

David CRIEKEMANS

SECURITY THREATS IN EUROPE: POSSIBILITIES AND OBSTACLES FOR EU–RUSSIA COOPERATION

Introduction

We meet at a time of great international tension between East and West, an evolution, which is very unfortunate. At the core lies a mutual distrust, which developed after the end of Cold War, and especially during the second half of the 1990s. We need mutual empathy to try to escape from the current situation. The West has, in my opinion, made some major geopolitical mistakes in its relationship towards Moscow. NATO enlargement, pushed by Washington, was certainly one of them. The American president Bush sr. and then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had agreed in 1990 to reunify Germany and make it a NATO member, but NATO would not expand one inch further. NATO broke that agreement and expanded anyway in several waves. Historical fears in Central Europe fed into this process. Washington also promoted an agenda of regime change in the former Soviet sphere of influence in the 2000s.

Developments such as these made a common security analysis by East and West very difficult. In my personal opinion, NATO does not constitute part of the solution, rather it is a part of the problem in the relations between East and West.

At the same time, we are being confronted by important new changes in the geopolitical landscape. The election of American president Donald Trump and Brexit are changing the geopolitical and geostrategic theatre. As a result, several EU countries have realized that they should themselves take more responsibility in the realm of defence. Steps are being taken to develop the European Union as a security actor. Important in this regard is that the EU conceptually uses what I would

call a “broad definition” of security, not only focused on the military dimension, but also on the economic, environmental and societal dimensions.

These geopolitical changes are also an opportunity to undo some of the mistakes in the past that have led to the unfortunate tensions between East and West. Europe will have to evolve towards a more independent geopolitical pole, which means a realization that our interests do not always match completely with those of Washington. They may also not always match with those of Moscow, but it is important to explore where a win-win might be possible and the current atmosphere of distrust can be overcome.

In my opinion, the prism of the “broad definition” of security gives us a conceptual tool today to start discussing with one another the challenges, which we are both confronted with, so as to explore whether we can develop common strategies. In essence, the question lying before us is whether cooperation between the EU countries and Russia on some of these domains is possible.

As already concluded by some European geopolitical scholars in the past (and here I take the liberty to also mention the work at the Geneva Institute of Geopolitical Studies in Switzerland, of which I am a member since the first hour), the geopolitical interests of Europe and Russia are much more complementary than one would think. On the Eurasian continent, both entities play major roles as security providers in each of the above-mentioned dimensions.

What interests binds us together and how can we devise strategies to work together?

Remember the 1970s

The past can also offer us some inspiration. At the end of the 1960s, a similar East-West tension existed. Belgium took the initiative under our then Minister of Foreign Affairs Pierre Harmel for diplomatic talks with several Eastern European countries. Although the initiative initially seemed to have failed, it gave impetus to the later so-called “Helsinki Accords” in 1975.

The Accords' “*Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States*” enumerated 10 points:

1. Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty
2. Refraining from the threat or use of force
3. Inviolability of frontiers
4. Territorial integrity of States
5. Peaceful settlement of disputes
6. Non-intervention in internal affairs
7. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief
8. Equal rights and self-determination of peoples
9. Co-operation among States
10. Fulfillment in good faith of obligations under international law

The document was seen by East and West as a significant step toward reducing Cold War tensions. Both parties in essence respected each other's geopolitical sphere of influence. Looking back, one can understand why Moscow sees the enlargement of NATO as a form of undermining that gained stability, perhaps even provoking a counter-response. Whereas in Western media the policy actions of Moscow are often portrayed as "offensive", perhaps they were just "defensive" (see: 'Defensive Realism').

The result is that we again seem to be locked in a world of competition and a zero sum game, whereas a positive sum game would lie more in our reach than we would think. *What common challenges are we confronted with?*

Common challenges, which we are confronted with

Taking a "broad definition of security" several domains come within the radar of possible cooperation:

- ***Energy security***

Europe and Russia clearly are objective partners in the domain of energy. The EU is rapidly transitioning towards natural gas in combination with renewable energy. The age of oil will remain, but decline in relative terms. Europe will remain an important customer of Russian gas, even while Moscow rightly so diversifies its portfolio in the direction of Asia. New natural gas fields in the territorial waters of Cyprus, and perhaps even Greece or Syria are also of interest to the Russian federation. The question is whether a win-win could be found in this regard.

If Europe transitions in a few decades away from oil, new alternatives will have to be found for e.g. plastics. The petrochemical industry will have to be replaced by a bio-based chemical industry, based upon sustainability criteria. The Russian federation could become a major exporter to Europe in the field of biomass. In return, the EU and Russia could already today start working together in setting up expertise and perhaps even joint intellectual property in a future bio-based chemical industry.

- *Economic security*

It is in the interest of both East and West to maintain steady economic relations. But there is a hurdle to take; both East and West should be able to buy themselves into the companies of the other side via foreign direct investments under a common legal framework or rules. Perhaps certain sectors could be identified that could spearhead such a process. For a long time this has constituted a hurdle to achieve true complementarity in the economic realm.

- *Environmental security*

All our countries will in the coming decades be affected by climate change. We will need common solutions and new technologies to mitigate the upcoming unforeseen problems, with which all our societies will be confronted. Russia's problems are Europe's problems and the other way around in this regard. Europe can help with energy efficiency technologies in Russian housing and industry while Russia can help in the energy domain.

If natural gas is the 'bridge fuel' towards a renewable energy future, we urgently need to work together on a problem mentioned in the World Energy Outlook 2017 by the International Energy Agency; the leaking of the climate-dangerous methane in natural gas production.

Another problem to be tackled together, which receives too little attention, is the rapid degradation in biodiversity. The Russian federation and Europe could work together in this regard.

- *Confidence building measures and cultural diplomacy*

Within societal security there are many historical links between Russia and Europe. Think for instance of the rich cultural heritage in Saint Petersburg and Moscow. Via an active cultural diplomacy, it would be possible to make sure that our population gets to know the other partner better. In Saint Petersburg there is, for

instance, an active Dutch institute that can play a role in this regard. Cultural diplomacy can help in getting to know each other better, and in nurturing a positive atmosphere.

- ***Radicalisation of individuals, terrorism and intelligence sharing***

Within the harder part of societal security, both our societies are being confronted with radicalization and terrorism. Belgium has woken up to this new reality after the terrorist attacks of 22 March 2016. A new security culture is being implemented by its authorities. A more structural exchange of intelligence sharing could create a mutually beneficial cooperation.

Last but not least, there are two elephants in the room with regard to security, which should be mentioned – Ukraine and Syria.

In the Ukrainian case, the European Union did not realize in 2013 that its negotiations for an Association Agreement with Ukraine had major geo-economic and geostrategic consequences for the Russian federation. The EU has great difficulty in understanding Geopolitics, still locked in a technical world of neoliberalism. What happened afterwards is a geopolitical disaster for both East and West. Instead of comparing notes on our perception of the situation on the ground since 2013, let us think about how the situation could be stabilized again. The Cold War gives us in the geostrategic domain the example of Austria. This country promised to remain neutral and thus could flourish. It is my firm belief that Ukraine, which literally means border zone, should remain just that and return to its non-aligned status. This would mean that NATO should indefinitely freeze any direct or indirect cooperation with the government of the Ukraine, take a step back and allow the European Union to become the main interlocutor in the realm of security in a broad definition. Ukraine must return to a policy of neutrality in “hard security topics”. This would allow the country to cooperate economically more freely with both East and West. -In a later phase, one could think of more autonomy for the Russian speaking regions in the East of the country. President Putin suggested some scenarios in this regard in the past. Only if the security issue is solved, Ukraine can become a geo-economic place where East and West meet and cooperate.

In the Syrian case, the West has also made some major mistakes. But both Russia and the West have worked together in defeating ISIS / Daesh. It would be dramatic if tensions between both sides rise any further. The European public

opinion does not want this. In fact, it is now more than clear that the government of al-Assad has won the war west of the Euphrates River. Many European leaders may have difficulty admitting this to their public, but this is the truth. East of the Euphrates River the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have consolidated the territory.

Taking this important intellectual step in the West – that al-Assad has won west of the Euphrates and the SDF east of the Euphrates – there is a window of opportunity to work together. In the coming weeks and months, the war will continue in the province of Idlib with conventional means. Can a joint plan be devised so as to safeguard the local population?

Moreover, there is a risk that the Syrian war will soon develop another dimension. Israel accuses Iran of establishing a power base in Syria. We can debate whether this is true or not, but that in itself does not help. If Israel or Saudi Arabia would take matters into their own hands, there is an acute danger the Syrian war will overflow the region in ways that can no longer be contained.

It is my belief such a dramatic scenario would be against the geopolitical interests of both Europe and Russia. In other words, there is currently a window of opportunity to try to put the genie of war back in the Syrian box before its new chapter explodes in our faces.

To conclude, I do believe there are currently opportunities in all dimensions of security. In the new geopolitical landscape, which is gradually forming, it is in the interest of both Europe and Russia to try to understand each other, overcome our differences, and attempt to work together.