

## **US – EU – Russia: an intricate triangle.**

### **Different Perceptions and Approaches to International Security**

By Franz Cede (AIES, Vienna)

The relationship between the US, the EU and Russia is indeed an intricate one, i.e. containing many detailed parts and thus difficult to understand. I would like to add NATO to the triangle thereby modifying the picture to a quadrangle.

#### Russian perceptions RF – US

With regard to international security the US is the principal point of reference of Russian politics. In this regard there is a tendency in Moscow to continue thinking in bipolar categories. In spite of the diminished role of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet empire the Russian foreign policy establishment still likes to put Russia on the same footing with the US. Therefore, the announcement of H.Clinton that the new administration would put the reset button on the US-RF relationship was heartily welcomed and interpreted as a confirmation of Russia's prominent place on the foreign policy agenda of the Obama administration. In this perspective Moscow was pleased by the signals sent out by the new administration with regard to the resumption of the START negotiations, the reassessment of the missile defence scheme in Europe and the stated intention of the US to ratify the CTBT in conjunction with the vision by President Obama of a nuclear weapon free world.

#### RF – EU

While the US is considered by Russia as the first address for a strategic partnership in the EU is not perceived as a player in the first league. The lack of a coherent EU Russia policy, the deficiencies of the ESDP and the poor coordination of the EU-CFSP contribute to the prevailing view that the EU is not - or not yet - an actor of global reach and influence. This impression has not fundamentally changed irrespective of the pro-active intervention of President Sarkozy as the acting President of the EU-Council to broker a cease fire agreement in the recent Georgia-Russia confrontation. In a recent commentary for the ECFR Timothy Garton Ash expressed the view that "much of the Russian foreign policy elite treats the EU as a kind of transient, post-modern, late 20<sup>th</sup> Century anachronism: flawed in principle and

feeble in practice. What matters, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as in the 19<sup>th</sup>, is the muscle and determination of great powers. And so Russia has been trying to restore the country's dominance over its neighbours by hook and by crook – whether by sending in troops (as last August, in Georgia) or by turning off the gas (as in January this year, in its dispute with Ukraine).” I share this observation.

### RF – NATO

In the eyes of the Russian leadership NATO is a different story. From the Russian vantage point NATO is primarily viewed as a US dominated military alliance whose right to exist has vanished after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the end of the Soviet Union. The continued existence of NATO and its transformation into a globally acting security organization are looked at with utmost mistrust. Irrespective of its proclaimed objectives NATO is considered by Moscow as a military organization with an overt anti-Russian design. In this thinking NATO enlargement is seen as a strategy to encircle and isolate Russia challenging her security interests in the post-Soviet space. The concept of the “near abroad” falls in this category. The last rounds of NATO's eastward enlargement painfully reminded Russia of her diminished influence in Eastern Europe as most member states of the demised Warsaw Pact and even parts of the territory of the former Soviet Union (the Baltic States) joined the Atlantic Alliance. The efforts to admit both Georgia and Ukraine into NATO are anathema to Russia. Russia's participation in the NATO-RF Council and in the PfP programme does not express a genuine interest in a cooperative relationship with NATO but rather serves as a necessary tool to influence NATO's decision making process in matters which are of concern to Russia.

The Russian elite have not yet digested the loss of the super-power status associated with the USSR. Russia is still suffering from the phantom pain of the lost empire. In recent years with the boom of the oil and gas industry Russia thought it could recapture its lost world power status in the economic field. The dependence of Western Europe from Russian oil and gas deliveries has largely contributed to the increasingly assertive and aggressive posture of Russia over the last years. It remains to be seen whether the impact of the world economic crisis on Russia will dampen the feelings of “we are back”.

Another element of the new Russian identity has to do with the nationalist trend that has re-emerged in Russian politics. Putin as former President and now as Prime Minister is the chief architect of a new Russian patriotism that seems to be rather appealing to large segments of

Russian society. Putin is largely responsible for promoting the vision of a strong state and of traditional Russian values as fostered by the Russian Orthodox Church. The Western type of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights does no longer seem to be the dominant social model of the Russian policy establishment. I think one should not underestimate the changed climate deriving from this new distinctly Russian approach to public affairs.

Obviously the proud self-perception of the Russian policy establishment does not correspond to the harsh Russian realities. Whether Russia is indeed a world power remains an open question. Its economic clout largely depends on the sale of its natural resources. The current economic crisis has demonstrated if need there be how vulnerable Russia's economy is indeed. Contrary to the announcements of the opposite the military are chronically underfinanced and not in a position to act on a global scale. And then there is the demographic time bomb that is ticking. According to serious estimates the population of Russia continues to decline dramatically. In 2050 Russia will probably count no more than 100 million inhabitants if the current demographic trend continues.

### Three suggestions for a sound policy toward Russia

- (1) The EU needs to develop a unified and coherent Russia policy. Such a policy does not exist yet. The EU member states need to define and defend their interests vis-à-vis Russia in a coherent and manner. As of now there are divergent views and different approaches of major member states in relation to Russia on key issues such as energy security, NATO enlargement, the US missile defence scheme or Russia's ambiguous attitude on the Iranian nuclear project. Whereas some member states keep dealing with Russia on these matters on a bilateral basis thus confirming Russia's view that the CFSP is a lame animal the problem also consists in a lack of consensus on how to deal with the Russians in these matters. In general a soft position toward Russia seems to take precedence over a more robust response to Russian behaviour. Numerous examples may be cited to illustrate this state of affairs (e.g. the RF-Ukraine gas conflict, the Russian Georgia invasion, the debate on the US missile defence project etc.). Lacking clarity and cohesion it seems to me that the EU usually settles on the lowest common lowest denominator when it comes to dealing with Russia on hot security issues. In order to develop a more ambitious Russia policy the EU needs to have an effective European energy policy diminishing its dependence from Russian oil and gas deliveries. The second challenge for the EU is to define a vision for countries

such as Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. The Eastern European dimension of the EU needs to be further developed with the ultimate goal of integrating these countries in the EU as full members in the future when the time is ripe and the Copenhagen criteria are met. Of course this is a long term perspective. But one should speak about it already now. The vision of admission to the EU would boost political reforms in these countries and provide them with an attractive perspective. So far one is left with the impression that the definition of an EU strategy towards these countries is subordinated to the overriding EU-Russia relationship.

- (2) The second suggestion concerns the need for better coordination between the partners of the Atlantic alliance in shaping their Russia policy. The series of proposals of the Obama administration concerning Russia encapsulated in the expression of the “Reset Button” does not appear to be fully harmonized with the EU or with NATO. Given the lack of a clear and consistent EU-Russia policy this is not surprising. The Europeans were taken over by the firework of proposals by the new US administration. Obviously they lost the initiative in the big bargain and missed the chance to take the lead in shaping and carrying out an ambitious Russia strategy of their own. A better coordination and harmonisation of the Russia agenda on both sides of the Atlantic is now a matter of priority.
- (3) My third suggestion for a new and innovative Russia policy would be to address the Russian civil society at large and not to stick to the government only. Contacts to and exchanges with all segments of the Russian society should be furthered. Travel restrictions for Russians should be lifted to the extent possible. Communication and partnerships should be promoted at all levels. I was truly impressed by the video message addressed by President Obama to the Iranian people. Something similar should be done in relation to Russia. I am convinced that exchange programmes and direct contacts between the citizens of the EU and of Russia can do more to foster relations between the two than communiqués written by politicians at EU-Russia summits. Especially the younger generation in Russia thirsts for contacts with western partners. Getting to know and to understand each other better may be the best instrument of security policy one can think of.