

Choices and necessities of security policy for the 21st century

Plenary session IV at the 13th Annual Aleksanteri Conference
Helsinki, Finland

Choices and necessities of security policy for the 21st century

Plenary session IV at the 13th Annual Aleksanteri Conference

Helsinki, Finland

Chair:

Jyrki Iivonen, *Docent of International Relations, University of Helsinki*

Speakers:

Bettina Renz, *University of Nottingham*

Carolina Vendil Pallin, *FOI - Swedish Defence Research Agency*

Dmitry Danilov, *Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences*

The 13th Aleksanteri Conference was held in Helsinki from October 23rd to October 25th, 2013. The theme of the conference was “Russia and the World”, and presentations focused on Russia's foreign policy and its place in the international system. This report was produced for the Finnish Ministry of Defence from presentations made during plenary session IV on the 25^h of October. The views expressed in this report are an attempt to summarise those presentations, and remain the work of the authors.

Helsinki 9.12.2013

Hanna Smith

Christopher Rowley

Introduction

The fourth plenary session at the 13th Annual Aleksanteri Conference grappled with an array of issues related to Russian security challenges in the 21st century. The speakers addressed issues that ranged from military reform to domestic politics, from xenophobia to Russia-West strategic dialogue. These questions are particularly pertinent given recent developments in Russian security choices and circumstances. Putin has returned to the presidency, military reform is ongoing and the security environment is fraught with challenges.

Russian security policy choices are thus shaped by both internal and external factors. Military reform is shaped, for example, not only by challenges - a such as Central Asia -, but also by attitudes and developments in Russian domestic politics. Domestic stability remains as a top priority for Moscow, and the proliferation of new attitudes in Russian society creates new challenges. Thus questions related to the domestic effects of certain foreign and security issues – such as Ukraine or Chechnya – are increasingly significant for the Russian leadership.

However, the relationship between Russia and the West remains as the key determinant and context for making security policy. As a result of strategic contradictions, the rapprochement seems to be over. Russia is increasingly pursuing a pragmatist foreign and security policy and focusing on issues of hard security. The Russia-West relationship, in turn, is moulded by developments in geopolitics and the fabric of international society. In the 21st century, states such as China, Russia, India and Brazil are, to a growing extent, challenging the Western international order of the 1990s. As the center of gravity in global power gradually shifts eastwards, the resolution of this new power balance is likely to be one of the key questions in 21st century security.

The overarching question seems to be that of foresight: what kind of change should be anticipated in the Russian security framework, both regionally and globally, and how does this affect Russia's neighbours? In the realm of security, it seems to be especially true that threats arise unexpectedly, so the attempt to foresee them is as relevant as ever. In short, what are the choices and necessities of Russian security policy in the 21st century?

Analysis

Bettina Renz

The presentation deals with the issue of military reform in Russia, with a particular emphasis on technology, conscription and so-called “small wars”. The main argument is that, contrary to what seems like a consensus in contemporary discourse, Russia’s military reform has not failed to the extent that some claim. Furthermore, to the extent it has failed, the failures mirror similar shortcomings in the West. In other words, the failure in Russian military reform is not entirely a failure, nor is it an entirely Russian failure. The argument contrasts with the traditional view in the discourse: namely, that Russia’s military reform has failed, at least insofar as it is stuck in the Cold War era and thus does not reflect the new security agenda. By employing a broader frame of reference (instead of focusing just on Russia), failures commonly attributed to Russia can be seen as more international failures.

Russia might be focusing more on traditional arms technologies, but these are not as defunct as advocates of 'network-centric warfare' claim. Tanks, fighter jets, submarines and other conventional technologies play a role in Russia's strategic vision. The critics of these technologies like to emphasise, instead, the importance of capabilities related to 4CISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance). However, advanced technology, especially C4ISR has not, in reality, been as helpful in winning wars as envisioned by RMA (Revolution in Military Affairs) theorists. RMA is the hypothesis that by using new, revolutionary technology – information technology and intelligence, in particular – states can achieve battlefield dominance. However, the wars fought by the US and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq over the past decade have demonstrated that winning wars requires more than just state-of-the-art technology. Indeed, the RMA hypothesis fails in its overemphasis on technology over successful strategy, which is arguably the most important component if an actor is to achieve its aims through war.

Technology is important in the context of military reform, but should not be overly emphasized at the expense of strategy. The way in which this particular argument corresponds with the literature is clear. In strategic and security studies, and especially in their critical formulations, the focus on strategy is evident. Authors such as Colin Gray, Christopher Coker and Edward Luttwak have all emphasised the importance of strategy and the nature of war over certain superficial characteristics of war, such as – arguably – technology. Moreover, they have argued that war has some fundamental features such as the Clausewitzian ‘fog of war’ – that make it a

phenomenon difficult to harness. In essence, RMA, 4CISR and 'network-centric warfare' are all attempts to control war and make it more predictable, manageable and, above all, winnable. This is relevant also for Russia. For example, in the case of the Chechnyan war technology would not have helped Russia substantially. COIN (counterinsurgency) is difficult, which is underlined by the fact that Russia already has the material superiority over the Chechnyan militia – what is needed instead of technology is strategy. In part, the popularity of technology can be explained by the view that it tends to reduce casualties – this too, is evident in the literature.

Because of its strategic aims, Russia needs to reform conscription instead of discontinuing it. For military reform to be successful, in addition to this the image of the military profession must be improved. There are some persistent myths about conscription; it is often portrayed as a “legacy of the Cold War” or the policy of “conservative generals”. To begin tackling these misconceptions, certain facts need to be established. First, that there is actually no consensus about the outdatedness of conscription: many states still retain the practice even in Europe. Many countries with conscription have a mixed system of recruitment, using both professionals and conscripts – this could also work in Russia, but does not at the moment. In the context of military reform, conscription is a difficult topic because it is politically very unpopular. The image of the military profession is so negative in Russia that the amount of people willing to become professional soldiers is not enough to enable discontinuing conscription. However, conscription reform is possible and already being addressed to some extent. There seems to be a more serious concern for the well-being of conscripts, and the financial commitments are considerable. Getting rid of conscription is not as central to successful reforms as often asserted. It is possible to have a modern military whilst maintaining an element of conscription at the same time (see, for example, Finland, Israel, Norway, etc). However, whether conscription reform will work in the long run is still somewhat of an open question.

Interstate war is not a thing of the past, in spite of the recent focus on small wars. In strategic studies, there is an ongoing debate over whether states should focus more on how to fight small wars. Since the end of the Cold War, and particularly since 2001, there has been an explosion in the number of studies into small wars, importing a vast array of terms in its wake. For example, concepts such as new wars, insurgency, low-intensity conflict, irregular warfare, fourth-generation warfare, military operations other than war, asymmetric warfare, counterinsurgency and limited warfare have all been used somewhat interchangeably to describe a similar phenomenon. They are used profusely in the portion of strategic studies literature that focuses on the changing character of war. The argument, however, is that “interstate war is not derelict”, and that we ought not be

shortsighted about the matter. For example, the US military might be in danger of losing some of its capacity to fight conventional wars because of its COIN focus.

Russia requires some capabilities to fight small wars, but in light of its strategic vision, it will certainly maintain its conventional war-fighting capabilities. This is especially true if one considers Russia's potential adversaries, such as China and NATO – both with large, conventional forces. So, in the context of military reform, the decision not to just focus on small wars can hardly be seen as evidence that Russian military planners are stuck in the Cold War. This is particularly true if one considers what many analysts see as the most important factor that ought to drive military reform: strategic context. Russia understands the strategic context it needs to operate in – and the context is not necessarily, even probably, one of small wars.

Russia will modernise as well as professionalise its army and, above all, maintain an army that reflects its strategic context. Indeed, the failure of Russian military reform is everything but clear-cut: it seems to be the case that “the modern military is an enigma for others, too”. Military reform is a continuous process, and thus one should neither overstate failure nor underestimate progress. While Russia might not have the military it wants, it is certainly not unprepared to deal with the threats the country faces.

Carolina Vendil Pallin

In Russia, domestic policy acts as a constraint on foreign and security policy. The argument in the presentation is that in Russia, the desire to maintain stability in domestic politics is crucial, and that this bears consequences for Russia's ability to make certain foreign and security policy choices. So, the question dealt with is as follows: to what extent is there room to manoeuvre in Russian security policy, given these domestic policy constraints? This question is approached through four case studies – Ukraine, Russian xenophobia, military reform, and the rise of new attitudes in Russia – to demonstrate that domestic politics indeed acts as a constraint on security policy.

The complex relationship between Russia and Ukraine is characterised by the domestic need for the Russian leadership to exercise a rigorous and robust security policy towards Ukraine. The case of Ukraine has been aptly commented upon by the director of Carnegie Moscow Centre, Dmitri Trenin, when he stated that it would be easier and save a lot of headache if Russia were to treat Ukraine as an independent country. In essence, the situation for the leadership is that giving up on Ukraine would result in a considerable loss of face.

Xenophobia in Russia is a domestic trend which certain politicians exploit, but has negative foreign and security policy consequences. One example that demonstrates xenophobia in Russia are the violent attacks against immigrants in Biryulevo district, Moscow, in October 2013. The attackers got off relatively mildly, while the authorities chose to play along with prejudiced attitudes against immigrants and appeased nationalists by sending back illegal immigrants. It is argued that this has direct and negative implications for both security policy and, in particular, cooperation in institutions such as the CSTO and the Customs Union – as well as rendering more difficult the attempt to build a Eurasian Union. It will be difficult to attract the countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus while treating their citizens resident in Russia with contempt. Furthermore, Russia has on numerous occasions expressed its concern about the security situation in Central Asia after ISAF withdraws from Afghanistan. For the countries whose economies are dependent on remittances, Russia's policy of sending home immigrants to Central Asia will do little to stabilise the situation further.

Some Russian investments into defence are explained better by regional policy than by productivity. Russia has displayed a commitment to continue to channel money into military reform, even in the face of slumping economic growth. However, in some cases the investments and choices made clearly reflect domestic politics rather than defence policy priorities. This is

especially evident in how the defence budget is distributed over the defence industry. Instead of channeling funds where they will be made most efficient use of, moribund industries that are dependent on government subsidies receive orders. These industries continue to be subsidised even when there is little or no prospect for them to produce arms that the Russian Armed Forces actually want. One explanation for why the state continues to support these industries is the potential for social unrest in case of withdrawn economic support.

The Russian leadership will increasingly have to deal with tensions in society arising from new attitudes that are more critical towards the state. This “new generation” in Russian society is more mobile and less afraid of the state, while maintaining a greater sense of entitlement from it. If the leadership increases repression, it risks adding to the so-called 'brain-drain' in Russian society, as particularly young, well-educated Russians seek careers and lives abroad. This has implications for security choices: how to balance state security and stability in the light of these new attitudes?

The conclusion is that domestic politics play a significant, constraining role on Russia's security policy. While this is not unique to Russia, domestic politics is nevertheless increasingly limiting the capacity for manoeuvring in defence policy. Perhaps even more importantly, this is something that will be true for some time to come, given the stark challenges that the Russian leadership faces – both in security and domestic policy.

Dmitry Danilov

The presentation explores the security policy of the 3rd Putin presidency, and offers some explanations for the difficulties in the Russia-West relationship. The analysis tackles several key themes: continuity vs. change, rapprochement with the West as well as Russian strategic perceptions both regionally and globally. The main argument is twofold. First, actual change – in spite of changes in leadership – in Russian security policy over the past decade has been only very moderate. This is the result of Russia's strategic context, which changes relatively slowly. Correspondingly, Russian security policy revolves around certain key elements, such as the complex relationship with the West and its regional neighbours, as well as the way in which Russia sees itself. Second, Russia has begun to revert to pragmatism because it has realised that rapprochement has not been effective in securing its interests.

In essence, the core determinants for Russia's security policy have remained the same: the relationship with the West and a focus on hard security drive policy, in spite of changes in leadership. Indeed, the relationship with the West is crucial in a number of ways, and whether this relationship manifests itself as partnership or opposition determines the direction of security policy. Furthermore, the ongoing Putin presidency can be seen as Putin's 4th term – so perhaps it can be said that during Medvedev's presidency, real power over foreign and security policy was vested with the Prime Minister rather than the President. Thus, in principle no serious change has happened in the security policy context since 2000.

The “reset” or rapprochement with the West is over. While some progress was made in Russia-West relations during the period of the reset, the key strategic realities have stayed unchanged, prompting Russia to discontinue its belief in rapprochement. The results garnered are mixed: on one hand, relations with the US, NATO, OSCE and EU have eased. Russia and the US were able to negotiate, for example, a new START treaty. Also, when designing the new strategic concept, NATO took Russia's view into account. However, these developments have not changed the fundamental problems related to strategic partnership between Russia and the West. Confrontations between the two parties have increased in many security issues, and mechanisms to resolve these confrontations are inadequate.

From Moscow's point of view, the central problem is that Russia is currently not part of the European security architecture. OSCE reform, for example, has failed, and this is representative of a greater trend in institutional imbalances. These institutions are designed to create equal footing

and space for trust, but real partnership must be based on understanding mutual differences. Only through the recognition of these fundamental differences between Russia and the West can positive prospects for security cooperation exist. The logic of rapprochement failed perhaps because it ignored this very fact – the existence of not only practical problems in cooperation, but underlying contradictions in strategy. Issues such as the potential of Ukraine turning westward, frozen conflicts such as Transnistria and especially the future of a post-2014 Afghanistan are concrete strategic issues in which Russia and the West remain at odds with each other. In short, the key source for rifts between the two is due to the contradictions in strategic vision. Russia is not only a difficult partner, but a different party altogether.

Russia and the West hold very different views about the direction of Russian modernisation.

Western criticism of what is perceived as undemocratic behaviour by Moscow has only intensified during the Putin era. As a consequence, Moscow has taken the habit of stigmatising certain non-governmental actors as “foreign agents”, further worsening the political climate. What is crucial here is that, in Russia, these accusations of undemocratic or even authoritarian policies are ostensibly regarded as unfounded. Some in the West see this as insincere, and the existence of these two opposing views causes serious difficulties in Russia-West dialogue.

These unresolved strategic contradictions have prompted Russia to pursue pragmatism in its foreign and security policy. This is a result of the problems described above: seeing that rapprochement has not yielded desired results, Russia is turning to a more hardline, pragmatic stance. The real danger here is that in the absence of progress between Moscow and the West, the latter will try to engage Russian civil society and circumvent Moscow – further aggravating relations. Related to this trend is the Russian desire to create a Eurasian strategic sphere: Russia understands that a Euro-Atlantic strategic partnership, especially one that seeks enlargement towards the east, greatly undermines Russian interests. Therefore, Russia is trying to shift focus back to Eurasian integration – again relating back to the importance of Russia's inclusion in the European security architecture.

There is genuine Russian motivation to strive for cooperation with the West, but the barriers in cooperation are very real, and significant. Ultimately, whether these barriers can be overcome will depend on progress in both awareness of and solutions to the existing differences in political and strategic contradictions between Russia and the West. The inclusion of Russia in the European security architecture is an essential part of any solution: failure to achieve this will only further prompt Russia to seek to create its own, parallel security framework in the Eurasian sphere.

Conclusions

All three papers found that little has changed in the fundamentals of Russian security policy since Putin was first elected President in 2000. The apparent deterioration in relations with the West results in fact from the realisation that Russia and the West do have opposing interests, combined with the failure to integrate Russia into the European security architecture. Thus the strategic context remains one in which confrontation with another major power, including the possibility of full-scale warfare, has to be considered by Russian security policy makers. This stance is neither a return to the Cold War nor a sign of possible aggression by Russia, but a relatively normal 'worse case scenario' view of security policy.

In this context, military reform aims at making the existing military system more efficient and effective. Military spending is likely to remain at high levels and Russia will continue to rely on a conscript army in order to provide some creditable counter to the large conventional forces of NATO and China. The potential for high technology to replace conventional capabilities should not be overestimated. Russia will continue to develop new technologies relevant to, for example, a potential Islamic insurgency and arctic conditions, but these will not replace conventional capabilities.

Recognition that Russia and the West have opposing interests is one reason why Russia is seeking to strengthen its position as the hegemonic power in Eurasia. The potential challenge of China is another reason for the growing emphasis in this direction, but this has been a major part of Russian foreign policy ever since the break-up of the USSR. The biggest changes, perhaps, in Russian security policy result from the changing domestic context. The crackdown on dissent at home since the regime was shaken by demonstrations in 2011 has been accompanied by a growing tendency to blame foreign influences, while pandering to nationalist and xenophobic sentiments has led to moves against migrant workers from Central Asia as well as Russian citizens from the North Caucasus. This domestic factor threatens to undermine Russia's efforts to strengthen its hold on Eurasia through the Eurasian Customs Union.

In conclusion, the West should not overreact to apparently aggressive moves by Russia, but should also bear in mind that Russian domestic considerations could have adverse consequences. Although Russia is likely to continue to pursue its own security agenda shaped by its own strategic contexts and long-term interests, the greater integration of Russia into European security architecture may be one way to reduce the unpredictable elements in Russian security policy.