

## THE RELUCTANT ALLY

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Gone are the favoured days of the Bush administration when virtually any European country that was willing to send troops to join Washington's coalition of the willing in Iraq or Afghanistan would be courted and placed on track for NATO membership. Instead of a confident America, an undecided Europe, and an ineffectual Russia, we are now witnessing the emergence of a new "correlation of forces" on the old continent between a reluctant America, an undecided Europe, and a reenergized Russia.

Barack Obama's meeting with eleven government leaders from Central Europe during his trip to Prague to sign a new START nuclear weapons treaty with Dmitry Medvedev in early April was intended to demonstrate that relations with the new NATO allies have not been reset. In other words, despite attempts to upgrade relations with Russia, the U.S. will not downgrade its ties with the new democracies. However, the fact that Obama needs to periodically reassure the new allies indicates that several capitals remain troubled, not just about Russia's aspirations but also about U.S. and NATO policies.

Bordering states are concerned about Russia's ambitions in countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and Georgia, and the pressure that this can exert on their own security. As proof of NATO's Article 5 defence guarantees, they are pushing the Alliance to prepare full contingency plans for their own defence, to stage regular exercises in the eastern part of NATO, and to position NATO infrastructure on their territories. They also want greater clarity as to how NATO countries interpret Article 5 of the Washington Treaty together with proof that the Alliance has an effective deterrence policy.

Although it is cited as a pledge of protection by all NATO allies, Article 5 is highly ambiguous. It states that if one ally were attacked, NATO would take actions "deemed necessary", which may or may not include the use of armed force. Moreover, each ally would be at liberty to interpret the article in any way it chooses. The NATO treaty also fails to specify the appropriate reactions against non-traditional

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attacks, such as the use of irregular forces, minority proxies, or cyber assaults. Clarifications are urgently needed.

NATO's fifth annual air exercises over the three Baltic States were held in March. More significantly, NATO is planning to organize military manoeuvres in Latvia in October, which are styled as "Sabre Strike 2010." Over 2,000 American, Lithuania, Latvian, and Estonian troops are due to participate as well as transport ships in the first ground exercises in the Baltic countries since they joined the Alliance in 2004. Governments in the region want to transform these exercises into more regular events with a broader array of NATO members. They point out that Russia regularly stages military manoeuvres close to their borders without any NATO response. However, they face an uphill in this case primarily because of the reluctance of West European capitals to upset Moscow.

Anxieties about NATO's defence commitments have been reflected in its operational limitations. Despite incorporating ten new members over the past decade, there has been little growth in military capabilities among European allies. Of the approximately 2.5 million soldiers available to NATO, only 300,000 are deployable, with half available at any one time because of rotation requirements. In the view of many new allies, the core reason for NATO membership was to protect their national independence especially from possible Russian encroachments. However, a perplexing problem confronting the Alliance is the inability to reach consensus on defining and prioritizing threats. For instance, several CEE capitals interpreted the Russo-Georgia war of August 2008 as a direct challenge to NATO's security but failed to galvanize the Alliance against Russia's partition of Georgia. There are fears that this will encourage further Muscovite adventures, particularly at a time when Washington has adopted a low profile approach throughout the Black Sea and South Caucasus regions.

Despite its reassurances that it will not support the delineation of "spheres of interest," in practice the Obama administration concluded that it would not vigorously challenge Moscow in its immediate neighbourhood. It evidently calculated that even if Ukraine, Moldova, and other countries slip under closer Russian control, this will not damage U.S interests, which center on much more vital concerns such as Afghanistan, Iran, counter-terrorism, and nuclear proliferation.

Indeed, closer Russian supervision over many of the post-Soviet republics may even be considered beneficial by some members of the Obama team, as there will be fewer conflicts with Moscow as a result. This approach has been reinforced by the staunch opposition of the West Europeans to NATO enlargement eastward

and the election in Ukraine of a Moscow-friendly President, Viktor Yanukovych. In effect, Washington's approach constitutes an informal concordat with Moscow in agreeing on respective spheres of interest and some sort of nascent "balance of power" in Europe and Eurasia.

However, the longevity and effectiveness of any such agreement is likely to be tested, as balance has no permanence and Russia's appetite will grow with new acquisitions. In particular, resistance to Moscow's pressures and encroachments may result in violent conflict or it may more directly affect one of the new NATO members. Given this inauspicious and potentially unstable international environment, the Central Europeans will continue to seek Obama's commitment to five strategic "Nos:" no weakening of NATO's security guarantees; no U.S. military withdrawal from Europe; no redivision of the continent into spheres of influence; no closing of doors to further NATO enlargement eastwards; and no grand bargains with Moscow over the heads of former Soviet satellites.

For this reason, there are several significant landmarks in the coming months as the new democracies seek an upgrading of NATO's security commitments. First, the content of NATO's new Strategic Concept is important for defining the role of the Alliance. In particular, how Russia is depicted in the document, as a partner or a threat, will be vital. Second, NATO's Summit in Lisbon in November will be key, especially as to what commitments are made to mutual defence.

Third, the contours of the new Missile Defence (MD) system will need to be fleshed out as well as whether Russia is to be included in the planned system. The main reason Warsaw and Prague signed on to the original Bush MD version and why several states remain open to the Obama alternative is that it forges closer bilateral links with the U.S. at a time of doubt over NATO solidarity, as several West European states have reset their relations with Moscow to an even warmer setting than Washington.

President Obama's decision in September 2009 to scuttle the planned U.S. anti-ballistic missile defence shield raised security fears among America's new allies. In reality, missile defence against an Iranian threat has never been the burning issue for Warsaw, Prague, or other capitals in the region. It is the content of the security relationship with Washington that is of primary concern. The change of policy on missile defence opened up charges of American unpredictability. Governments in Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, and the Baltic States view themselves as loyal allies, regardless of the identity of the U.S. administration. Rightly or wrongly, they joined the "coalition of the willing" in Iraq during the

Bush administration despite damaging their relations with several West European partners in order to assist Washington.

Although President Obama and his cabinet have underscored that the decision to shelve the missile shield was not dictated by Russia's opposition, Central Europeans remain sceptical and are not easily reassured by invocations of NATO's Article 5 defence guarantees. Warsaw, Prague, and other capitals will be closely watching Washington's subsequent moves. In the worst case scenario, the U.S. will mute its support for the future inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia in the NATO alliance, and will accede to signing a new European or Eurasian security charter as proposed by President Dmitry Medvedev, which is essentially designed to gut NATO, will not offer Georgia or other threatened states any meaningful self-defence assistance, and will ignore Russia's provocative actions against Estonia, Latvia, and other former satellites.

In Moscow's calculations, the decision on missile defence was a U.S. concession that could lead to more significant American capitulation in the former Soviet empire. The Kremlin is intent on re-establishing and expanding its zones of "privileged interests" – a concept that assumes Russia's right to determine its neighbours' foreign policies and security orientations and create counterparts to NATO and the European Union. Instead of establishing a strategic partnership between the U.S. and Russia, the "resetting" of relations risks missing the threat that Russia poses to its neighbours. The Kremlin's energy blackmail, military threats, and the persistent manipulation of ethnic and territorial disputes are intended to create dependent states along Russia's borders and to prevent them from developing into America's partners.

If the Obama administration is to effectively reassure Europe's new democracies and resist Russia's imperial impulses, then it must enhance the security of vulnerable countries. There are several concrete steps that it could take, such as formulating detailed NATO defence plans for all Alliance members bordering Russia, accelerating assistance in military modernization, and buttressing the territorial defence capabilities and military deterrents of the new allies. Without such measures, the Obama administration will be perceived as weak and wavering and Moscow may be tempted to further test its pliability by manufacturing conflicts with pro-American neighbours or more intensely interfering in their domestic politics.