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Forget NATO, Russia's Got Bigger Problems

By Judy Dempsey

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Relations between Russia and NATO have been strained for a long time — long before the start of the crisis in Ukraine. In April 2008, President Vladimir Putin attended the NATO summit in Bucharest. The atmosphere among the allies was tense. The United States' outgoing Bush administration had wanted NATO leaders to offer the Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine. That would have put them on a direct path to joining NATO.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former French President Nicolas Sarkozy were adamantly against such a move. They didn't want to provoke Russia.

Berlin and Paris argued, unofficially of course, that if Georgia and Ukraine were to eventually join NATO, would most members really be prepared to defend them if they were attacked by Russia? The answer then was no, as it is today.

Five months after the Bucharest summit, Russia invaded Georgia and during a short war wrenched the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia.

There was the usual handwringing by the West. But not long afterward, it was business as usual with Russia, as if the West had not grasped Putin's agenda.

The Kremlin's agenda, then as now, is to prevent both NATO and the European Union from encroaching on former Soviet states.

And if that means using military forces to prevent that from happening, as the case of Georgia showed, then so be it.

After all, since the West didn't really care about Russia declaring the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, why shouldn't Putin take the same risk with part of Ukraine?

Ukraine is different. Because, whether European leaders accept it or not, the EU is now in direct competition with Russia over the future of the lands straddling the EU and Russia.

The Poles, Balts, Swedes, Finns and Norwegians know full well what that entails and so does Germany's Merkel. It means deciding once and for all whether to support — in a much more sustained and strategic way — Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in their aspirations to join Europe. Even Belarus might be added to the list in the future.

For these countries, the future lies in joining the structures of the EU and NATO.

In short, this is about completing the political, economic and social transformations of these countries that have so often faltered since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991.

Yet the NATO summit that will take place in Cardiff on Sept. 4 to 5 is ill-prepared to begin the process to help these countries complete that transformation.

Of course, NATO can provide training and technical assistance to those countries so they can reform the civil-military relationship and help them cooperate with NATO and even take part, as Georgia did, in the NATO military mission in Afghanistan.

But it stops there. What Putin understands perfectly well is that NATO is not going to provide military assistance to Ukraine even as it loses more territory to the Russian-backed.

Instead, NATO will beef up the defenses of Poland and the Baltic states through more rigorous and regular training sessions. NATO too intends to have more agile and flexible forces in the region that will be deployed within days, if necessary.

But it will not deploy, on a permanent basis, troops and garrisons, logistics and any command and control centers in these countries. Despite this, there is little doubt that if Russia did threaten or attack any NATO country, NATO would respond.

But the NATO strategy still leaves Eastern Europe highly vulnerable. The last thing that Poland, Sweden, Finland and the Baltics want is for Eastern Europe to be turned into a new cordon sanitaire. It would, in fact, create a new, divided and highly unstable Europe, which is why these countries are determined that the EU prevent this from happening.

NATO, for its part, is not equipped to prevent this from happening. It is hampered in two

ways. The first is that NATO members do not have a shared perception of threats. But the northern Europeans, Poles and Balts do share a common threat: Russia.

The southern Europeans understandably see radical Islam as the bigger threat. Britain and France understand the threats facing Europe, but their leaders are hamstrung by domestic crises instead of articulating these threats to their NATO allies.

As for the U.S., President Barack Obama must wish that the Ukraine crisis was out of his in-tray, which is why he has left most of the diplomatic running up to Merkel.

Which brings us to Germany. On Sept. 1, in a highly unusual move, Merkel addressed the German parliament to explain why Germany had to send weapons to the Kurds in order to halt the slaughter of civilians by the Islamic State fighters in northern Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic State is a "threat to Germany," she told parliament members.

This is a huge shift in German thinking, which, with few exceptions over the years, has shirked its responsibilities when it comes to security issues.

But when it comes to Ukraine, Merkel so far has ruled out sending military assistance to Ukraine and instead focused on high-level diplomacy and sanctions in an attempt to change Putin's mind. But both have failed.

Second, NATO is also hampered by a lack of consensus over deterrence. It was so easy during the Cold War when the enemy was clearly defined and deterrence was a given. NATO knew where it stood.

Today, as it winds down its huge military mission in Afghanistan and has time to take a hard look at its own neighborhood, it is becoming increasingly clear that NATO is not yet prepared to deal with the threats in its eastern and southern neighborhoods.

This is despite the fact that the outgoing NATO secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, has repeatedly spoken about an "arc of instability" around Europe.

He has repeatedly warned Russia that it would suffer the consequences after Putin's decision in March to invade and then annex Crimea, Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine and Putin's call for immediate talks on "statehood" of southern and eastern Ukraine, or Novorossia.

But it is clear that so far Western sanctions and NATO's threats and rhetoric are no deterrence when it comes to thwarting Putin's ambitions.

What could deter him is his own combustible southern flank and Islamic State, which Russia would be very unwise to ignore. It is these threats that are far, far more dangerous to Russia than NATO's limited intentions in Poland and the Baltic states.

These threats are also more dangerous than the EU, whose openness has hugely profited Russian companies and ordinary Russian citizens.

If Putin thinks NATO and the EU are his big threats, competitors and enemies, he hasn't seen

anything yet.

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