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Russia, NATO, and Ukraine: The Return of Spheres of Influence

By Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

Recent tensions between Russia and NATO are not just about Ukraine or Putin's ostensible great power phantasies. They are about a restructuring of European security order, including security guarantees for Russia which compel us to once again think about spheres of influence.

COMMENTARY

TENSE RUSSIA-UKRAINE relations are not new. Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and has since continued to back separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region. In December 2021, the world noticed Moscow's deployment of more than 100,000 Russian troops, raising suspicions over a potential invasion of Ukraine.

Ever since, the United States and its NATO partners, perhaps most simplified as "the West", are at heightened alert. Ridiculing President Putin's great power phantasies or his ostensible fear of NATO is Western hypocrisy. Of course Putin does not fear the defence organisation NATO as a direct security threat because the aggressor here is evidently Moscow.

What Does Putin Really Want?

Nonetheless, the West has not paid sufficient attention to Russian security demands in the recent past. Putin has not always been opposed to NATO, but for two decades, he has requested that Russia must be an equal partner in rearranging the post-Cold War European security architecture.

In particular, Russia seeks to keep the now more or less independent former Soviet

Republics as Russia's sphere of influence. Ukraine is of particular importance due to its strategic location and long history of being part of the Russian Empire and USSR.

In 2001, Putin [articulated](#) this request in the German Bundestag, and he [repeated](#) himself at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, albeit in much harsher terms by then. All such requests received widespread support in Europe in-principle, only to be ignored thereafter.

So in reality, the West knows the price for an accommodation with Moscow put an end to NATO expansion and involve Russia in the design of Eastern European security, which means de facto accepting Russian influence in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood.

Spheres of Influence: Not a Cold War Relict

It is good that the US, France and Germany, as well as NATO are talking to Russia in earnest and at eye-level again. Given European history and the great role Russia has in it, this should be a matter-of-course. The impression that it needed Russian force is unfortunate.

It is equally unfortunate that red herrings dominate the debate: Moscow seeks to undermine the European Union and NATO; Putin fears not NATO missiles but democracy.

NATO never expanded eastwards but many former Warsaw Pact countries sought to move westwards because they (correctly) identify Moscow as the source of their insecurity, especially since the Russian war against Georgia in 2008 and the 2014 annexation of Crimea. If it is Russia's intention to bind former Soviet Republics, it is not doing a great job at it.

All these arguments are correct but are besides the point. As painful as it is after decades of peaceful institutionalised integration in Europe, the real debate must once again be about spheres of influence. Living next to a giant who interprets international relations as every great power has done throughout history, requires an appreciation that the European model of regional integration and collective security is exclusively that: European.

It is the nature of international relations that the most consequential powers seek their own path and demand spheres of influence, buffer zones of exclusive influence. The US has it in the Western Hemisphere, the EU established it by peaceful means of neighbourhood integration, and indeed Russia de facto has it in the Caucasus and along its Central Asian borders.

Accepting this is not appeasement but a realistic view on international relations.

A New European Joint Security Order

NATO is for now [committed](#) to upholding its open door policy. This should be revised. The logical consequence of a recognition of a Russian sphere of influence is ruling out further NATO expansion. This is not simply giving in to Russian demands at the barrel

of the gun but a realistic acceptance that further expansion would not increase but decrease Europe's geopolitical security.

Russia is the aggressor and Moscow's actions are deeply objectionable. However, a geopolitical symbolism such as ruling out NATO membership of Ukraine and Georgia will get Europe out of the current escalation spiral.

And it is indeed symbolism, for expansion is currently not on NATO's agenda anyway, and no ally will go to war with Russia over Ukraine. Nor is there an automatism for expansion. Allies decide case-by-case with unanimity and for the foreseeable future, Germany and others are not going to support expansion.

Alas, with spheres of influence come buffer zones, and Ukraine will have to become one. This cannot be negotiated without Kiev. A power-concert carve-up of Eastern Europe, as in 1939, must not be repeated. Kiev must be part of a neutralisation process, comparable to Austria in 1955, including strict conditions, obligations, and guarantees attached.

This concession would be painful to accept for many Ukrainians and Europeans, including this author, and for many in Washington, who persistently fail to grasp the diverse range of European perspectives on continental security.

But in final consequence, this would be the least painful arrangement. It can help to create a basis for more fundamental talks with Russia about a new, joint European security order, and to hopefully work on and towards mutual interests, of which there are many.

It is a cliché but true: peace in Europe can only be maintained with, not against Russia.

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