



# Medvedev and the new European security architecture

By Bobo Lo

- ★ Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's proposal for a 'new European security architecture' is largely devoid of substance, and reiterates principles already enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and the UN Charter.
- ★ Moscow strongly opposes a Euro-Atlantic security environment dominated by NATO and the US. But it has done little thinking about what might emerge in its place.
- ★ There are signs that the Medvedev initiative is losing momentum, as Moscow turns its attention to more important priorities, such as renewed engagement with the US and strategic arms control.
- ★ Europe's response to the Russian proposals has been sensible so far. It is important that it resist attempts to minimise NATO and undermine the OSCE.

President Dmitry Medvedev's call for a new European security architecture is the most active initiative undertaken by Russian diplomacy in recent years. Not since Vladimir Putin's endorsement of the American military deployment in Central Asia after September 11<sup>th</sup> has there been a move of comparable profile. And yet opinion remains strongly divided on its merits. Critics dismiss it as a try-on containing virtually no substance, a transparent attempt to split the West. More sympathetic analysts, however, view the Kremlin project as a genuine effort to articulate a security vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one all the more necessary given recent tensions on the European continent.

## Breaking the mould?

The Medvedev initiative is a significant departure from the normal course of post-Soviet foreign policy in at least three respects. First, Moscow has put forward a set of ideas that go beyond the purely reactive. While the original proposals in June 2008 were prompted by Russia's negative perceptions of security trends in

<sup>1</sup> Medvedev's speech to German political, parliamentary and civic leaders, Berlin, June 5<sup>th</sup> 2008.

Europe, they were more than simply a gut reaction to NATO enlargement, missile defence and American unilateralism.<sup>1</sup>

Instead of the ad hoc approach that had characterised much of Russian foreign policy under Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, the Medvedev project was an attempt to introduce Russia's own vision of European – and Euro-Atlantic – security.

Second, and consequently, the notion of a new security architecture challenges the assumption that Russia's international influence is almost entirely preventative, far better suited to obstructing the interests of others than to advancing a positive agenda of its own. It is as if the leadership has realised that Russia cannot live on 'anti-policy' alone, but must offer an alternative, no matter how nascent and ill-defined. In a very real sense, it reflects Russia's desire to play a leading role as a 'responsible stakeholder' in regional and global affairs.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The term, 'responsible stakeholder', was used most famously by Bob Zoellick in 2005 in relation to China.

Third, when Medvedev first introduced the idea of a revised European security architecture, it indicated a new self-belief. For much of the Yeltsin (1991-99) and Putin presidencies (2000-08), Russian foreign policy was a hotchpotch of allergic reactions, grudging compliance and mounting frustration. At times, Russia appeared on the verge of reassuming a major

role in world affairs, but these moments were short-lived. For example, initial hopes of equal partnership with the US post-September 11<sup>th</sup> soon gave way to bitter disillusionment. The Iraq war, the ‘colour’ revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, and the development of US missile defence plans in Europe highlighted a Russia whose importance was given little more than lip-service. It remained at best a secondary player in Europe and a largely disregarded voice on global issues.

It is difficult to pinpoint when exactly the Russian mood changed. For this was a gradual process, given impetus by a number of domestic and external factors: the near-universal unpopularity of the George W Bush administration; booming energy and commodity prices; divisions among the Europeans; Putin’s consolidation of power; and the disorganised response of NATO member-states to the question of alliance enlargement. What is clear is that the timing of Medvedev’s proposed new European security architecture was not accidental. It revealed a confidence that Russia was finally able to assume a more active role in international affairs, and that others – great powers and small states alike – must respect its interests.

### Context, content and compromise

This CER policy brief addresses four questions.

★ **What is behind the Medvedev security initiative?**

While it certainly points to a more activist and confident foreign policy, Moscow’s specific motivations are less clear. What does the leadership hope to achieve by promoting a new security architecture? Indeed, does it even have an end-game in mind?

★ **What is the content of the Russian proposals?**

The Medvedev concept – if one can call it that – has already undergone several iterations during its short life. It is frustratingly vague. While its main premise is clear enough, that existing European and Euro-Atlantic security institutions have outlived their usefulness, it has been much less forthcoming on what might emerge in their place. Does the Kremlin have something particular in mind or do its proposals merely reflect the vicissitudes of Moscow’s relations with the West, and the US in particular?

★ **Do the Russians have a case when they complain about the inadequacies of the existing architecture?**

The Euro-Atlantic security environment has deteriorated significantly in recent years, a trend that NATO and the OSCE, as well as newer mechanisms such as the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), have failed to arrest. Yet it is not clear where the fault for this lies. Ultimately, institutions function only as well as they are allowed to; individual national agendas constantly intrude to foil the best of intentions. The key

question is not so much whether the current security system operates effectively, but whether a revised architecture would improve things. Would it lead to a more stable environment, in which security was ‘equal and indivisible’, or does it simply confuse process for substance?

★ **How should Europe respond?** Even if one accepts that existing security arrangements are unsatisfactory, this does not necessarily bring us closer to developing more effective co-operation with Russia. Much has been said about its ‘indispensable’ role in European security and, more recently, about a common European security space. But do such slogans merely gloss over uncomfortable truths, above all that Russia’s strategic interests in Europe are often fundamentally in conflict with those of the West?

### Redefining Europe

The general rationale behind the Medvedev security concept is to redefine Europe in ways that are more inclusive of Russia and its interests. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has felt excluded from the continental mainstream. In the 1990s during the Yeltsin presidency, the combination of political instability, socio-economic crisis and sharply reduced influence abroad ensured that it would be regarded as a junior partner at best, but more often as a serial whinger. Later, as Russia’s domestic and foreign policy fortunes improved under Putin, it would be seen as more influential, but also as increasingly awkward and sometimes confrontational. The brief Georgia war in August 2008 marked, simultaneously, the climax of a much-trumpeted resurgence and Russia’s alienation from Europe.

All this has occurred against a backdrop in which the EU and NATO have become almost wholly identified with post-Cold War Europe. The EU has assumed a normative, as well as political and economic, monopoly of what it means to be European, while NATO has achieved much the same in the military and security spheres. As a member of neither body, Russia has struggled to assert a modern European identity. Its so-called ‘strategic partnership’ with the EU and participation in the NRC offer a measure of formalistic recognition, but they have scarcely made Russia any more European, at least in the post-modern sense. If Russia is part of Europe, then it belongs to an earlier age: on the one hand, a ‘common European Christian civilisation’; on the other, a loose gathering (or ‘concert’) of great European powers – Russia, France, Germany and Great Britain. The acceleration of European integration over the past 20 years has left it behind, even more of an outsider than countries such as Turkey (a NATO member for more than half a century).

The original iteration of the Medvedev initiative in June 2008 predated the Georgia conflict, indicating

that Moscow was already looking to reshape European security in ways more congenial to Russian interests. It was intended, in the first instance, to limit American influence on the continent. It emphasised that “Atlanticism as a sole historical principle has already had its day”; claimed that the existing European architecture bore “the stamp of an ideology inherited from the past”; and declared that

<sup>3</sup> *The 1975 Helsinki Act centred on three baskets of issues: political and military (including de facto recognition of WWII territorial changes); economic, trade and scientific co-operation; and human rights, freedom of emigration and cultural exchanges.*

<sup>4</sup> *Medvedev’s Berlin speech, June 5<sup>th</sup> 2008.*

NATO had “failed so far to give new purpose to its existence”. Crucially, Moscow called for a *European* summit to start work on drafting a new Helsinki-type charter<sup>3</sup> and, in case anyone should miss its meaning, noted that “absolutely all European countries should take part in this summit, but as individual countries, leaving aside any allegiances to blocs or other groups”.<sup>4</sup>

## Divide and scatter

The Kremlin seeks to exploit divisions within the western alliance – between the US and Europe, and amongst the Europeans themselves. It is scarcely coincidental that Medvedev’s original proposal followed on the heels of the Bucharest NATO summit in May 2008, which saw serious splits within the alliance over whether to grant Georgia and Ukraine Membership Action Plan (MAP) status. In the end, they were promised eventual membership, but with no timeline or road-map. The impression of NATO divisions – and weakness – in the face of Russian pressure was stark.

The Medvedev initiative was a natural response to European disarray. The Bucharest summit, more than any other recent event, highlighted the fissures within the western alliance on Russia policy. Some member-states, notably Germany and France, believed that the West had pushed Russia too far, and that NATO enlargement had reached its natural – and safe – limits for the foreseeable future. The overt ‘European-ness’ in the original Medvedev proposals was designed to appeal to this ‘pragmatic’ constituency within the alliance. It tapped into anxieties over the Bush administration’s policies towards Russia and the former Soviet Union (FSU); a more generalised, if latent, anti-Americanism in some European states; and eagerness to restore predictability to Europe’s relations with Moscow.

## Image and power projection

However, as noted earlier, Medvedev’s proposal was also an attempt to change the perception in the West that Russia was incapable – being too weak and uninterested – of outlining a positive foreign policy

vision. Paradoxical though it may seem in light of the Georgia war, the Putin-Medvedev regime has always been anxious about Russia’s international image. The security architecture idea represents an attempt to exercise soft power, highlighting Russia’s importance as a *constructive* as well as influential player.

More importantly, Moscow seeks a framework that would legitimise its indirect control over the FSU. The notion of a “privileged sphere of interests” has acquired fresh currency in Russian thinking.<sup>5</sup> While policy-makers understand that restoring the Soviet Union is neither practical nor even desirable, they are keen to reassert Russia’s hegemonic role in its neighbourhood. The existing Euro-Atlantic security system, dominated by the US and NATO, is a major hindrance to this. For all its imperfections, it has been instrumental in promoting western interests and values throughout much of the FSU. It is unsurprising, then, that Moscow should challenge its legitimacy.

<sup>5</sup> *Medvedev’s TV interview with Channel 1, Rossiya and NTV, August 31<sup>st</sup> 2008.*

The ultimate prize is not so much a more effective European security architecture as an environment that would facilitate (or at least tolerate) the projection of Russian influence. Moscow aspires to an arrangement that would consolidate its position as the ‘regional superpower’ in the former Soviet space; bring it into the European strategic mainstream; and recognise, formally and practically, its status as a great power on a par with the US and the totality of European states.

## Some detail, but little substance

The first iteration of Medvedev’s proposals in Berlin elicited little response in Europe. It was only when the Russian president presented a more developed version at the World Policy Forum in Evian in October 2008 that his project began to attract some attention. By this time, Russia’s relations with the West – and particularly the US – had reached a 20-year low following the Georgia war two months earlier.

The biggest difference between Medvedev’s Evian statement and his Berlin address was the shift in geographic focus from European to Euro-Atlantic. Although he condemned Washington’s alleged complicity in the Georgia war and American unipolarity in general, there was now an implicit understanding that the US could not be excluded from any revised security architecture. The Russian initiative metamorphosed from a purely regional to a more global undertaking. In addition to the frequent use of the term, ‘Euro-Atlantic’, Medvedev highlighted issues that extended beyond Europe such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and international terrorism. Importantly, too, he invited “all key Euro-Atlantic organisations” to take part in a European security conference – a

<sup>6</sup> Medvedev address at the World Policy Forum, Evian, France, October 8<sup>th</sup> 2008.

significant departure from Berlin, when he had called for countries to attend as individual nations only.<sup>6</sup>

But although the Evian speech revealed more detail about Russian thinking, it remained thin on substance. Reiterating the need for a new European security treaty, Medvedev declared that this should incorporate five “specific provisions”:

- ★ affirmation of the “basic principles for security and inter-governmental relations in the Euro-Atlantic area”. These included a commitment to abiding by international law; respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of states, as well as other principles enshrined in the UN Charter;
- ★ a clear statement of the inadmissibility of the use of force in international relations; and a “unified approach to the prevention and peaceful settlement of conflicts in the Euro-Atlantic space”;
- ★ a guarantee of “equal security”, based on ‘three noes’: “no ensuring one’s own security at the expense of others”; “no allowing acts (by military alliances and coalitions) that undermine the unity of the common [Euro-Atlantic] security space”; and “no development of military alliances that would threaten the security of other parties to the [proposed new security] treaty”;
- ★ a statement that “no state or international organisation can have exclusive rights to maintaining peace and stability in Europe”; and
- ★ “basic arms control parameters and reasonable limits on military construction” as well as “new co-operation procedures and mechanisms in areas such as WMD proliferation, terrorism and drug trafficking”.

In truth, these ‘specific provisions’ were neither specific nor new. Respect for international law, national sovereignty and territorial integrity; the inadmissibility of the use of force; the notion of ‘equal’ and indivisible security; and crude criticisms of NATO and its yen to expand – these were the stuff of innumerable statements issued by the Kremlin and Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the Yeltsin years.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> By late 2008 the case for a non-NATO dominated security architecture had become all the more compelling because many of the anxieties of the Yeltsin administration, especially NATO enlargement, had since become reality.

<sup>8</sup> Medvedev speech at Evian, October 8<sup>th</sup> 2008.

form our common security guarantees for many years to come”.<sup>8</sup> But even its significance was questionable.

Arguably, the only conceptual innovation was a new Helsinki-type treaty that would “ensure in stable and legally binding

The notion of a ‘Helsinki-plus’ or ‘Helsinki II’ treaty followed in the tradition of grandiose, but essentially empty ideas, such as a ‘global multipolar order for the 21<sup>st</sup> century’, a Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi axis, and the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China).<sup>9</sup> It did not point to a more contemporary understanding of international security. Instead, Medvedev highlighted the importance of military issues, insisting that “it is hard security that plays a determining role today”. The assumption that international security is fundamentally about political-military power reflected a realist culture dating back more than 300 years, one that viewed soft power and soft security (political and human) as alien constructs, more decorative than essential.

<sup>9</sup> See the Sino-Russian ‘Joint declaration on a multipolar world and the establishment of a new world order’, April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1997. The idea of a Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi axis was aired unsuccessfully by Primakov during a visit to New Delhi in December 1998.

## Moving the goal-posts

But if the unfolding of the Medvedev initiative has underscored continuities in Russian thinking, it has also revealed Moscow’s sensitivity to changing domestic and international circumstances. Europe’s relative unity over Georgia, the impact of the global financial crisis and, most recently, a resurgent US following Barack Obama’s election have radically changed the external context of Russian policy-making. An overtly anti-American and anti-NATO tone is no longer sustainable. In fact, this was already evident at Evian, when French President Nicolas Sarkozy insisted that “our American friends and allies” must be brought into the Euro-Atlantic security dialogue. Sarkozy emphasised that any ‘Vancouver to Vladivostok’ security arrangement must be based first of all on NATO, and he urged Russia to engage more closely in existing institutions and mechanisms, such as the NATO-Russia Council and the EU’s European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Sarkozy speech at the World Policy Forum, Evian, October 8<sup>th</sup> 2008.

With the emergence of an American president who enjoys unprecedented popularity in Europe, the Russian proposals have become increasingly conciliatory and inclusive. The extent of the journey travelled is illustrated by Medvedev’s address at the London School of Economics (LSE) in April 2009, immediately after the G-20 summit. Eschewing the aggressive rhetoric of Berlin and Evian, he stressed that NATO, as the “strongest military-political organisation in the world” had a “deserved place” in any European or global security system. In effect, he shifted to the position taken by Sarkozy at Evian, noting that “we should not see the conclusion of a new treaty as leading to the replacement of existing organisations with new ones. The organisations that already exist ... should take part in drafting the new treaty.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Medvedev address to LSE students and staff, London, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2009.

Moscow is now clearly at pains to smooth out the rough edges in its security initiative. At a time when relations with the US and NATO are improving, there is little will in the Kremlin to upset things. The latest Russian position, articulated by Medvedev in an address at Helsinki University in April 2009, is that a new security architecture should involve “all Euro-Atlantic states, international organisations ... regional organisations and ... all the countries that belong to these organisations”. The question of a new ‘Helsinki-type’ treaty has been left deliberately vague (and confusing): “a confirmation, continuation and effective implementation of the principles and instruments born out of the Helsinki process, but adapted to the end of ideological confrontation and

<sup>12</sup> *Medvedev speech at Helsinki University, April 20<sup>th</sup> 2009.*

the emergence of new subjects of international law in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.<sup>12</sup>

### Do the Russians have a case?

It has become fashionable to blame western governments, above all the US, for the deterioration in the Euro-Atlantic security environment. They are accused of rubbing Russia’s nose in the dirt, most notably by enlarging NATO eastwards to include most of Central and Eastern Europe. More recently, western support for the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the development of US missile defence plans in Poland and the Czech Republic, and a failure to manage Russian sensitivities in the former Soviet Union have generated considerable resentment in Moscow. The current European security architecture, centred on institutions such as NATO and the OSCE, stands accused not merely of failing to alleviate tensions, but of aggravating them to the point of crisis.

<sup>13</sup> *One of the biggest controversies concerns the alleged commitment by then US Secretary of State James Baker to President Gorbachev in February 1990 that NATO would not expand eastwards following German reunification.*

This is not the place to go into the rights and wrongs of the West’s engagement with Russia over the past two decades. Clearly, mistakes have been made, while NATO and, to a lesser extent, the OSCE have become part of the problem.<sup>13</sup> The 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which has

supplied the main conceptual framework for European security for over 35 years, has been largely bypassed through the ups and downs of Moscow’s relations with the West. With its emphasis on ‘equal and indivisible security’ and illusory shared values, it has often seemed a quaint irrelevance.

On the face of things, then, the Russians would appear to have a case – the existing security architecture is ineffective in many respects. It cannot stop wars; it breeds considerable ill-feeling, and the western powers exploit it to promote national and bloc (i.e., NATO) interests. Yet such criticisms should not obscure the fact that international organisations

are only as good as their constituent states. Despite the considerable advances in multilateral diplomacy since the Second World War, it is the great powers, not multilateral institutions, that dominate international affairs.

The issue is not whether a revised Euro-Atlantic security architecture can address the problems identified by Medvedev. For it can do no such thing. As Russia has demonstrated, and others before it, great powers will not always abide by international law; they will not necessarily respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states; they will sometimes use force as an instrument of foreign policy; they will ensure their security at the expense of others; and they will pursue their national interests in ways they deem appropriate, but that offend the interests or sensibilities of others. The best architecture in the world will not alter any of these realities.

Rather than finding (obvious) fault in the current security system, we need to consider whether it can be improved, even at the margins. Can NATO find ways to become more inclusive of Russian interests? How might the OSCE develop into a more effective body? Can the impasse over the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty be resolved? Would European security be enhanced by the integration of Moscow-backed institutions such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) into existing structures? And would a new pan-European treaty bring the Helsinki Charter into the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### ‘Fixing’ the unfixable

It is difficult to be sanguine about the prospects. Take NATO, for example. The alliance has tried to reinvent itself in the post-Cold War period. And to some extent it has succeeded. It has changed its identity from a defensive alliance countering the Soviet military threat to an organisation that has promoted stability, democracy and the development of civil society in much of Central and Eastern Europe. There can be little doubt that these countries – and European security in general – would have been far worse off had they been left to fester in a kind of strategic limbo-land (or ‘buffer zone’). One needs only to look at the Balkan conflicts to see what the fate of these countries might have been had they been excluded.

Simultaneously, NATO has attempted to engage Russia more closely in security co-operation. In the 1990s, it brought Moscow into the Partnership for Peace programme, with the potential prospect of eventual alliance membership. The 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act admitted Moscow to alliance consultations for the first time. And in 2002 the creation of the NATO-Russia Council established mechanisms for joint decision-making in areas of common security concern. None of this, however, has changed the core perception in Moscow that

NATO remains a ‘relic of the Cold War’, directed primarily at containing Russia. The burden of history is oppressive. Although there has been some modest co-operation within the NRC, for example on joint anti-piracy patrols in the Mediterranean, Russian policy-makers continue to regard the alliance as intrinsically hostile, and co-operation within the NRC as largely tokenism.

It is a different, if no less grim story with the OSCE. During the 1990s, the OSCE was Moscow’s favourite security organisation. Not only was Russia a full member, but consensus voting rules meant that it could always veto any decision it disliked. The OSCE was an attractive ‘alternative’ to NATO precisely because it was so hamstrung; it did not impinge on the sovereign prerogatives of the great powers, Russia in the first instance.

This situation changed after the December 1999 OSCE summit in Istanbul, when the organisation condemned Moscow’s conduct of the second post-Soviet Chechen war. Since that time, the OSCE has begun to exert genuine influence in the area of soft security. The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), in particular, has assumed a high profile through its monitoring and evaluation of elections in Central and Eastern Europe (including Russia). Moscow views such scrutiny as external interference and an infringement of sovereign rights. It seeks a return to the good old days – and the OSCE’s ‘core’ security functions – when the organisation was almost entirely ineffectual and could be safely disregarded or exploited, according to need.

<sup>14</sup> *The original CFE treaty, signed in Paris in November 1990, set bloc-to-bloc (NATO-Warsaw Pact) limits on conventional forces and weaponry. A 1999 agreement, on Adaptation of the CFE Treaty, set national instead of bloc limits. Under the ‘Istanbul commitments’, Russia also agreed to withdraw its forces from Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Moldova. Its failure to do so, and the consequent refusal of NATO member-states to ratify the adapted treaty, has led to the current impasse.*

The CFE Treaty is one area where there is room for significant improvement. It is evident that the treaty needs to be revised (‘modernised’) to reflect the changes in Europe’s strategic map since the fall of the USSR.<sup>14</sup> The present version restricts Moscow from moving more troops to the south, where the main threats to Russia’s national security lie. NATO member-states have erred in linking their ratification of an adapted CFE treaty to the withdrawal of Russian troops (‘peacekeepers’) from Abkhazia, South Ossetia

and Moldova. Moscow has rejected this linkage and used the non-ratification issue to justify suspending its participation in the CFE treaty. Nevertheless, all these problems relate to the treaty itself, not to the much broader (and largely abstract) question of a continental security architecture. As such, they should be addressed within the specific framework of CFE negotiations.

Since its establishment in 2002, the CSTO has been Moscow’s multilateral instrument of choice – a

political-military alliance that brings together Russia’s closest allies within the former Soviet Union: Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Although its military effectiveness is minimal, it serves important psychological and symbolic purposes. It sends the message that Russia is not without friends, and it gives Moscow something to bargain with when pushing for a more central role in European security. As a result, Russian policy-makers are now calling for a NATO-CSTO ‘equal partnership’. The problem, however, is that there is an enormous imbalance in the scale, capabilities and importance of the two organisations. If the CSTO is to be brought into a new security architecture, then its role will be peripheral at best. And Moscow will continue to take umbrage at the perceived unfairness of Europe’s security framework.

The idea of a Helsinki-2 or Helsinki-plus treaty has found some support in the West. In principle, there is nothing wrong with freshening up the 1975 Helsinki Final Act to reflect post-Cold War realities. However, Medvedev’s emphasis on hard security (see above) indicates that a ‘new’ treaty, as imagined by Moscow, would reflect traditional Russian thinking. The gulf between the enunciation of supposedly common values and their radically different interpretations across Helsinki signatory states remains stark. A new Helsinki-type treaty would inevitably become heavily politicised, aggravating extant tensions on the European continent. (In this connection, the notion that the West could somehow ‘trap’ Russia into abiding by commitments to democracy and human rights is delusional. The West was singularly unsuccessful in achieving this with the Soviet Union post-Helsinki, and there is no evidence to suggest that it would have any more luck with Putin’s Russia.)

Finally, we should consider whether it is even meaningful to speak of a security *architecture*. For this implies a coherent, interlocking network of organisations, mechanisms and values. Such a network has never existed, even if the original Helsinki Act introduced the veneer of a common normative basis. Today, more than ever, the conditions are lacking to translate worthy aspiration into practice. Regional organisations are in open competition; there are major disagreements over the legitimacy of European security mechanisms; the values-gap between Russia and many western countries is wide and getting wider; and Moscow and the West compete for influence in the so-called ‘common neighbourhood’. To promote a new security architecture without addressing some of these fundamental problems is to pretend that elaborate process can somehow substitute for lack of substantive progress.

### **A lukewarm commitment**

The vagueness of Medvedev’s initiative has been much criticised, in Russia as well as the West. One

commentator recently observed that “this grand vision remains no more than just an idea that Russian officials periodically allude to without bothering to describe in detail how it is supposed to work”.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Frolou, ‘Medvedev’s “vision thing” in foreign policy’, *Russia Profile Weekly Experts Panel*, June 6<sup>th</sup> 2009.

Such vagueness underlines that Moscow has a far better understanding of what it does not like – a European security environment dominated by the US and NATO – than of how an alternative architecture might look, let alone work. In fact, it hopes that others will fill in much of the detail. This uncharacteristically demure approach is intended, first, to get Medvedev off the hook by diffusing responsibility for developing a more co-operative security environment. Second, it is meant to showcase the acceptable side of Russian foreign policy – flexible, reasonable and open-minded. Third, it aims to strengthen the ‘pragmatic’ constituency in Europe – Germany, France, Italy – that favours accommodation with Moscow. It leaves open the tantalising possibility of a new deal in Russia-Europe relations: enhanced security and economic co-operation in exchange for western commitments not to proceed with NATO enlargement, missile defence in Central Europe, or geopolitical ‘encroachment’ in the former Soviet space.

However, the downsides of imprecision are equally evident. As long as Moscow is unable to supply chapter and verse, the Medvedev initiative will remain a sideshow that few take seriously. Although it continues to feature in various statements by Medvedev and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, there has been a marked loss of policy momentum in recent months. Part of this may reflect uneven interest among Russian decision-makers, or simply *ennui* at yet another ‘grand’ but impractical vision. The most plausible explanation, however, is that it has been overtaken by developments: the global financial crisis and, above all, the warming of Russia-US ties.

## Back to the USA

<sup>16</sup> See Vice-President Joe Biden’s speech at the 45<sup>th</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy, February 7<sup>th</sup> 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Tomas Valasek, ‘Obama, Russia and Europe,’ CER policy brief, June 2009.

it has downplayed to near-anonymity issues that have previously caused major ructions, such as NATO enlargement and missile defence.<sup>17</sup> The administration’s moves have altered the psychological climate and led Moscow to embrace, albeit cautiously, the opportunity to engage Washington on issues where it has both a vital interest and a genuine role.

The Obama administration has not only talked of “pressing the reset button” in US-Russia relations,<sup>16</sup> but has re-engaged with Moscow in areas where it believes Russia can make a difference: strategic arms control, the Iranian nuclear question, and Afghanistan. At the same time,

The prospect of a renewed co-operative security relationship with the US has made grand systemic approaches to international security less relevant and certainly less urgent.

More generally, Washington’s renewed interest has encouraged a return to the America-centric tradition in Russian strategic thinking. The EU may account for over half of Russia’s external trade as well as most of its foreign investment, while senior political figures often speak about a common European civilisation. But for Russia’s leadership, the US remains the main game because it is by far the most powerful country in the world, even if its authority is under greater challenge than at any time in the past two decades. Brutally put, in the Russian mind raw power trumps geographical proximity, economic interaction and cultural affinity.

All this means that the evolution of proposals for a new security architecture are to a large extent hostage to trends in the Russia-US relationship. As long as the latter remains centred on concrete priorities, there will be scant policy space for more conceptual schemes, particularly if, as now, Washington shows little interest in them. But should the bilateral relationship sour, with deadlocked arms control negotiations or a worsening of tensions in the former Soviet space, then the notion of a European/Euro-Atlantic security treaty could gain new impetus.

## The challenge for Europe

The main challenge for European policy-makers in responding to the Medvedev project is that there is very little to ‘bite’ on. It was easy to reject some of the early ideas, such as the exclusion of NATO and the US. But, beyond that, getting to grips with what the Russians really want has proved elusive.

What is interesting, given past divisions on Russia policy, is the degree of European unity so far. Some NATO member-states, mainly in Central and Eastern Europe, have viewed the Medvedev proposals as pure mischief-making, motivated by a desire to undermine NATO and consolidate a Russian sphere of influence. Others, such as Germany and France, have been more receptive, identifying an opportunity to realise the long-term vision of a common European security space. Yet even their reaction has been guarded, and fallen well short of what Moscow had hoped or expected. Far from fracturing along familiar ‘old Europe’ versus ‘new Europe’ lines as they did over NATO enlargement, the Europeans have foiled Moscow’s attempts to divide them from the US and from each other. They have refused to legitimise the notion of a Russian sphere of privileged interests. They have underlined NATO’s primacy in European security,<sup>18</sup> as well

<sup>18</sup> *In the aftermath of the Georgia war, there was much talk among NATO member-states about the need to reinforce mutual defence (Article 5) commitments in the face of external military challenges.*

as preserving a central role for the OSCE. And they have left the onus on Moscow to deliver on the detail of its security proposals.

All this is quite encouraging from a European perspective. And yet it is important to place this consensus in context. Since Medvedev first broached his big idea, international developments have conspired towards greater unity vis-à-vis Russia. In the past nine months alone, the Europeans have experienced two of the most serious crises in modern memory (the Georgia war and the global recession); a US newly committed to multilateral co-operation; and a Russia seemingly bent on confrontation. Seen through this lens, European solidarity in response to vague, reheated proposals from Moscow is perhaps not the surprise it first appears.

The real test is whether this unity can withstand a more nuanced Russian foreign policy. Several traps await. One is a misplaced belief that Moscow has undergone some sort of Damascene conversion and seen the error of its confrontational ways. Such complacency is scarcely warranted. While the global financial crisis has acted as a reality check on the Russian leadership, it would be foolish to assume that this will necessarily foster a more benign attitude towards the West. While Moscow may have softened its foreign policy style, some things remain constant:

<sup>19</sup> Bobo Lo, 'Russia's crisis – what it means for regime stability and Moscow's relations with the world', CER policy brief, February 2009.

an innate sense of Russia as a global great power; the conviction that the former Soviet republics belong in its sphere of influence; and a general view of the world as a fiercely competitive arena.<sup>19</sup>

Another error would be to view the rapprochement between Moscow and Washington as an unalloyed benefit. Improved relations certainly contribute to a more stable security environment in Europe. On the other hand, Washington's courting of Moscow will also reinforce the extant America-centrism of the Russian elite, giving new life to notions of strategic bipolarity at the expense of more multifaceted relations with Europe. It would be mistaken, also, to assume that Russia-US co-operation will reduce the centrality of geopolitics in Russian foreign policy. It has hardly escaped Moscow's attention that it is precisely in the area of 'old-fashioned' political-military affairs that Washington is engaging it most closely as an 'equal partner'.

The final trap, to which European states are often prone, is wallowing in quasi-mythical ideas of commonality, such as 'strategic partnership' and a 'common European security space'. Although EU and NATO member-states certainly share some security priorities with Russia – in conventional arms control, counter-terrorism and combating transnational crime – there are many areas where their positions diverge fundamentally. For example, Russia's approach to the common neighbourhood differs in almost every

respect from that of NATO and the EU. And the interpretation of supposedly universal norms varies so greatly that these have become meaningless as a basis for common policy approaches.

## Recommendations

Tempting though it may be to develop more 'innovative' or 'imaginative' responses to the Medvedev proposals, the Europeans should stick to the strengths that have served them well until now. That means:

- ★ **Preserve European unity and discipline.** While some differences of style and emphasis are inevitable, individual country responses to Russian proposals must remain broadly consistent with NATO and EU positions. National free-lancing, of the type that has periodically undermined European policy towards Russia, will only encourage Moscow to play a spoiling role.
- ★ **Co-ordinate bilateral and multilateral responses with Washington.** A common response to the Medvedev proposals is a critical test of the new multilateral spirit in transatlantic relations.
- ★ **Maintain the pressure on Moscow to come up with concrete ideas.** Russian attempts to pass responsibility on to others for taking the new security architecture forward should be gently rebuffed. At the same time, the Europeans need to retain an open mind if and when specific ideas do materialise.
- ★ **Emphasise to the Russian leadership that the viability of the Medvedev initiative depends on actions, not words.** There is a clear contradiction between Moscow's stated commitment to the principles of territorial integrity and national sovereignty, and the consolidation of Russia's armed presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (in breach of the six-point peace plan Putin negotiated with Sarkozy in August 2008). While an early full withdrawal of Russian troops to pre-war positions is unlikely, a downsizing of this presence would be an important confidence-building measure, as would Moscow's agreement to extend the mandate of OSCE and UN monitors.
- ★ **Encourage Russia to re-engage in the CFE,** and facilitate this by de-linking treaty modernisation from the question of the Russian military presence in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Moldova.
- ★ **Reject any attempts to minimise or sidestep NATO,** which will remain the cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic security for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, the Europeans (and

Americans) can afford to be generous in admitting other organisations to discussions about Euro-Atlantic security. The CSTO and the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) pose no threat to the primacy of NATO and may even contribute usefully in some areas, such as Afghanistan, counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics. Meanwhile, the West should test the sincerity of Moscow's good intentions by seeking observer status for the EU, NATO and the US within the CSTO and SCO.

★ **Resist efforts to limit the definition of security to military ('hard') and energy security.** If there is to be a new security charter or treaty, then it must reflect the values of 21<sup>st</sup> century, not 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Political and human security – such as democratisation, the development of civil society, and respect for human rights – are integral to any pan-European framework. The OSCE, in all

three baskets of its activities (hard security, economics, and human rights) should retain a major role.

★ **Keep a sense of perspective.** The Medvedev project is in many respects a metaphor for Russia's engagement with the West. It is at once elusive, aspirational and temperamental. In coming years, its form and substance will undergo many changes – some minor, others more radical; some positive, others less so. Throughout all this, the West needs to steer between the extremes of excessive optimism and dismal fatalism, and maintain a flexible, pragmatic and above all patient approach.

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