

THE EU AND RUSSIA: A SECURITY PARTNERSHIP?

EU-Russian relations were the subject of a seminar which took place at the Institute on 25 March 2002.¹ The seminar, attended by a number of experts and policy-makers both from Russia and EU member states, sought to explore the state of EU-Russian security relations today, define common interests, and examine whether a strategic partnership is possible, and how to move forward.

I. What they say

Although the interventions by the Russians participants differed in style and tone, the key message is that EU-Russian relations are held hostage by, or viewed through the prism of, US-Russian relations. EU-Russian relations are important only if they can help bring Russia closer to the United States. In other words, since 11 September in particular, there has been a declining interest on the Russian side in forging a wider security relationship with the EU.

More specifically below is a sample of Russian perspectives :

1. The feeling in Russia that Europe has ceased to matter could be positive, given the fact that Europe is not perceived as a military threat any more: both NATO expansion and EU enlargement are givens. On the other hand, Putin's strategic decision to move toward the West has come with the support of the elite in Russia but it is still unclear what this option means for Russia. The challenges, which are many, include divergences over:
 - Georgia -- The West supports Shevardnadze, while Russia supports Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In this setting, the presence of US troops on the ground in Georgia is hotly contested.
 - NATO -- Russia's relations with the West seem to have been upgraded to the extent that a key issue (if not the most important one) of European security is not whether Russia should be integrated within Euro-Atlantic institutions but how. Yet this presents many challenges, such as what a consultative body at 20 would imply. Russia feels that a merely symbolic role in an enlarged NATO is not enough.
 - Nuclear -- The US nuclear position is seen as problematic. While symbolically US-Russian relations have improved, the questions of essence such as ABM and START negotiations remain.

In this setting, Russia's perceptions of itself are closely related to the state of US-Russian relations. While the EU is perceived as a more natural partner than the US for Russia, the question remains primarily an economic one because Russians fear that European states will ultimately side with the US on most security related issues. Finally, Russia could reconsider its rapprochement with the West within two years if it still feels that it is not getting enough benefits from it.

2. The key challenge for Putin and the current administration is whether Russia can modernise without destroying its power base, which is a product of the past. In other words, Putin is attempting to liberalise the Russian economy in order to spur economic growth while simultaneously implementing bureaucratic reform which would allow him to control the business sector more efficiently. Therefore, a liberal economic policy is the means rather than the objective, which is to make Russia stronger via more effective control by the Kremlin. In this context, the EU, which currently accounts for about 40% of Russia's foreign trade (with enlargement, the EU share may

increase to 50-60%), is instrumental, as greater economic cooperation (in the areas of trade, energy, and WTO membership) would markedly improve Russia's global economic standing. As the focus is on greater economic ties, EU-Russian security relations play a secondary role.

3. Russia's lack of choice as to partners and allies, and the limits of US-Russia relations, attest that it is in its interest to strengthen its relations with the EU. This in no way means that Russia views Europe as an alternative to the US as might have been the case in the past. But given the political and operational shortcomings of ESDP, the further development of the Russia-NATO link would act as an incentive for enhancing EU-Russian relations. In other words, some form of upgraded arrangement between Russia and NATO (a new NATO Council at twenty, for example) offers better prospects for a strategic partnership with the EU because membership of NATO tends to limit the potential for power politics directed against EU member states.
4. Putin's decision to turn to the West in the wake of 11 September was made in the context of Russian-American relations. Therefore the primacy of the role of the United States in addressing the troublesome peripheries (such as the Balkans, the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus) and the re-emergence of "non-traditional" security threats and challenges such as international terrorism, the proliferation of WMD, drug trafficking, money laundering, and environmental concerns, is a given. Therefore cooperation between the EU and Russia in most of the afore-mentioned cases is possible provided it is subordinated to US-Russian relations.
5. Defence and security issues have no place in EU-Russian relations, especially when it comes to the troublesome peripheries. The EU is not ready to intervene in the Caucasus and Central Asia if called upon. Russia's ability to be militarily involved beyond Chechnya and the Caucasus is also limited. This being the case, neither side, as things stand today, can do anything beyond what it is already doing.
6. The lack of a strategic vision by both the EU and Russia with regard to their relationship hinders the evolution of a strategic partnership. The post-11 September environment has not necessarily clarified the basic foundations and orientations of Russia's foreign policy other than giving predominance to the "American factor". This in turn, from Moscow's perspective, will put the evolution of Russia's relations with the EU in the waiting room, depending on the course of Russia-US relations.
7. In terms of EU-Russian relations, their further institutionalisation is a priority. The Russia-PSC 'Troika' framework, to which military cooperation should be added, is considered to be the main testing ground of strategic cooperation between the EU and Russia.

II. What we can conclude

- The Russian side is extremely reticent to take initiatives vis-à-vis the EU other than those aimed at improving its economic standing. Russia's relations with the EU are subordinated to Russia-US relations, especially after 11 September. On the EU side, there is also a perception that there is no need for a strategic dialogue with Russia if only because the US deals directly with it. In other words, both sides use the US as an alibi for maintaining the status quo in their relationship. But while the Europeans are slowly coming to terms with

the fact that the United States is changing (not interested in institutionalising relations with Russia (to the level of strategic parity) and less willing to intervene in crises in Europe), the Russian side still clings to the notion of parity with the US.

- This gradual evolution in the EU's position necessitates certain initiatives. Though there is no short-term perspective for an EU-Russia strategic partnership, a lack of vision should not obviate the necessity for cooperation. This stems primarily from: 1) the aftermath of 11 September and the changed American priorities; 2) the EU's future enlargement, which will bring the EU territorially closer to Russia; and 3) the reconstruction of failed states, whether in the Balkans or the former Soviet Union due to the challenges of terrorism, organised crime, and other concerns that these present.
- Despite the limits of greater cooperation in the fields of security and defence at this stage, Pillar II issues will not go away. The test case is the Balkans, where the EU is stepping in militarily as the US disengages. Here Russia has to decide if it wants to have a say in the region or not. If it feels it cannot disengage, it will have to deal directly with the EU.

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ⁱ The seminar entitled "THE EU and Russia: A Security Partnership?" was held in Paris on 25 March 2002.