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Lisbon's NATO Celebration Misses the Point

By Alexander Golts

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NATO diplomats promised the Russians that the summit of the NATO-Russia Council in Lisbon would go off without a hitch. They definitely kept their word. Summit participants announced a "historic breakthrough" in relations at least 10 times each on Saturday. They ceremoniously marked the official restoration of NATO-Russian relations after historical lows following the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008. Both sides approved a document spelling out a common understanding of national security threats. The declaration essentially called for all of the "good guys" to team up against all of the "bad guys."

But that's not all. NATO's 28 member states approved a new strategic concept for the alliance that says, among other things, "NATO is not a threat to Russia."

Then came the bombshell: NATO invited Moscow to participate in the European missile defense system. And President Dmitry Medvedev not only accepted the invitation, but he even shared his vision of the system.

Medvedev's celebratory mood was not even spoiled by the presence of Russia's Public Enemy No. 1 — Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili — or the inclusion in the final summit declaration of a demand that Russia withdraw its recognition of the independence of Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

There is just one problem: This celebration of mutual understanding is completely worthless. There have already been a number of such celebrations: Recall the NATO Russia Founding Act that former President Boris Yeltsin signed in 1997 and the NATO-Russia Council that then-President Vladimir Putin helped establish in 2002. There inevitably comes a day when all such agreements are thrown into the trash heap and Moscow's relations with NATO revert to their usual less-than-satisfactory levels. That happened in 1999 when NATO initiated military operations in Yugoslavia and again in 2008 following the Russia-Georgia war.

The reason, of course, is that Russia and NATO have serious and deep points of contention that cannot be eliminated simply by signing a "historic" declaration. When drafting bilateral or multilateral statements, the provisions over which signatories disagree are usually written in parentheses, with the idea that they will eventually be replaced with phrasing that all participants can agree on.

But there is another approach where points of contention are simply removed from the final draft and left to be dealt with at a later date. That is apparently the approach used by Russian and NATO diplomats who were obviously instructed by their respective governments to produce yet another "diplomatic breakthrough" for the Lisbon summit.

A year ago, the NATO secretary-general suggested conducting a joint assessment of threats. Toward this end, it would be helpful if during high-level discussions — and not joint declarations — Moscow explained to its partners why NATO ranks first among the main external military dangers listed in its 2010 military doctrine. That document describes the threat as "the desire to endow the force potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with global functions carried out in violation of the norms of international law and to move the military infrastructure of NATO member countries closer to the borders of the Russian Federation, including by expanding the bloc." In this way, negotiations could attempt to ascertain which guarantees Russia would require to cease considering NATO expansion as a security threat.

Nothing of the sort happened. Diplomats took the easiest approach for preparing a document for the Lisbon summit. They discussed only the security threats that both sides already hold similar positions on in an attempt to fix that near-agreement in writing. As a result, the document refers to the same tired old themes as before: the fight against international terrorism, protecting the freedom of navigation, the fight against maritime piracy, the threat emanating from Afghanistan, and the protection of critical infrastructure from terrorist attacks and man-made disasters, as well as the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons and missile technology. But the main question — why one side considers the actions of the other to be a significant threat — was left unanswered.

It is the same story with Russia's possible participation in the European missile defense system. Medvedev accompanied his agreement to participate in missile defense with stipulations that resembled a threat. It is not yet clear what exactly Medvedev meant when he

said that European missile defense should be "sectoral." I would venture to suggest that, by that plan, every country would be responsible for its own defense "sector." That would ensure the full equality of all the participants in the system. Of course, that would also make it extremely difficult to determine where the centralized command for a European missile defense system would be located.

At the same time, Medvedev has demanded that NATO accept Russia's conditions. "Our participation should be absolutely of that of equals. ... We either participate in full, exchange information and are responsible for solving this or that problem, or we don't participate at all," Medvedev said. "But if we don't participate at all, then we for obvious reasons will be forced to protect ourselves."

In effect, Medvedev is not speaking about Russia's participation in the European missile defense system but about the terms under which Moscow would cease to consider the system a threat.

And this is the main problem. With Russia refusing in principle to retract its assertion that NATO represents an imminent threat, Moscow's cooperation with the alliance is doomed to be limited in scope. That means any conflict situation that might arise — even if it is unrelated to issues of national security — will be expressed in terms of a military confrontation. That problem can be shoved between parentheses and ignored when composing the latest "historic" joint declaration. But without resolving this fundamental issue, all those declarations will remain nothing more than empty words on paper.

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