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Medvedev's Presidency – implications for NATO's future relations with Russia.

Since the famous characterization of what Winston Churchill, maybe mischievously, termed 'Russia', as 'a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma', nearly sixty nine years have passed; that just sixty nine years would prove to be exactly the life span of the USSR, I think that we can agree, would have come as a surprise to the British statesman in 1939, as indeed it did to so many of us just over half a century later. In discussing the implications of Medvedev's presidency for NATO's future relations with Russia, I will take, as a starting point, an admittedly controversial judgment that the Soviet Union was brought down, not, as many in the West would maintain, by President Reagan, NATO intransigency and Star Wars, nor even by *perestroika* or 'democratization', but by Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*, the very openness that Vladimir Putin appeared bent on eradicating between 2000 and 2008 as he moved Russia back along more traditional authoritarian lines in order to overcome the widespread chaos and insecurity of the 1990's. I would argue further that it is disingenuous to ignore the fact that the overwhelming majority of Russians today connect openness – which we in the West see as the very life-blood of our civic, democratic and free societies – as a major cause of unprecedented national humiliation, enfeeblement and instability. On the contrary, it is my firm belief that these differing perceptions of openness should be factored into any formulation of an effective NATO policy toward its former long-standing adversary.

Churchill's key to the 'Russian' riddle was its 'national interest'. Now in 2008, academics, diplomats, journalists, military specialists and politicians are engaged in an intense debate over the implications of what is arguably the first voluntary handover of supreme executive power in more than a thousand years of Russian history by an apparently healthy and relatively young leader to his chosen successor. As Putin formally vacates the presidency for his protégé Dmitri Medvedev, textbooks on the almost forgotten art of 'Kremlinology' are being dusted down, consulted and updated in an attempt to discover in which direction is Russia now likely to head and what will the implications be for relations with the West in general and NATO in particular.

My contribution before you today seeks to revisit this riddle by using appropriate analytical tools to look deeper into Russia's national interest and examine what I perceive to be the dilemma lurking therein. At the same time I will look at a parallel dilemma facing NATO in formulating its own interests vis-à-vis Russia in the short, medium and long term. I have identified these dilemmas, to which I will return in more detail later, as, on the Russian side, national interest perceived as either great power status (as envisaged in Putin's 2020 strategy paper) or a modern, democratic 'European' state (as advocated by Russian 'democrats' and human rights activists). Let me put my cards on the table from the outset and declare that I am with the 'democrats' on this, although I am only too aware that this view is by no means shared by the Russian population as a whole, let alone Putin or Medvedev, and that even were this desirable outcome to materialize, as we shall see, problems would still remain.

On NATO's side, there is the fall-out stemming from the characterization of both the war in Iraq and the 'war on terror' as battles between 'good' and 'evil'. This has damaged significantly the Western concept of 'democracy' within, but especially outside, the alliance. Coupled with this is a perceptible and growing recognition that a Western-style parliamentary democracy may well be (as Medvedev has already articulated in public pronouncements since being elected) inconsistent with the maintenance of the territorial integrity of Russia as it is presently constituted. This dichotomy leads to a situation in which pressure from NATO that appears to push Russia down the road to 'democracy' will be perceived in the Kremlin as a threat not only to its security, but to its very existence. In other words, the continued promotion of democracy by NATO in the former Soviet Union will inevitably clash with the current perceived priorities of the Kremlin. My argument is that such clashes need not and should not automatically lead to conflict.

Rather than retread the well-worn path of the chequered history of NATO-Russian relations I propose to share with you today conclusions drawn from my more than forty years of close engagement, on both a personal and professional level, with first the Soviet Union and then Russia in an attempt to view these relations from a Russian perspective filtered through the prism of the mind of a citizen of the West (and, insofar as I was just three when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was founded, I suppose that one could say, a child of NATO).

I do this not in any way to justify the actions and policies of, or plead special treatment for, Russia, let alone to criticize, preach to or lecture those of you here who are charged with the delicate and demanding task of handling relations with NATO's eastern neighbour. What I seek to offer you is an understanding of these genuine dilemmas facing both Russia and NATO so that, at the very least, relations are not unintentionally and needlessly exacerbated. At best, I hope that elements of what is in danger of becoming evermore a zero-sum game can be transformed into an empathetic recognition of the mutual interests and intentions of both sides, upon which reasoned and understandable policies may be based. Why is this needed at the present juncture? Because, in my judgment, NATO and Russia stand currently at the entrance of an impasse into which neither side wishes to enter but into which both are in danger of being inexorably drawn due to mutual distrust, misperceptions and unresolved dilemmas.

For example, let us accept both NATO's repeated assertion that its expansion eastwards represents no threat to Russia and the realistic assessment that Russia no longer poses any immediate military danger to the 'old' members of the North Atlantic alliance. This would be all well and good were it not for the fact that the very countries in Eastern Europe that are most anxious to seek shelter behind NATO's shield (be it missile or otherwise) DO perceive a real, present or potential, threat from a resurgent Russia seeking to reassert itself in its 'near abroad'; thus recreating from the Baltics to the Balkans and from the Caucasus to Crimea a classical security dilemma from the days of the Cold War. Small wonder, therefore, that NATO retains, for Russian leaders

and led alike, 'the worst image of all influential international organizations'. Widespread popular condemnation of US/NATO actions in Kosovo, Iraq and over missile defence has led to a vision of the West from Russia that is markedly different from how we would wish to be viewed. Unsurprisingly, therefore, as recently as August 2007, 56% of Russians polled identified NATO as 'a hostile bloc', whereas at about the same time the European Union (which appears to present economic opportunities rather than threats to the Russians) was viewed favorably by nearly two-thirds of the same population.

It seems to me that to attempt to assuage such strongly-held expressions of popular distrust by promising the furthering of 'democracy' in a country where the adjective 'Western' in the 1990's was soon replaced in everyday discourse by 'cursed' in relation to democracy (for the reasons above), is self-evidently a sterile strategy in need of urgent re-examination if unnecessary conflict is to be avoided. In other words, the cognitive consonance produced in our own societies by such concepts as 'democracy' (and, in certain contexts, NATO) currently produces a corresponding cognitive dissonance in Russia. Of course, this is not to suggest that we should forego either democracy or NATO just in order to appease Russia. Rather that both, to be effective, should be configured, and presented, in such a way as to increase the perceived advantages for, and decrease the perceived threats to, not only the Russian president and people but also, I would argue, the populations of present and prospective members of the organization. For, as was revealed at NATO's Bucharest summit in April this year, not only was there clear evidence of a lack of unanimity over NATO expansion, but there were signs also that the public in NATO member countries appeared to be confused and surprised by the ease and haste with which new members were accepted.

Perhaps, in retrospect, an opportunity was lost in the 1990's when, with the eradication of the Soviet military threat, the refocusing of NATO to the promotion and defence of democratic values was not accompanied by a change of name. This could have opened the way to eventual membership, should Russia have elected to persevere with the far from easy transition from authoritarian regime to democratic rule in the wake of such Western countries as Portugal and Spain and those of Central and Eastern Europe, such as the Czech Republic, Poland and the Baltic states. Instead, the rhetoric about 'sovereign' democracy emanating from the Kremlin notwithstanding, I think that we can agree that Putin has sought stability through less openness and more authoritarianism.

Whatever the division of powers between Putin and Medvedev, it is quite clear in the short term that there is little prospect of Russia remaining anything other than, at best, a semi-authoritarian regime with a single dominant party controlled by a single vertical of executive power. Although such regimes may provide stability in the short term they tend not to be as stable (in the face, for example, of a dramatic downturn in the economy due to a sharp fall in oil prices, major natural disasters etc.) as either one-party states or democracies. What they share with the former is a marked resistance to policies that might lead them to cross the threshold of democracy by allowing truly competitive elections. The relatively recent experience of the then maverick Yeltsin's

electoral victories over 'approved' communist party candidates in 1989 and 1990 serves as a stark warning of the unintended and unforeseen consequences that might flow from such a move. Hence the dichotomy of views on Russia's future direction between the current leadership and a considerable majority of its population on the one hand, which favours maintaining the territorial integrity of the Russian state as a Eurasian entity and the much smaller minority which sees Russian national interest best served by shedding the non-Russian territories acquired in the period of Tsarist and Soviet expansion and creating a smaller, modern European-style democratic nation-state.

Russia's dilemmas do not end there. Two-thirds of its territory (and much of its present and projected energy resources and mineral wealth) is located in Asia where not only is the population miniscule compared with those of its Asian neighbours, but also much of the territory is on land claimed, albeit nominally, by indigenous non-Russian ethnicities. To exacerbate matters, resurgent Russian nationalists from the extreme south-west to the far north-east, while appearing to regard the territories, for example, of Chechnya and Chukotka, with their riches in oil and gold respectively, as belonging to Russia, tend to treat the Chechens and Chukhchi as second-class citizens, at times as unwanted aliens. The trauma of 9/11 and the subsequent 'war on terror' notwithstanding, one has to note that tragically, the passivity and silence emanating from Western governmental institutions, including NATO, over the manifestly brutal treatment of the Chechens by the Russians during the 1994-6 and 1999-2006 conflicts hardly leaves much moral high ground from which the West might criticize Russia on its handling of ethnic minority issues. It inadvertently sends a message to the Russian authorities that intervention is undertaken not on issues of principle, but only when it suits the West's narrower interests. The lesson that both the Russian people and its leaders, unfortunately but understandably, have drawn from the Iraq war is that the United States (and by extension NATO) is prepared to launch massive attacks against weak states with much-needed resources, and is best deterred by a strategy of powerful military defence and multipolarity (hence the importance paid by the Kremlin to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization).

Clearly, it is not in the West's strategic interests (nor, as critics as diverse as Michael McFaul and Boris Nemtsov have indicated, in the economic interests of the Russian people) to actively facilitate any prolongation of a highly corrupt, clan-controlled political system in Russia, with its potentially dangerous nexus of crime, violence and the circumvention of the rule of law. An optimist might perceive Putin's choice of Medvedev, rather than a fellow *silovik* (from the military and security ministries), as his successor as an indication that the realization has dawned on the upper echelons of the Russian power elite that the greed and tenacity of such officials, reluctant to lose their source of seemingly unlimited riches and influence, stand in the way of the much-needed modernization of the Russian economy. As a younger man with little or no experience of working in the military/security or even communist party milieu and with a broader background in legal affairs and business than his predecessor, one can confidently predict that Medvedev, at

least, has the potential to be a force for change if he is given the freedom so to do. Whether even he would opt, or be allowed, to cross the line from centralized, authoritarian rule to democratic governance is much more doubtful in the short term. It is these difficult choices facing the world's largest country that create in turn dilemmas for NATO in its future relations with Russia.

The first dilemma for NATO might be whether a less corrupt, less than democratic, but predictable and stable Medvedev-style regime would be preferable to a situation in which Russia's abundant resources might fall into the hands of criminal or even terrorist elements or, indeed, China. The second dilemma concerns the identification of the optimum strategy for NATO expansion. Clearly, there is a danger in unnecessarily fast-tracking Georgia's and Ukraine's applications for membership to NATO. The Medvedev/Putin 'tandem' could well respond by pre-emptive interference in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, East Ukraine and Crimea. On the other hand, Russia must be given a clear and unambiguous signal that it has no veto on the democratic aspirations of these peoples and states. The effectiveness of such a signal, however, rests upon two assumptions: 1) that the admission of Georgia and Ukraine is presented as genuinely pro-openness and not anti-Russian; and 2) that there is unanimity between NATO members (and their populations) that the Georgian and Ukrainian people and governments are indeed ready and willing to make the full transition to open and democratic societies. For if overstretch can cause such problems in terms of popular support for governments within the European Union, it is unlikely that these self-same governments would be immune from widespread domestic criticism were NATO expansion to proceed at a faster pace than was considered as objectively necessary.

So where would such *realpolitik* leave the Russian supporters of a democratic nation state? If NATO and the West were to stand idly by, then the answer is clear; they would be in great danger of sharing the fate of the late Anna Politkovskaya and like-minded activists. Russia has voluntarily signed up as a member of European forums such as the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe; both committed to the observance of civil liberties and good governance. If Russia is allowed to breach the rules of these organizations with impunity, as in the aforementioned case of Chechnya, and if it can divide and thus rule influential member countries of these organizations by exercising its soft 'energy' power, then it is unlikely to heed warnings that it is not acceptable for contract killers or agents of the state to execute at home and abroad business competitors, dissidents, investigative reporters or political opponents without being held to account for such actions by the broader international community. However, these rules and guiding principles should not be held up as 'ours', but as 'civilization's' and those countries that are best-placed to observe them, including NATO members, must be seen to do so to avoid the charges of double standards and hypocrisy. I cannot be alone in detecting a potentially serious disconnect between those in civilian and military life who actively and ardently seek to uphold these principles and the oft times 'super' greed of the super rich and powerful that our own societies are producing.

This brings me to my final point. We should not shy away from examining the damage done to the West's reputation as the upholder of democratic principles wreaked by the war in Iraq, in particular, and the 'war on terror' in general. Despite its enormity, the damage is capable of repair. Having studied terrorism and counterterrorism practically from its first appearance almost forty years ago in July 1968, I would be among the last to deny the very real threat posed to democratic societies by terrorists. NATO members must anticipate and expect further such attacks. However, in my opinion, the threat has been blown out of all proportion. In life, if one is to undertake any risky venture, be it trekking the Sahara or exploring the Amazon, one takes sensible and appropriate precautions and then gets on with the task in hand. The overreaction to the threat purportedly posed by terrorism to the Western way of life, it seems to me at times, is like seeking to traverse the Amazon or the Sahara in a spacesuit within a sterilized bubble while armed to the teeth against every eventuality. Just what is the point of such an exercise?

After all, the strength of Western societies vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes is that we are open, free, and accountable. We are willing and able to counter might with right for all members of society, even those who consider themselves wealthy or powerful enough to avoid the responsibility. It seems indicative that the election for the next president of the United States is contested by a person of mixed race, a woman, and a former prisoner of war; a call for a return to some basic principles after the follies of unilateralism if ever I heard one. To my mind, the abandonment of the very principles that have served the cause of freedom and democracy so well within the NATO alliance since the last world war and the replacement of civic strength by the projection of mainly military power combined to produce a strategy that was always doomed to fail.

Never has there been a more urgent need for the democratic alliance of nations to unite under the single banner, not of fighting a 'war on terror', but in standing up to brutality, exploitation, injustice and oppression wherever they occur. That is what our citizens are good at; this is what they want to do. This is what those millions in countries deprived of these basic rights such as China, Russia and most of the developing world expect us to do on their behalf. Not because it is 'good', nor even because it is 'right', but because it works!

There is no stronger argument for the way of life that NATO seeks to uphold and protect than the demonstration effect on the rest of the world of a well-functioning, caring, humane and just society, mature enough to embrace diversity and honest enough to admit its own faults before criticizing the behaviour of nations who are not in step with us. Openness is infectious; North America and Western Europe have passed it on to Central and now Eastern Europe. States that built upon an imperial past or ambition by cementing a form of bureaucratic capitalism such as Russia and China may hold back the flood tide while improving incrementally the lot of their peoples in the short term, perhaps even the medium term. But in the long term the demonstration effect, if genuine and believable, will burst even these dams. Of

course, there might well be a very long wait indeed. Although the temptation to hasten the process will at times be great, it is always likely to be counterproductive.

Thus in conclusion, although it might appear at first glance that it is Russia that has to change its ways, it is my belief that this is best brought about by the West changing to better connect with the aspirations, beliefs and principles of its greatest single asset – its own, in the main, very decent citizens. For its part, the Russian people has provided human civilization with some of its greatest cultural and scientific achievements, from Alexander Pushkin to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, from Dmitri Mendeleev to Sergei Korolov, often under conditions of great personal or national sacrifice. What better way to repay that debt than by allowing the Russian people, in their time and their way, to begin to enjoy the fruits of a humane just and strong civic society, arguably the single greatest contribution that the West has made to humanity?

Much has been made of the link between Dmitri Medvedev's surname and the Russian word for 'bear', the traditional symbol in the West for the Russian nation. Many before me have pointed out that Russia, like the bear, will tend to go just as far as you let it, but, when faced with resistance stiff and determined enough, will tend to back off. I commenced this address with reference to Winston Churchill, so it is appropriate, perhaps, to remind ourselves in this city, above all others, that we are shortly to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the beginning of the Berlin Airlift, one of the most glorious pages of the Western alliance's contribution to freedom and democracy and one of the prime motivators for the foundation of NATO. So clear and unambiguous was the message delivered on that occasion, that even as undemocratic a dictator as Stalin was left in no doubt as to the West's resolve not to back down. Compared to the grizzly Caucasian brown bear that was Stalin, the leather-jacketed, Led Zeppelin-loving Medvedev might seem more like Winnie-the-Pooh, but appearances can be deceptive. The new Russian president, like his predecessor, is from the hero city of Leningrad, the siege of which formed one of the most glorious, albeit tragic, pages of Russian history. Medvedev will need similar clarity and lack of ambiguity from this side in our relations with him in differentiating NATO resolve in defending agreed principles from policies perceived as being directed simply at weakening Russia. Only then can the NATO-Russian relationship become one of cooperation and engagement, rather than confrontation. Thank you

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