

Russia proposes new organization of European states

Niall Green

9 December 2009

President Dmitri Medvedev of Russia issued a statement on his official website November 29 calling for a new European organization to replace the existing structures of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The Russian proposal was timed to precede the annual OSCE conference, held in Athens December 1-2, and a NATO-Russia meeting in Brussels on December 4. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov used the meetings to promote the Kremlin initiative, insisting that the end of the Cold War meant that new security structures had to be developed.

The Russian side threatened to cancel the Brussels meeting if Medvedev's new security treaty proposals were not included in the agenda. Speaking three days prior to the meeting, Russian Ambassador to NATO Dmitri Rogozin said that his country faced a "moment of truth" in relations with NATO and implied that the US and its allies were trying to block Moscow's proposals due to a "Cold War psychology."

"Shutting themselves into a little Western house, shuttering the windows, and believing they live in a state of security won't work," Rogozin told Russian television. "Trying to make decisions with such sectarian methods, without taking Russia's interests and opinions into account, won't work."

Seeking to avoid a diplomatic incident, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen made a vague statement the following day offering some discussion: "My aim as chair of the NATO-Russia Council is that we will be able to agree to a joint review of the 21st century threats and challenges, that we will set out a concrete work plan where we will do more together to face those threats, to the mutual benefit of all countries within the NATO-Russia Council."

The move by Russia is seen by many commentators as an attempt to limit the power of the United States in Europe. Moscow is particularly concerned by the prospect of an expansion of the US-led military alliance NATO into the former-Soviet countries Ukraine and Georgia.

While the prospect of a radical restructuring of the post-World War II European structures is unlikely at present, the Kremlin hopes that it can take advantage of the relative decline of the US and divisions between Washington and its European allies in order to advance its ambitions as a major power.

In January 2010 Kazakhstan takes over the rotating presidency of the OSCE. It is widely expected that Moscow will use its strong

influence in the former-Soviet republic to push its proposals for a new security arrangement at that time.

Medvedev reportedly first discussed his intention to propose a new European treaty during a trip to Germany in June 2008. Speaking in Berlin, the Russian leader claimed, "Europe's problems won't be solved until its unity is established, an organic wholeness of all its integral parts, including Russia." He called the United States, the European Union, and the Russian Federation the "three branches of European civilization."

Criticizing the eastward expansion of NATO and the extension of its operations into Afghanistan, Medvedev stated that the US was "trying to globalize the alliance's mission, including by encroaching on the prerogatives of the UN and attracting new members. It's clear that won't solve the tasks at hand."

The Kremlin's proposal was developed in subsequent speeches in France and, earlier this year, at the University of Helsinki. During the address in Finland, Medvedev called for a new transatlantic security conference, dubbed "Helsinki Plus", in reference to the 1975 agreement between the Soviet Union, the US and the European powers reached in the city that led to the establishment of the OSCE.

Medvedev included few details in these earlier statements, but the Kremlin's most recent call represents a stepping-up of its efforts to take advantage of the increasingly divided NATO alliance. NATO was established in the aftermath of the Second World War under conditions of undisputed US hegemony in Western Europe. With the relative decline of US power over the past three decades, and growing tensions between Washington and its European rivals, especially Germany, Moscow hopes to gain a greater say in the geopolitics of Eurasia.

In the latest Kremlin statement on a new European security treaty, Russia has demanded that there should be a proscription of "the development of military alliances to harm the security of other members of the treaty" while "any idea of alliances and groups of states would be left at the door." This is a clear rebuke of NATO expansion into the former-USSR and a call for the creation of a security bloc of individual states in Europe that would preclude a role for the US-led military bloc.

"Atlanticism as a single basis for security has exhausted itself," Medvedev's website stated. "No state or international organization can have the exclusive right to maintaining peace and stability in Europe."

The Russian proposal to hold talks on a new security forum

involving all 27 European Union (EU) countries and the US received little support in 2008, but during a NATO-Russia meeting in May the idea was cautiously welcomed by France, Germany and Italy.

Speaking to reporters during the Athens OSCE meeting, Bernard Kouchner, France's foreign minister, stated that Russia's proposal for a new security treaty should be taken seriously. "We have just received two days ago [November 29] the framework of a treaty coming out from our Russian friends," Kouchner said. "We have to take Medvedev's proposal very carefully. France has already done so."

Responding to the move by the so-called "core" EU states to diplomatically engage Moscow over a new security arrangement, a group of more pro-US NATO members comprising Eastern European countries and led by Britain and Canada advocated a discussion on the Russian proposals within the context of reforming the OSCE. Washington has maintained a public silence on the Kremlin's proposals, not seeking to initiate an open dispute, while it is doubtless working with its closest allies to marginalize Russian demands.

There can be little doubt that the Kremlin is fully aware of the rising tensions between the NATO allies and is looking to develop avenues for future cooperation with some of the alliance's members, especially those such as France and Germany that have increasingly close economic ties to Russia and disagreements with Washington. The differences were expressed most clearly in the run-up to the war in Iraq in 2003 where Paris, Berlin and Moscow came together to publicly opposed the Bush administration's drive to war.

Despite the Kremlin's diplomatic bluster in the days leading up to the NATO-Russia meeting in Brussels, Russia has indicated its willingness to work with NATO. At an informal pre-meeting on the Greek island of Corfu in June, Lavrov assured his NATO counterparts that Russia was willing to resume political dialogue and cooperation "no matter what winds blow."

While Moscow is deeply concerned about US ambitions in Eurasia, and is opposed to the further eastward expansion of NATO, it has long been a goal of the post-Soviet Russian elite to strike a deal with the US that grants Russia a role as a regional power in the former Soviet sphere. In pursuit of this end, Moscow has made repeated efforts to aid US imperialism in anticipation of a quid pro quo from Washington.

However, Russian support for the US "War on Terror" following the 9/11 attacks, including practical support for the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, failed to win Moscow any concessions. On the contrary, Washington intensified its efforts to roll-back the influence of the Kremlin in the region by sponsoring pro-US "color revolutions" in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004/5). It also pushed ahead with a missile defense shield based in former Warsaw Pact countries Poland and the Czech Republic that Moscow consider to pose a threat to its ballistic arsenal.

Faced with a deepening crisis for the US armed forces in Afghanistan, combined with the ongoing occupation of Iraq by over 100,000 American troops, the new administration of Barack Obama has concluded that US imperialism needs to court some support from its rivals, including Russia.

In order to gain Moscow's aid in the current surge of US troops into Afghanistan, including an agreement in principal to fly equipment over Russian airspace, Washington has made limited concessions to the Kremlin, including scrapping its proposed missile shield bases in Eastern Europe.

For the Russian elite, this represents an opportunity to press home its ambitions to secure for itself a great role in the "Great Game" of Eurasian politics through some restructuring of the post-war security set-up, from which Moscow might expect, at the least, a means to halt the expansion of NATO.

The Russian elite has close economic ties to the EU, and to the German bourgeoisie in particular. The Nordstream natural gas pipeline from Russia to Germany, due to open next year, is an example of the burgeoning trade and geopolitical ties between the two countries, with Russia supplying much of Germany's energy needs. Last week, during a state visit to Italy, Medvedev and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi oversaw the signing of an agreement between Russian, Italian and French energy companies to construct a major new gas pipeline, dubbed South Stream, from Russia, through the Balkans, to Italy and Austria.

Both major Russian-backed pipeline networks are seen as rivals to US-backed plans for energy routes in Europe, with Nordstream circumventing pro-American Eastern European countries Poland and the Baltic States, while South Stream is a direct rival to the Nabucco pipeline that Washington has backed as a means to export Central Asian natural gas while bypassing Russia.

However, Russian efforts to strike agreements with the European powers are tempered by the fact that they are rivals for control of markets and resources in Eurasia. EU governments and energy companies have hedged their bets on oil and gas pipelines, backing both Russian-led and US-supported routes. And while France and Germany are wary of the expansion of NATO into Ukraine and Georgia, concerned about antagonizing Moscow and introducing more US client states into the alliance, they do not want to see a reinvigorated Kremlin exercising its power in a region they too seek to plunder.

Faced with a debacle for the US and NATO in Afghanistan, the European powers have, like Russia, made a deal with Washington. The EU members of NATO are pledging more troops to the Afghan war in order to avert a historic defeat for imperialism that threatens their own predatory ambitions in the energy-rich regions of the Caspian Basin and the Arabian Gulf.

Such deals between the major powers cannot, however, disguise the growing tensions between them. In the scramble for control over the world's major energy deposits and pipeline routes, new alliances and conflicts between the main protagonists will emerge.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact