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MEDVEDEV IN LISBON: A PUBLIC RELATIONS EXERCISE OR A NEW BEGINNING?

«Russia has only two friends – its army and its navy,» according to the memoirs of Grand Duke Alexander Mikailovich - he is the author of the phrase that is said to have been repeated by emperor Alexander III when appointing ambassadors or top level generals. In the last ten years, this statement has been frequently reiterated by Russian political leaders. It is supposed to serve as proof that the country needs no partnership with the West, and especially with NATO. Few ever gave a thought to the idea that the emperor's quote is taken out of a vastly different historical context, when foreign policy, at least in Europe, was the preserve of a small pan-European aristocratic class and was conducted in secret without a lot of interference by public opinion, members of parliament, the media or big business – as it is today. Moreover, Alexander III had to abandon this attitude and form an alliance with republican France, which he otherwise hated. Times have changed, but until fairly recently most Russian policymakers still preferred to preserve the thought that Russia was fully capable of conducting what president Putin termed in his 2007 Munich Security Conference speech as an «independent foreign policy».

So, when in November 2010 President Dmitry Medvedev decided to accept the invitation by the North Atlantic alliance's Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and attend the NATO-Russia Summit in Lisbon, he went against the spirit that still largely prevails in Moscow's corridors of power.

He made this an official line prior to the Lisbon summit when meeting the 46th Munich Security Conference participants in the Russian capital. Mr Medvedev admitted that in Russia “there is the sense that NATO is some kind of an aggressive element.” “This is in many respects a mistake,” he opined. For a Russian leader to utter this was unthinkable even a year ago when relations between Moscow and the alliance were pulled out of the political refrigerator, where they had been locked in since the 2008 Russian-Georgian war.

But Medvedev went even further when meeting the heads of NATO states and governments face to face in the Portuguese capital. “We are prepared to go as far as NATO is prepared to go”, he said, according to officials who have attended the NATO-Russia council meeting and whom I have personally spoken with. If this is indeed so, then Mr Medvedev has embarked on a course that might see Russia’s national interests redefined in a dramatic way.

There seem to be several reasons for this cautious and still by no means definitive change of direction. Is the way Russia deals with the outside world gradually being reassessed? If yes, it is the result of a sober analysis of several factors: the economic crisis, which has demonstrated that country’s economy is inexorably linked to the global markets and is, by some estimates, the weakest of the G20 nations; troubled demographics, directly and indirectly affecting national security issues; and a rather shaky condition of the Russian armed forces, undergoing painful reforms with a still uncertain outcome. The much-ridiculed intention of the Russian navy to acquire “Mistral” ships from the French is nothing but a symptom of a larger malaise – a chronic shortage of modern weaponry, which the nation’s industry is still – or yet - incapable of reducing.

And of course, the rise of China, which has lots of cash, increasingly treats Russia like a junior partner, elbows it out of Central Asia and robustly competes with it in the international arms markets – frequently selling back-engineered and updated versions of Russia’s own military hardware.

All this made lots of influential people in Moscow to re-evaluate country’s potential and the real dangers it faces. Having the world’s largest military force - 3 million Chinese officers and men - placed on its eastern border, and one of the planet’s most unpredictable and treacherous regimes – the Iranian – brandishing threats of nuclear Armageddon on the southern one, creates an uncomfortable geopolitical surrounding.



While notionally Russia has its own “mini-NATO” – the Collective Security Treaty, this organization has proven to be ineffective. Moscow’s allies spectacularly refused even to consider supporting its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. They were unwilling to help the government of Kyrgyzstan last summer, when it was pleading for assistance to quell ethnic riots in the southern city of Osh. On top of that, the Russian leadership is locked in an increasingly fierce standoff with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka, nominally a key military ally. With such friends, who needs enemies?

Against this backdrop, Russia-NATO relations, with all their ups and downs, look like a stable and at least modestly successful enterprise. When looking back at the thirteen years that have passed since the signing of the NATO-Russia Charter in Paris, we see that there have been thousands of exchanges, seminars, training exercises, which, although never managing to break the mould of mistrust, contributed to Russia and the alliance getting to know each other better. Moscow did not stop providing vital transit for the NATO-led international security force in Afghanistan even at the height of disagreements over Georgia. In short, even if in many respects NATO is the devil in Russia’s eyes, it is a pretty well-known devil by now.

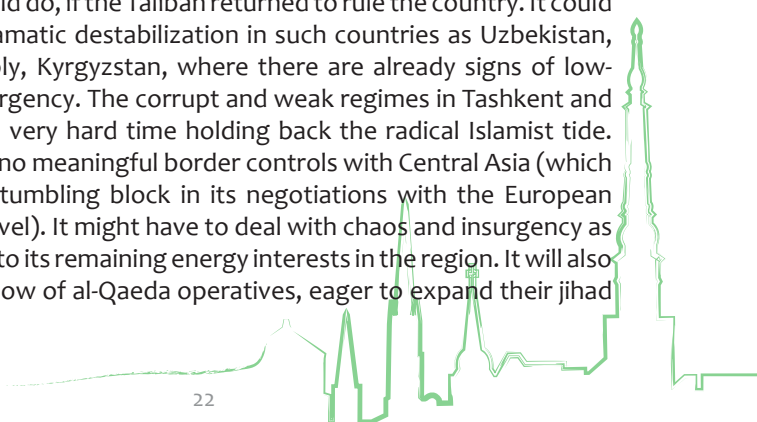
Being present at the summit in the Portuguese capital was a significant moment in the life of someone like the author, who has analyzed the Russia-NATO affairs since the early 1990s. Here the Russian leader ended nearly fifteen years of hostile rhetoric and finally admitted that the alliance was not a threat but rather a preferred partner for his country.

To me there were several important benchmarks in Medvedev’s speech in Lisbon. For example, there was no mention of NATO enlargement as a threat to Russia’s security. This was one of Moscow’s key foreign policy messages ever since the mid-1990s. It can be argued that after the change of administration in Washington in 2009 and in Kiev in 2010, the question of alliance membership for Ukraine and Georgia is not on the agenda, and probably will not be anytime soon. Some analysts argue that Moscow’s decision to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states dealt a nearly mortal blow to Georgia’s plans to join the alliance. Now, with Tbilisi having an unresolved territorial problem on its hands, and President Yanukovich announcing that Ukraine will not seek membership, it looks as if the enlargement issue is off the table. It may be – for now. But leadership change in Kiev, Tbilisi, or in Washington is not inconceivable and the membership subject could return on the agenda, historically speaking, quite soon.

Interestingly, Mr Medvedev has shown previously unknown restraint with regard to Georgia. He called the events of 2008 a “crisis in the Caucasus” – something even the BBC could not have put more neutrally; refrained from any personal attacks on Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili (who met Barack Obama for the first time in Lisbon); and even linked the possibility of unspecified talks on the aftermath of 2008 events to the perspectives of Russia-NATO cooperation. Moscow faces an unpleasant perspective of having to put up with Mr. Saakashvili’s presence for quite some time (in case he becomes prime-minister after stepping down as president in 2013). Russian leaders may try to continue ignoring Georgia, but it is already proving detrimental to country’s long-term interests. Tbilisi’s objection is one of the very few remaining obstacles on Russia’s path to joining the WTO. The US and the EU are adamant in their branding the results of 2008 war as “illegal occupation”. The Georgian question can indirectly impact on discussions on visa-free regime with the EU, as the opponents of abolishing visas can brandish an additional argument – “Such a measure would in fact commend Russia for its behaviour in the Caucasus!” There are some signs that the Kremlin is at least giving the situation a thought.

From the point of view of the allies, the most important result of the Lisbon summit is Mr Medvedev’s pledge to increase support for ISAF operations in Afghanistan and aid to President Hamid Karzai’s government. The Kremlin promised to expand the nomenclature of NATO equipment transported across the territory of Russia to include “non-lethal military cargo”, train more Afghan policemen and pilots and supply helicopters – free of charge - to Kabul. Karzai’s government is under a growing criticism for inefficiency, cowardice and corruption, so the Kremlin’s attitude can only be seen as a deliberate demonstration of solidarity with the alliance.

This solidarity has a practical dimension for Russia. The thought of coalition forces withdrawing from Afghanistan is Moscow’s foreign policy nightmare. There is nothing it could do, if the Taliban returned to rule the country. It could mean a quick and dramatic destabilization in such countries as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and, possibly, Kyrgyzstan, where there are already signs of low-intensity Islamist insurgency. The corrupt and weak regimes in Tashkent and Dushanbe will have a very hard time holding back the radical Islamist tide. Russia has practically no meaningful border controls with Central Asia (which is already the main stumbling block in its negotiations with the European Union on visa-free travel). It might have to deal with chaos and insurgency as well as a direct threat to its remaining energy interests in the region. It will also have to tackle the inflow of al-Qaeda operatives, eager to expand their jihad



in the North Caucasus, as well as the rest of Russia. In these circumstances, helping NATO in Afghanistan is a sensible course, especially if one wants the alliance to stay there as long as possible.

In Lisbon, Russia also accepted NATO's invitation to work jointly on creating a common system of ballistic missile defence (BMD). It is the most uncertain result of the summit. No one can predict how the future BMD will operate, what will its command structure be, who will ultimately be responsible for pressing the "Launch" button. There is also the unresolved issue of a common threat assessment. Russia and some NATO allies, like Turkey, are reluctant to point the finger at Iran, still believing it to be susceptible to sanctions and other forms of diplomatic pressure. However, it seems that the BMD project is viewed by NATO in more political and economic terms than the purely military ones. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has said that NATO and Russian defence ministers will start discussing the common threats' issue soon and no one will put any pressure on them to produce immediate results, which suits Russia just fine for now. For its part, Moscow must be interested to participate in a US-Europe technological pool that, as NATO leaders hope, will eventually start working on the basics of the BMD system. The Russian military industry is starved for new ideas and technologies and without an external stimulus it does not seem capable of a qualitative change. This is a tricky issue for NATO, where there is a growing suspicion of Russian espionage. There seems to be no agreement inside the Russian political leadership as to what the acceptable terms of BMD cooperation with the alliance will be. Mr Rasmussen's suggestion to proceed with the issue slowly in order to achieve a better understanding is designed to first and foremost engage Moscow in a political dialogue to enhance mutual trust – something that has so demonstrably lacked in NATO-Russia relations.

All in all, there was a not-entirely-unexpected echo of the 1980's era and Mikhail Gorbachev, when the Russian president spoke about the arms race as an unacceptable economic burden for his country. Still there is a difference: Medvedev, quite expectedly, presented his policy as an expression of national interest, rather than ideological choice. Since Gorbachev and Yeltsin's idealism is routinely portrayed in Russia as misguided at best and treacherous at worst, Medvedev's attitude is understandable. If he indeed wants to break the decades-long anti-Western propaganda mould and embark on a new course, it cannot be done overnight. The Russian president is a lawyer who instinctively prefers to proceed rather carefully. But does he have the time? Was the whole Lisbon performance not just a ploy to gain

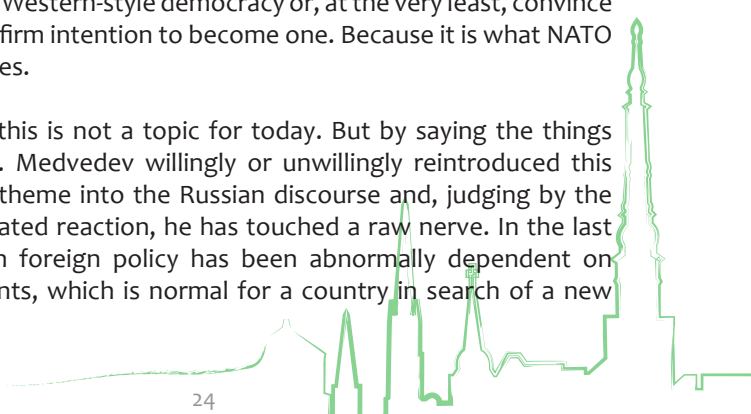
some time as the economic crisis is still not over and the lack of resources to continue the previous policies is so menacing?

The answer to this question is still pending. Having spoken to Russian officials, I get the impression that Medvedev's personal intention is quite sincere. However, it is also clear that relations with NATO are seen in Moscow through the domestic policy prism and the presidential succession of 2012. The alliance is seen by the Russian public as an embodiment of the West as a whole, and there are many people in the top echelons of power, led by prime-minister Putin, who have a high stake in perpetuating a besieged fortress attitude in Russia. A real thaw in relations with NATO will inevitably put in doubt Mr Putin's foreign policy vision, which has remained largely unchanged and uncontested until now.

There are still those who think that Putin and Medvedev are playing the "good cop – bad cop" game with both Russia and the world. Still, disagreements in the so called "tandem", especially over external policy, are perceived as genuine by many in their own country, as well as by a number of analysts and politicians abroad. Currently it looks like President Medvedev regards cooperation with the West if not as an end in itself, then at least as a more efficient way of keeping power within reach of the current ruling class without diverting its fairly limited political and economic resources towards confrontation with the West. A "new Cold War" seems to be off the table as an option – at least for the foreseeable future.

However, there is a circle to be squared by Russia's elite. If cooperation with NATO is to rise to a qualitatively new level, there will be no way of avoiding the perennial question of Russia's relations with the West – is it possible for it to engage deeply with the United States and Europe without broadly sharing their values? If, as Mr Medvedev emphatically said in Portugal, Russia does not exclude eventually raising the prospect of NATO membership for itself, it will have to become a Western-style democracy or, at the very least, convince the allies that it has a firm intention to become one. Because it is what NATO allies are – democracies.

Practically speaking, this is not a topic for today. But by saying the things he did in Lisbon, Mr. Medvedev willingly or unwillingly reintroduced this seemingly forgotten theme into the Russian discourse and, judging by the pro-Putin camp's irritated reaction, he has touched a raw nerve. In the last twenty years Russian foreign policy has been abnormally dependent on domestic developments, which is normal for a country in search of a new



identity and new definition of interests. If Russian leaders are to conclude that more democracy inside Russia will guarantee a better understanding and more support for it abroad, Lisbon may be eventually considered as a moment when Russia's neo-imperial policy started to fade and a more realistic and pragmatic assessment of its national interests and goals began to emerge. But if this time it does not happen this time, the country and its leaders, probably new ones, are destined to repeat the attempt again – until they finally succeed.

