

Europe Should Be Careful of Smiling Bears

By [Janusz Onyszkiewicz](#)

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Remember the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, aimed at enshrining “commonly shared values” between Russia and the European Community? Signed in 1994, during the hopeful early days of Russia’s first-ever democracy, the agreement was bolstered in 1999 by the creation of the European Union’s Common Security Defense Policy.

Both sides often refer to this desire to forge closer relations as a “strategic partnership.” But as French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel meet President Dmitry Medvedev in Deauville, France, on Tuesday, it would be wise to recognize that the Kremlin seems to be changing the terms of this nascent relationship.

In the wake of Russia’s apparent departure from democratization during Vladimir Putin’s presidency and of the wars in Chechnya and Georgia, the European Union has adopted increasingly cautious language, sounding less optimistic about the prospects of a real partnership.

Thus, the European Security Strategy, adopted in 2004, says only the following: “We should continue to work for closer relations with Russia, a major factor in our security and prosperity. Respect for common values will reinforce progress towards a strategic partnership.”

Russia’s August 2008 invasion of Georgia produced a sterner variation: “No strategic partnership is possible if the values of democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law are not fully shared and respected.”

Russians, meanwhile, are struggling to reconcile their disparate views on Europe. Some profess to be “sick and tired of dealing with Brussels bureaucrats.” As Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the State Duma’s International Affairs Committee, put it, “In Germany, Italy, France, we can achieve much more.”

Kosachev and others do not believe that the EU is committed to serious talks on hard security. This is a Russian imperative — and with good reason. How to deal with Russia on security issues — particularly on energy security — is one of the most divisive issues facing the EU. Despite their commitment to speak to Russia with one voice, various EU countries negotiate with Russia bilaterally whenever possible (especially over lucrative business contracts), congregating under the EU umbrella only when necessary. That gives Russia great scope to play one country against another.

Russia, meanwhile, harbors deep disappointment with the West for its actions after communism’s collapse. During the era of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, it was assumed that the West would stick to the essence of its Cold War containment policies. Russians expected that once their country was seen to be no longer confrontational and expansionist, it would be treated as a legitimate partner, not as a defeated enemy. It would retain its status alongside the United States on the world stage, its territorial integrity would be unquestioned, and it would be left to manage its domestic affairs without outside interference or criticism.

Growing resentment toward the West has reinforced the Kremlin’s enduring penchant for the concepts of great global powers and spheres of influence, as well as the flawed belief that international relations is a zero-sum game in which others’ gain is Russia’s loss. Thus, Moscow cannot accept that more robust multilateral institutions, confidence, cooperation and interdependence could assure international security. On the contrary, Russia’s loss of superpower status is completely unacceptable.

Economic growth during the Putin years was combined with the defeat of Georgia, both of which were regarded in Russia as the beginning of a great political comeback. These two successes provided the confidence needed to try to remodel the trans-Atlantic security architecture. Medvedev’s proposed trans-Atlantic security treaty would enshrine the principle of avoiding external force to resolve national disputes, which would rule out international intervention in the conflicts affecting the North Caucasus, including Chechnya.

The status quo would be reinforced further by the principle that no country may increase its security to the detriment of another. But what remains unclear is who decides what is detrimental. Worse, the freedom to join military treaties, stipulated in the Helsinki Accords of 1975 and in other major international agreements like the Charter of Paris for a New Europe or the Charter for European Security, is ominously omitted. The expansion of military alliances,

such as NATO, would be declared a threatening measure.

Europe should react to this Russian proposal. It should first acknowledge that Russia has a critical role to play in trans-Atlantic security and that it should be treated not only with caution, but also with respect. At the same time, a range of institutions already deals with the issue: the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the NATO-Russia Council and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, to name only a few. These existing institutions might need to be reinvigorated and fortified, but there is no need for more of them.

Second, the principle of the indivisibility of European and U.S. security, so fundamental during the Cold War, remains valid. Security initiatives should therefore first be discussed bilaterally within the NATO-EU framework. Only then should a common position be presented at the OSCE. Speaking to Russia with one voice is absolutely essential.

Third, the idea implicit in Medvedev's plan — that Russia should have veto power over all security-related decisions of NATO or the EU — must be rejected. Given that Russia's own new military doctrine presents NATO as the country's top potential danger, its leaders can logically claim that NATO enlargement undermines Russian security.

Russia should nonetheless be consulted on all major security issues. NATO-Russia consultation during the drafting of the latest NATO Strategic Concept is a good example — an approach that Russia itself rejected before adopting its new military doctrine. Consultations on Medvedev's security plan should also include other former Soviet-bloc countries, such as Ukraine.

The best way to proceed on the Medvedev plan would be an OSCE declaration similar to the one adopted in Istanbul in 1999 — that is, a political resolution, not a legally binding treaty.

According Russia more formal recognition as a great power might help EU and U.S. efforts to engage its leaders in a serious security dialogue. But no treaty should be signed as long as the sincerity of Russia's commitment to the norms of international behavior remains in doubt.

Janusz Onyszkiewicz, a former Polish defense minister, is chairman of the Council of Euro-Atlantic Association. © Project Syndicate

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