2008, <[www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=4141](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4141)>.

<sup>22</sup> T. Colton, "Post-Communist Russia, the International Environment and NATO," in A. Braun (ed.), *NATO-Russia Relations in the Twenty-first Century*, Routledge, London, 2008, p. 25-26.

<sup>23</sup> L. Shevtsova, "Anti-Westernism is the New National Idea," *Moscow Times*, 7 August 2007.

territories of former Warsaw Pact states not only as a provocation, but as a threat to what it views as an *entitlement* to the restoration of its former world status. Such Russian threat perceptions were made rather evident in its dealings with “frozen conflicts” and crystallized with Georgia.

### “Frozen conflicts” and Georgia

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of successor states left behind four separatist regions in what Russia used to call the “Near Abroad.” Two of these, Georgia’s Abkhazia and South Ossetia, border Russia. Nagorno-Karabakh is an ethnic Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan and Transnistria is located in Moldova. All are collectively known as “frozen conflicts.” In certain respects though, this is a misnomer, for as American analyst Vladimir Socor pointed out, the conflicts are not really frozen, but rather “it is their settlement that is frozen”—mainly by Russia.<sup>24</sup> As he also noted, Moscow’s approach is to create (especially in the case of the Georgian separatist regions) a kind of controlled instability which Russia can foment or calm, often encouraging the separatists’ sense of impunity and intransigence towards the central government with the resultant tensions undermining Euro-Atlantic strategic and democratic interests in the region.

In Georgia, at least since the “Rose Revolution,” Moscow’s manipulation of the tiny, dependent population of the two separatist regions to which it granted Russian citizenship has intensified.<sup>25</sup> Matters, from Moscow’s perspective, were made worse with the January 2008 re-election of Mikheil Saakashvili, his western orientation, and his clear desire to join NATO which was sanctioned through a plebiscite in the same elections.<sup>26</sup> Even in the case of Moldova’s Transnistria region, Moscow has not hesitated to use both incentives and intimidation to ensure that the rather Russia-friendly Moldovan government did not use the “5+2” format (Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE], the United States, and the European Union [EU]) to challenge the Kremlin’s interests.<sup>27</sup>

Often Moscow’s relations with the states where the frozen conflicts are located have been delegated to the power ministries, peopled by the *siloviki*. It has been evident though that particularly in the case of Georgia, they have had the full support of Putin and that Russian-Georgian relations (even before the conflict) have been governed by a Primakovite vision. Consequently, the August 2008 war against Georgia involved not only a decision to try to crush or at minimum humiliate Saakashvili’s government, but also to lay down markers for NATO.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted by L. Bechner, “Russia and the Frozen Wars,” Council on Foreign Relations, *Daily Analysis*, 6 September 2006; V. Socor, “Russian Troops in Moldova,” *Eurojournal.org*, May 2007, <[www.eurojournal.org/more.php?id=233\\_0\\_1\\_0\\_M](http://www.eurojournal.org/more.php?id=233_0_1_0_M)>.

<sup>25</sup> “If Kosovo Goes Free”, *Economist*, 29 November 2007, <[www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=10225052](http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=10225052)>.

<sup>26</sup> B. Witmore, “Georgia: With New Political Landscape, Can Stability Prevail?” RFE/RL, *Feature*, 11 January 2008.

<sup>27</sup> “Transnistria Says New 5+2 Talks Sabotaged by Moldova,” *Tiraspol Times*, 19 November 2007, <[www.tiraspoltimes.com/node/1437.htm](http://www.tiraspoltimes.com/node/1437.htm)>.

## **NATO fears and reactions**

With the end of the Cold War, NATO no longer fears a massive Russian attack; in fact, the 2002 NATO-Russia Council was meant to at least give Moscow a seat in the Alliance's antechamber. Nonetheless, the Alliance remains concerned by assertive policies and manipulation designed to enhance Russian regional domination. The invasion of Georgia, as noted, only magnified such concerns and fears. Alliance fears though are not homogeneous and the reaction has not been uniform. There are several reasons for this and they give us considerable information about how Alliance threat perceptions are shaped and what this, in turn, implies.

First, NATO, as noted, suffers from something of an identity crisis (drifting between collective security and collective defense) that Moscow has only been too keen to exploit. The new eastern members of NATO have insisted on "hard security guarantees" that collective defense and ultimately only American military commitment could provide.<sup>28</sup> These newer Alliance members, who experienced Soviet control (and perhaps due occasionally to exaggerated fears), would prefer a NATO policy that would *contain* Russia, or at least its expansionist instincts.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, West European states have focused more on engaging Moscow and on ensuring Russian energy supplies.<sup>30</sup>

Second, the Georgian conflict magnified Alliance divisions and significantly impacted the new Alliance members' threat perceptions. Several Eastern European leaders rushed to Tbilisi to visibly demonstrate their solidarity with Georgia, whereas Western European leaders emphasized the need for a ceasefire and resolution of the conflict while downplaying blame. French President Nicolas Sarkozy persuaded Georgia to accept terms that allowed Russia considerable room for interpretation, terms that had to be subsequently clarified to save at least some of Georgia's sovereignty.<sup>31</sup> Among Western Allies, the US did send its navy to deliver humanitarian aid to Georgia<sup>32</sup> and continued to press for Georgian (and Ukrainian) NATO membership<sup>33</sup> but countries like Germany and France, which opposed offering Georgia (and Ukraine) the Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, have

<sup>28</sup> D. Braun, *NATO Enlargement and the Politics of Identity*, Martello Paper 31, Queen's Centre for International Relations, Kingston, ON., 2007, p. 43-49.

<sup>29</sup> A. Braun, "Enlargement and the Perils of Containment," in A. Braun (ed.), *NATO-Russia Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, *op. cit.* [22], p. 62-63.

<sup>30</sup> During the conflict the Russians made a point of having their massive forces rest on top of energy lines taking fuel to Europe. *New York Times*, 29 January 2009.

<sup>31</sup> EurActiv.com, "Sarkozy, Solana in Russia to Clarify Georgia Ceasefire," 2 February 2009, <[www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/sarkozy-solana-russia-clarify-georgia-ceasefire/article-175176.html](http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/sarkozy-solana-russia-clarify-georgia-ceasefire/article-175176.html)>; D. Sindelar, "OSCE to Dissolve Georgia Mission after Russia Blocks Extension," *RFE/RL*, 22 December 2008, <[www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1362355.html](http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1362355.html)>.

<sup>32</sup> EurActiv.com, *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> J. Dempsey, "U.S. Presses NATO on Georgia and Ukraine," *New York Times*, 26 November 2008.

continued to oppose moving closer to membership for these two aspirants,<sup>34</sup> despite an overall Alliance commitment to that end.

Third, despite Russian non-cooperation in monitoring Moscow's compliance with agreements to withdraw and restore the status quo ante in Georgia and in the separatist regions (which led the OSCE to dissolve its sixteen-year civilian mission)<sup>35</sup> NATO has begun to restore ties with Russia that were suspended in the wake of the Georgian conflict. NATO's Secretary General, who in February 2009 deplored Moscow's intention of establishing military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, nonetheless supported "measured reengagement" with Russia via the NATO-Russia Council.<sup>36</sup>

In the case of the EU which has a significantly overlapping membership with NATO, in November 2008 its French presidency claimed before an incredulous group of Eastern European leaders that Russia had complied with the EU's demands in Georgia, and moved to relaunch talks with the Kremlin on a replacement for the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement of 1997, despite strong opposition from Lithuania and Poland.<sup>37</sup> Western European members of NATO thus pushed for reconciliation with Russia in various forums just months after the invasion of Georgia, not only disregarding the Kremlin's noncompliance with agreements, but most significantly, magnifying the divisions within the Alliance, diminishing the credibility of the organization's hard-security guarantees, and thereby greatly enhancing the perceptions of threats and consequent insecurity on the part of the newer Alliance members.

Fourth, emboldened by divisions within NATO and the Alliance's ineffective response to the invasion of Georgia and the organization's inability to formulate an effective new strategic concept, Moscow has continued to push what it sees as its advantage. Recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the face of worldwide opposition, Moscow also strengthened its domination of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) which was originally formed in 2002 with five of Russia's most faithful allies (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan).<sup>38</sup> Moscow then pressured and offered billions of dollars to CSTO member Kyrgyzstan, to close the vital US airbase at Manas which is used to supply troops in Afghanistan, and offered Washington as compensation Russian transit lines that would only increase American dependence upon the Kremlin's good will.<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, in February 2009, Russia's ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, seemingly oblivious

<sup>34</sup> RFE/RL, "NATO Ministers Seek to Keep Door Open To Ukraine, Georgia," 20 February 2009, <[www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1496731.html](http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1496731.html)>; J. Dempsey, *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> D. Sindelar, *op. cit.* [31].

<sup>36</sup> RFE/RL, *op. cit.* [34].

<sup>37</sup> A. Lobjakas, "France Moves the Goalposts in EU Dealings with Russia," RFE/RL, 8 November 2008, <[www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1339683.html](http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1339683.html)>.

<sup>38</sup> M. Kaczmarek, "Russia Creates a New Security System to Replace the C.I.S." *The Power and Interest News Report (PINR)*, 21 December 2005, <[www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view\\_printable&report\\_id=41.html](http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_printable&report_id=41.html)>.

<sup>39</sup> V. Frolov, "Detecting Symptoms of Kremlin Schizophrenia," *The Moscow Times*, 16 February 2009, <[www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=374568&p.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=374568&p.html)>; C. J. Levy, "Poker-Faced, Russia Flaunts its Afghan Card," *The New York Times*, 22 February 2009.

to Alliance security concerns among many of its members, stipulated as an entitlement that Russia had a rightful place “in the front row of international relations”—effectively demanding NATO deference.<sup>40</sup>

That a number of key West European Alliance members would now be prepared to grant Moscow such deference is as ironic as it is potentially damaging to intra-Alliance relations and overall NATO security. Russia is simply not the same country as it was in August 2008. As oil and gas prices plunge, as its currency reserves dramatically contract, as support for the ruble becomes increasingly costly and futile, as huge sums of money leave Russia and foreign investments dry up while the Kremlin engages in a vast, wasteful increase in military spending, Russia is in far worse shape than many outsiders assume.<sup>41</sup> Add the stifling of civil society, pervasive, corrosive corruption, lack of freedom, horrific medical conditions where HIV/Aids and tuberculosis are running rampant, and where Russia is confronting catastrophic demographic prospects, and it is evident that the country is indeed in dire straits and hardly in a position to dictate to the world.<sup>42</sup> Russia’s “soft-power” is more bluster than responsiveness, while its “hard-power” is declining significantly.

It is not suggested though that this is the time to take advantage of Russia. Rather, there is a need to balance sensitivity towards Russian security concerns with NATO’s security needs. It would be rather dangerous for NATO to make concessions that lead Moscow to learn the wrong lessons from its invasion of Georgia, to overreach itself or to embark on risky adventures. For NATO’s security in its relations with Russia, what is needed is true reciprocity, and this is evident in the case of a number of issues.

<sup>40</sup> D. Rogozin, “How NATO Could Improve its Relations with Russia,” *Europe’s World*, Spring 2009, <[www.europesworld.org/NewEnglish/Home/Article/tabid/191/ArticleType/articleview/ArticleID/2.html](http://www.europesworld.org/NewEnglish/Home/Article/tabid/191/ArticleType/articleview/ArticleID/2.html)>.

<sup>41</sup> J. Calder, “Challenging the Assumptions About Russia’s Future,” *RFE/RL*, 2 January 2009, <[www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1365602.html](http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1365602.html)>; “Russia, Spurred by Georgia War, Plans Arms Upgrade,” *RFE/RL*, 22 December 2008, <[www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1362549.html](http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1362549.html)>.

<sup>42</sup> Transparency International ranks Russia 147<sup>th</sup> on its perceived corruption index (among the worst in the world), Transparency International, 2008, <[www.transparency.org/news\\_room/in\\_focus/2008/cpi2008/cpi\\_2008\\_table](http://www.transparency.org/news_room/in_focus/2008/cpi2008/cpi_2008_table)>. In its 2008 analysis, Freedom House designated Russia as “Not Free.” Freedom House, 2008, <[www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2008](http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2008)>; M. Feshbach, “Behind the Bluster, Russia is Collapsing,” *Washington Post*, 5 October 2008, <[www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/03/AR2008100301976.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/03/AR2008100301976.html)>.

## Proposed Missile-Defense in Eastern Europe

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Long opposed by Moscow, the proposed deployment of NATO-approved American missile interceptors in Poland and accompanying radar stations in the Czech Republic illuminates both NATO's security concerns and threat perceptions. With Moscow seemingly backtracking from its threat to deploy Iskander surface-to-surface missiles in the Kaliningrad enclave as retaliation and President Obama suggesting a delay or possible non-deployment, there may be room for agreement on this issue.<sup>43</sup> Yet, even a positive outcome may be somewhat problematic in terms of NATO cohesion and credibility, in part because of the asymmetry of threat perceptions between Russia on the one hand and NATO on the other.

### *Russian opposition*

Despite vociferous objections, Moscow has yet to make a serious military case that the "thin" missile defense directed against a limited Iranian threat would credibly impair Russia's vast offensive nuclear capacity. The extremely capable Russian SS-27 Topol-M Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) for instance, alone could easily penetrate such a defense—in addition to the enormous capabilities of Moscow's strategic air and submarine forces. Countless Russian leaders have said as much. Further, they have rejected a variety of US and Polish offers for reassurance, including technical monitoring and inspection rights.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps as Dmitry Trenin, a renowned Russian expert, has suggested, the Kremlin is most offended by what it perceives as disrespect by the US if it deploys the system.<sup>45</sup>

More credibly though, there is another possibility, particularly in the wake of the invasion of Georgia. Moscow may consider what it perceives as a Western attempt to diminish growing Russian influence in adjoining regions as a provocation, and denial of its "rights" in these areas as a threat to its security. It is a rather dangerous way to perceive security threats, for resolution here on Russian terms would likely raise the threat perceptions of

<sup>43</sup> "Russia Said to Back Off on Missile Threat," *Moscow Times*, 29 January 2009, <[www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=37400&p..html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=37400&p..html)>; E. Barry, "Russia Welcomes Letter from Obama," *New York Times*, 4 March 2009.

<sup>44</sup> RFE/RL, "Poland Seeks to Reassure Russia on Missile Defense," 20 November 2008, <[www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1351043.html](http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1351043.html)>.

<sup>45</sup> C. Clover, "Medvedev Rejects Missile Shield Deal," *Financial Times*, 4 March 2009>.

others. Poland's Foreign Minister, Radek Sikorski, for instance, has described Russian power as a glacier that periodically advances or retreats over Eastern Europe while trying to undermine the cornerstones of European security.<sup>46</sup> He further added that in the wake of Georgia there was a need to make NATO's security guarantee credible again. Consequently, Poland insisted as a side agreement to missile defense accords that an American *Patriot* air defense battery be moved from Germany to Poland together with one hundred American service members.<sup>47</sup>

## **NATO's position**

The firm Alliance decision on deployment in 2008 reflected a concern about the Iranian threat. As Iran is rushing to achieve a nuclear capacity complete with a long-range delivery system, it has been evident to Alliance members that the threat from the country's radical Islamist leadership is considerably wider than its expressed goal to destroy the State of Israel. Were the Iranian threat to disappear either because the regime were to suddenly and credibly give up its nuclear ambitions or a non-genocidal government would take over, the need for deployment of missile defenses would seemingly disappear. That is, except for the need for NATO to reassure its Eastern members whose confidence in the Alliance's credibility has been rather badly shaken by the Russian invasion of Georgia.

President Obama's seeming willingness to consider trading away deployment is therefore potentially problematic. If, as originally reported, it was to be a trade-off where Moscow would make certain that the Iranian threat "disappeared,"<sup>48</sup> the potential for success may have been significant. Still, the process and uncertainty might have been risky even then, for two reasons: first, Moscow might not have been truly willing to exercise the pressure needed to force Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program; and second, even if Moscow were willing, it might have overestimated its capacity in its delicate nuclear "chess game" with Iran and Tehran's program may have already passed the point of no return.

President Obama's subsequent clarification though suggests that his goals are more modest, namely, to persuade Russia to help stop Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons which would diminish the need to deploy the missile defense system.<sup>49</sup> Such a process might provide some reassurance to Russia, but otherwise, is full of negatives. It could greatly diminish Alliance deterrence of Iran, it would heighten the perceptions of a Russian threat in Eastern Europe, it would considerably damage the Alliance's

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<sup>46</sup> RFE/RL, *op. cit.* [44].

<sup>47</sup> P. Baker, "Russian President Reacts to U.S. Offer on Iran," *New York Times*, 4 March 2009.

<sup>48</sup> P. Baker, "Obama Offered Deal to Russia in Secret Letter," *New York Times*, 3 March 2009.

<sup>49</sup> "Analysis: Obama's Big Stride on Moscow 'Reboot'," *New York Times*, 3 March 2009.

credibility among the new and aspirant members, and magnify divisions within the Alliance.

## Reassurance and Cooperation?

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Still, both reassurance and cooperation between NATO and Russia are not only possible but are desirable. This is especially the case when it comes to such matters as Iran above and counterterrorism where there should be strong common interests. Moscow has repeatedly stated that it does not wish to see a nuclear-armed Iran and indeed, such an Iran could be a significant threat to Russia. Nonetheless, Russia has played a seminal role not only in building the huge Bushehr light-water nuclear reactor, but even more importantly, in helping train Iranian nuclear scientists who are able to use their know-how for military purposes.<sup>50</sup> Moscow has also supplied vast quantities of armaments to Tehran, apparently including potent air defenses which could become even more threatening if they include the sale of S-300 surface-to-air missiles.<sup>51</sup> The latter, once operational, would make it very difficult to militarily suppress Iranian nuclear weapons capacity (even if Moscow were to give Israel codes and coordinates), should diplomatic efforts fail.<sup>52</sup>

The Kremlin, as noted, seems to operate on the basis that it could stop Iranian nuclear weaponization at the last minute, but in the meantime, in a zero-sum approach, seemingly assumes that in whatever way Iran (or other unstable states that it supplies with armaments such as Syria) weakens the US, it commensurately strengthens Russia. It is a risky game that assumes the certainty of control in possibly chaotic situations, is tone deaf to raising American and NATO security concerns, and makes reassurance and cooperation so much more difficult.

Similarly, Moscow seems to believe that it can perfectly calibrate cooperation and obstruction in the fight against terrorist forces in a way that boosts Russian power, yet does not overly alarm the Alliance. Moscow's persuasion of Kyrgyzstan to close the American base supplying Americans fighting Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces in Afghanistan while offering the Alliance routes through Russia is such an example. Increasing Allied dependence on Russia in counterterrorism may well provide a short-term gain for Moscow, but in the longer term, it makes Russia appear more threatening and less cooperative to the Alliance. It may be a policy that is too clever by half.

Nevertheless, in the past couple of years Russia seems to have persuaded itself that it will gain more by intimidation and manipulation than by cooperation. This is evident, for instance, in Moscow's relations with

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<sup>50</sup> "Iran Tests its First Nuclear Power Plant," *Moscow Times*, 26 February 2009, <[www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=374807.htm](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/articles/detail.php?ID=374807.htm)>.

<sup>51</sup> "Iran Hails Military Ties with Russia," *New York Times*, 20 February 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Reuters, "Report: Israeli Sources Say Russia to Supply New Iran Air Defenses," *Haaretz*, 23 July 2008.

Canada. In addition to making outlandish claims regarding Russian rights of exploration in the fragile Arctic, it has frequently sent bombers close to North American airspace, including on the occasion of President Obama's visit to Canada in February 2009: that induced Ottawa to scramble fighter jets.<sup>53</sup> This was a gratuitous challenge to a NATO member that has sought hard to have good relations with Moscow. All this again is not to excuse the Alliance for being insensitive to Russian national pride or security fears, nor to suggest that better discursive practices would not have helped.

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<sup>53</sup> A. Woods, "Russian Bombers Intercepted on Eve of Obama Visit," *Toronto Star*, 27 February 2009.

## Conclusion

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Despite the logic of cooperation, at least on certain key issues, NATO on the one hand, and Russia on the other, in the past several years indeed acted as two solitudes. What is needed are new ideas that transcend cold war thinking and zero-sum games, and are grounded in reassurance, reciprocity, and reality. With a new administration in Washington, and the Obama government's successful persuasion of NATO to resume cooperation through the NATO-Russia Council (that had been suspended in the wake of Russia's war with Georgia), there are opportunities to alter threat perceptions, diminish confrontation, and increase security for all.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time, it is essential not to create exaggerated expectations, encourage wrong lessons, or foster new misperceptions. NATO needs to be sensitive to Russian concerns, be prepared for meaningful consultations and expand mutually beneficial ties. It would be in the best position to do this if it maintains Alliance cohesion and the credibility of collective defense, so as to reassure members, aspirants, partners and neighbors through clearly expressed intentions of peaceful relations, as well as an insistence on reciprocity of obligations. For its part, Russia may certainly aspire for a place in the front row of international relations, but it needs to be realistic about its expectations. Russia deserves international respect, but despite its energy resources, human talent, and vast geography, it remains a country with a unidimensional economy, roughly the size of Italy's.<sup>55</sup> It is hardly on the cusp of superpower restoration. Petro-diplomacy and energy pressures on Ukraine, Georgia, and indirectly Europe, may yield the Kremlin short-term gains, but in the long run they just heighten the perceptions of threat among its interlocutors.

In addition, as desirable as cooperation between the Alliance and Russia is, NATO concessions have to be carefully thought through. First, these should not convey the impression to Moscow that political or military pressure and attempts to create energy or military-supply dependency invariably yield results, grant the Kremlin a veto, and fulfill otherwise unrealistic Russian grand ambitions. Second, it should be evident that Alliance concessions at the expense of the Eastern European members similarly will send the wrong message and create the danger of future Russian miscalculations.

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<sup>54</sup> "NATO Resumes Formal Ties with Russia," *RFE/RL*, 5 March 2009, <[www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1504946.html](http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1504946.html)>.

<sup>55</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook* 2009, "Russia," <[www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html)>; Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook* 2009, "Italy," <[www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/it.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/it.html)>.

In the case of cooperation with Russia on Iran and in counterterrorism efforts, there has to be similar realism and reciprocity. NATO needs to engage Russia. Moscow, however, cannot just continue to view its relations with anti-Western states and groups as tactical opportunities and as a means of weakening NATO in general and the U.S. in particular. Russia, especially if it wishes to develop a stable political order and a competitive economy, will need to appreciate both that its interests lie strongly with the advanced industrialized states and that nuclearized rogue states and terrorist movements cannot be reliably calibrated and controlled and ultimately are likely to threaten its interests.

Consequently, all parties need to improve discursive practices, and think in terms of cooperation along political, economic and military lines. Progress on President Medvedev's promise of democratization and the rule of law would help diminish the growing gulf between Eastern Europe and the Kremlin leadership. European integration and the extension of the EU's Eastern Partnership program should be viewed as means of enhancing regional confidence. In the military realm, there are significant opportunities with a new American administration to work out a viable successor treaty to START that is set to expire in December 2009.<sup>56</sup> France's impending reintegration and current efforts at a new strategic doctrine for the Alliance should also make NATO both more secure and forthcoming.<sup>57</sup> Still, just as France's reintegration is very much a positive, Medvedev's proposed "legally-binding treaty" could turn out to be quite problematic.<sup>58</sup> There are strong suspicions, particularly among the Eastern European NATO members, that this is an attempt to redraft security on Russia's terms, play on divisions within NATO, and replace a significant part of Washington's influence in Europe with Russia's. Such suspicions could only be strongly reinforced by Ambassador Rogozin's recent public admonition that Europe should stop acting "like an occupied continent [by the US, one assumes]" and that NATO states use Alliance membership "for their own advantage."<sup>59</sup> This is hardly constitutes an improvement in discursive practices or productive new thinking.

There remains then considerable mistrust between NATO on the one hand and Russia on the other. Even in the best of circumstances, it will take time to embed sustainable improvements in relations between the two parties, ones that will lower threat perceptions and help address security dilemmas. Prospects will improve considerably though if the parties become willing to ask the right questions, make their expectations more realistic, and better understand their common interests.

<sup>56</sup> "Russia Offers Hope for Global Disarmament Talks," *New York Times*, 7 March 2009.

<sup>57</sup> S. Enlanger, "Sarkozy Embraces NATO, and Bigger Role for France," *New York Times*, 8 March 2009.

<sup>58</sup> O. Matthews and A. Nemtsova, "The Medvedev Doctrine," *Newsweek*, 1 December 2008, <[www.newsweek.com/id/170303/output/print.html](http://www.newsweek.com/id/170303/output/print.html)>.

<sup>59</sup> D. Rogozin, *op. cit.* [39].