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NATO Summit: Making Peace with Russia, Canada Notwithstanding

A Policy Update Paper

By

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November, 2010

Prepared for the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute

1600, 530 – 8th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3S8

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Westdal is a former Canadian diplomat with extensive experience heading Canadian Embassies, High Commissions and international delegations. Mr. Westdal was Ambassador to Russia (2003 to 2006), the United Nations in Geneva (1999 to 2003), Ukraine (1995 to 1998), South Africa (1991 to 1993), Bangladesh and Burma (1982 to 1985). Prior assignments abroad included India and Nepal (from 1973 to 1975), responsible for CIDA programming, and Tanzania from 1970 to 1973, as a member of a University of Toronto economic advisory team. In Ottawa, he was Director General of the Foreign Ministry's International Organizations Bureau from 1987 to 1991, Assistant Secretary at the Privy Council Office to the Cabinet Committee on Foreign Policy and Defence (1976 to 78, 1985 to 87), and CIDA Regional Director for East Africa from 1978 to 1982. Mr. Westdal holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from St. Johns College and a Master in Business Administration degree from the University of Manitoba. Mr. Westdal serves on corporate boards and consults on international affairs.

Canadians' attention is riveted on Afghanistan, but a subject as important at NATO's historic Summit this week in Lisbon is its adoption of a new Strategic Concept.

In that key document, NATO leaders will express the North Atlantic alliance's post-Cold War purpose, characterize Russia and, by pronouncing on NATO enlargement, clarify the boundaries between Russia and Europe. With President Medvedev an invited guest, they will seek a security partnership with Russia, aiming to consolidate peace across a swath of the most blood-soaked earth on Earth.

Though the Cold War that was its genesis is over (in most minds, but not all), NATO remains highly valued by its members as a US-backed counter-balance to Russia; a framework for European unity and discipline; a link with Turkey; a structure for cooperation and partnership; a vehicle for emergency management, a fire brigade, a posse; and, unspoken, a good way to contain and integrate Germany within multinational security architecture (alongside EU economic and political integration). Leaders will have no trouble expressing NATO's enduring reasons to be.

As to their description of Russia and prospects for security partnership, there is reason to expect language and gestures of historic rapprochement. The tone and text of the final document are likely to be at least as conciliatory as that in the recent report of the Expert Group chaired by Madeleine Albright (which included our Ambassador in Vienna, Marie Gervais-Vidricaire).

The Albright text declares that "Cold War rivalry ... has long since disappeared" and that "the Alliance neither poses a military threat to Russia, nor considers Russia a military threat." It does note that "doubts persist on both sides about the intentions and policies of the other," but calls nonetheless for engagement and deeper partnership. Leaders look set to heed that call.

They must also address the neuralgic subject of further NATO enlargement. The Albright Group says simply that "further enlargement has been under consideration in the western Balkans and with respect to Georgia and Ukraine" and that "the process for states that have expressed their desire for membership should move forward as each state fulfills the requirements for membership."

What it doesn't say is that, though Serbia and Macedonia may one day join NATO, Georgia and Ukraine, for the time being and the foreseeable future, will not.

The campaign for Georgian membership – which would extend a security guarantee into the cauldron of the Caucasus – came to a bloody, ignominious close in war there two years ago, with European governments utterly deaf to Dick Cheney's call (in person from Tbilisi) that they come help Georgians fight Russians to keep Ossetians apart (against their will) and Abkhazis under Tbilisi (against theirs). NATO membership would have had us try to do so.

Back on the actual boundaries of Europe, meanwhile, the campaign for Ukrainian NATO membership had long since been shut down, democratically, by the Ukrainian people. They know NATO's not a knitting club, know that Russians know this too – and know better than to pick a needless fight. For years, they told NATO's hopeful pollsters so, dissuading Brussels and Viktor Yushchenko from ever risking anything so directly democratic as a referendum on the subject – and then this spring they elected President Yanukovich, firmly opposed to the notion.

These facts have not yet been digested in Ottawa and several other NATO capitals. The manifest will of the Ukrainian people and the clear counter-productivity of the provocation entailed notwithstanding, the delusion will die hard that NATO membership would enhance Ukrainian security.

Meanwhile, what text on the subject might be agreed in the Strategic Concept? A recent Ditchley Park conference on EU-Russia relations thought language leaving an open door, with no mention of specific candidates, was an obvious solution, given that such generality could accommodate notions of new Balkan, Ukrainian, Georgian or other members.

Make no mistake, though: however innocuous the language, new boundaries of Europe and of Russia will be drawn. For one thing, the Caucasus region is not European. Georgia must learn to live with its neighbours. Into the “frozen” conflicts there, NATO will not be drawn. For another, in this reckoning, neither is Ukraine European – enough. Its neighbours in Europe are generous, but Kyiv is not invited to join the EU. Khrushchev was generous too, in 1954, giving Ukraine Crimea, a thoroughly non-European peninsula that anchors Ukraine to Russia.

Ukraine isn't called the “Edge” for nothing. It is the edge both of Europe and of Russia. It spans the ancient divide between Rome and Byzantium. Between Europe and Russia, two enduring major powers in a polycentric world, Ukraine is buffer, *cartilage* analogously, with profound interest in good bone structure and alignment – profound interest, that is, in good relations between its neighbours.

It is thus very good news for Ukrainians that prospects for NATO-Russia partnership have been improving so markedly. Since Obama reset relations, Russia has helped with Iran and more with Afghanistan. Putin's apology for the massacre at Katyn has eased relations with Poland. Arctic disputes have been settled with Norway. Cooperation in missile defence is on the table. The recession and slow recovery have meanwhile sobered the Kremlin about Russia's slow pace of economic diversification, innovation and industrial growth – not nearly good enough yet to keep up in a fast world and keep giving Russians better lives. China's massive, rapid rise and its more assertive international posture have underlined Russia's relative weakness and its demographic crisis in Siberia and the Far East. Vulnerable, Moscow wonders whether security links with NATO and Europe, paralleling the massive economic complementarities between European technology and Russian resources, ought not be welcome indeed. What's more, as long as it is not too close, NATO can, as it claims, enhance Russian security – by containing Russo-phobia in the former Soviet space along its western border, where what Russia wants and needs is peace.

At the NATO Summit, when leaders discuss Afghanistan, Prime Minister Harper will speak with hard-won credibility. When talk turns to the new Strategic Concept, though, to rapprochement with Russia and peace prospects for Ukrainians and others between Europe and Russia, our Prime Minister's credibility is undermined by widespread suspicion that his government's policy in East-West security relations is tailored to suit Ukrainian, Baltic and other Russo-phobe diaspora voting blocs in Canada.

Can he play roles comparable to Mulroney's or Trudeau's or Pearson's in their times, trading on personal relations and relevant security analyses at the top, to promote our interests with influence? No, not on this stage. In East-West relations, the security of Eurasia, rigid neo-con antipathy to Russia (reinforced by conservative national media) and a foreign policy narrowly designed for diasporas have led us to the margins of irrelevance and mischief.

Consider, for instance, the Prime Minister's visit to Ukraine last month. He spent his time commemorating no end of atrocities, in avowed aid of remembrance, harping on about his host's transgressions (centralizing power! restricting access to information! no kidding) and, to who knows what end (or Canadian national interest), stoking a sense of aggrieved Ukrainian victimhood and narrow nationalism. It was to these ends, presumably, that the Prime Minister exaggerated, more than doubled, the number of Ukrainian victims of the *Holodomyr* – doing their memory scant service, surely, with inference that four million were too few, ten million need have died to make the point. He closed with a rousing, empty promise: "Remember, Ukrainians ... you have friends in Canada." On the eve of a NATO Summit he knows will not invite Ukraine to join, such sentimental sloganeering is not sound security policy. The votes such visits may earn at home cost Canada credibility in other capitals – where decisive roles of a higher order are played in such a matter as the security of Ukraine.

In Moscow, for one, we've just been hard to take seriously these last five years, what with the open antipathy in our Last Cold Warrior Standing posture; our stubborn promotion of evidently counter-productive Georgian and Ukrainian NATO membership; our neglect of bilateral relations; our new insulting, hyper-intrusive visa questionnaires; our hypocrisy about Arctic cooperation and the ludicrous spectre we conjure of fighting the Russians for more space up there (about as remote a real threat to the security of Canada as can be imagined – and, for the two largest countries on earth, as inane as two bald men fighting for a comb); not to forget Minister MacKay's comic-book alarums about Russian bombers flying "within 24 hours of President Obama's visit." Such nonsense gets noticed – and does us no good.

After Bush, US attitudes toward the world were recast, its relations with Russia reset. Ours never were. The world has moved on, but neo-con thought is alive and well in Ottawa. We need to lift our sights and our game. It is high time we built better relations with Russia – and with all of Ukraine.

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