

A New Cold War or Dangerous Multipolarity?

Mariano Aguirre

Director of Peace, Security and Human Rights, FRIDE

There are signs of a return to a Cold War between Washington and Moscow. This is not, however, an ideological confrontation but rather one between a number of global and regional powers in which, ironically, the United States and Russia, though strong, are not the most powerful players.

Is there a new Cold War beginning between the United States and Russia? There are signs that would seem to indicate a return of the tension between Moscow and Washington that existed between the end of the Second World War and 1989, based on a contest of military strength and the control of influential regions. The scenario that is emerging now, however, is not one of two ideologically opposed powers competing for the rest of the world. The current one is of two key players within a multipolar international context where various governmental and non-governmental actors fight to advance their own practical interests. In ideological terms, it is no longer about a struggle between communism and capitalism. Now nationalism and other identity-based doctrines are the ideological chips used to gain internal legitimacy – from the messianic patriotism of the United States and Russian nationalistic pride to Chávez' populism, Chinese neo-communism and the hegemonic nationalism of Iran.

Speaking at the annual transatlantic conference on security in Munich last February, President Vladimir Putin took advantage of the opportunity to criticize the unilateralism of the United States, George W. Bush's contempt for international law, the Iraq war, and the way in which Washington has approached such issues as support for a possible independent Kosovo and the installation of an antimissile system in Poland and the Czech Republic. All of this, according to the Russian president, has been done without consulting Moscow. Tension between Moscow and Washington has also been raised over what to do in Iran as well as the United States' increasingly aggressive strategy in Afghanistan, which has included pressuring NATO allies to step up troop numbers for offensive action.

The United States has proposed that Poland and the Czech Republic form part of a missile system that would, in theory, intercept missiles in the air launched from "rogue states" such as Iran or North Korea. There are several problems with this, however. On one hand, the system is extremely expensive (\$225 million has been allocated for next year alone), and to date it has exhibited nothing but flaws and weaknesses.¹ On the other, Moscow does not see the system as a defence against distant powers but rather as a confirmation, along with the bases that Washington will establish in Romania and Bulgaria, of the encroaching expansion of NATO and the United States to Russia's very borders.

¹ "Missile fantasies", Editorial, *The Washington Post*, 25 February 2007.

Former Russian Prime Minister Evgueni Primakov wrote last February in *Moskovskíe Novosti* that the idea is to 'enclose' Russia and that the appropriate response is to alter Russian military strategy so that it includes the 'NATO war machine' among possible threats.² In March, *The Guardian* reported that Russian strategy was in the process of being revised, and that the new version would be much tougher on western 'expansion' towards 'post-Soviet space.'³ That same month, the chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the Russian State Duma stated that, "if the US continues to act unilaterally without giving answers, this could push us towards a crisis. Such a crisis could occur if we stop communicating and start to act unilaterally."⁴ The Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs has proposed that decisions on Euro-Atlantic security be made using an "integrated approach" in a "trilateral format, including Russia, the EU and the US," and that the Russia-NATO Council be used to discuss these issues.⁵

NATO's expansion is something that Moscow has been watching uneasily since the 90s when President Bill Clinton failed to include Russia in Alliance's expansion plans. The former Democrat government's lack of strategy and Bush's aggressive unilateralism throughout this decade have acerbated the defensive tendencies of China and Russia. Clinton's strategists began to classify Beijing as a risk for the United States, confusing trade and economic competition with military threat. For the conservative and neo-conservative alliance that makes up the Bush administration, having Russia and China as possible strategic and non-democratic adversaries supports their worldview.⁶ A view that would seem to be confirmed by the fact that both Moscow and Russia are developing alliances with countries in the South, as witnessed, for example, by the flow of Chinese investment into Africa or the sale of arms by Russia to Syria and Venezuela.

Ironically, although Cold War ideology is a thing of the past, these mutual perceptions of threat are providing an excuse for re-arming, creating distance and abandoning the international arms control agreements that took so much time and negotiation to reach in previous decades. In 2001, Washington abandoned the ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missiles) Treaty in order to launch its costly system. Moscow is now considering abandoning the 1987 agreement that prevents the deployment of intermediate-range missiles (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) within Europe.⁷ China, for its part, views the United States as an economic competitor with whom there could be military problems, and Russia as an old enemy with whom it must nevertheless maintain a relationship. At the same time, Beijing is also involved in a reconciliation process with Japan. Whatever the case, Beijing believes that re-armament is an essential element in the protection of its economic and trade expansion.

² Evgueni Primakov, "Une montée en puissance américaine qui inquiète Moscou", *Courrier International*, 858, 15 February, 2007, p.13.

³ Luke Harding, "Russian generals aim again at NATO and the West", *The Guardian Weekly*, 16 March, 2007

⁴ Konstantin Kosachev, "America and Russia: from cold war to cold shoulder", *Financial Times*, 23 March, 2007.

⁵ Sergei Lavrov, "A crucial debate on Europe's anti-missile defences", *Financial Times*, 11 April 2007.

⁶ See: The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, The White House, Washington D.C., 2004. <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Mar2005/d20050318nms.pdf>

⁷ Steven Lee Myers, "No Cold War, perhaps, but surely a lukewarm peace", *The New York Times*, 18 February, 2007.

Within these power games, Washington, by deploying its antimissile system in Poland and the Czech Republic, is looking to impose its will on Europe (shades of the Cold War), and is relying on allies such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Tony Blair to counteract any possible criticism from France. In fact, there is a great deal of doubt in Europe about the effectiveness of the antimissile system as well as worry over costs that Europe will be forced to share in the future. However, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer is an enthusiastic supporter, and has expressed his desire that NATO rearmament plans be coordinated with those of Washington, especially since the antimissile system will not cover countries in Southern Europe. Such coordination would prevent differences within the Alliance. ⁸

Indeed, the debate over the installation of a new missile system is beginning to generate tension in Europe. The German coalition government is divided on the installation of the antimissile system in Eastern Europe: while Merkel completely agrees with it (although she has suggested that Washington should consult Moscow more often), Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has come out against it, as has the leader of the Social Democratic party (SPD), Kurt Beck.⁹

After almost a decade of crisis and weakness, Russia is depending upon the authoritarian centralization of power and, more particularly, on oil revenues and nuclear arms to boost its influence and regain the power it enjoyed during the Cold War. With the 2008 elections just around the corner, Putin is taking a strong stance on the West in order to win over domestic nationalists and gain the support of the Russian military. At the same time, Russia wants to be seen as a powerful nation once again, one that cannot be questioned on its domestic policies whether they are restrictions on freedom of expression or business, or repressive military intervention in Chechnya.

As Dmitri Trenin, Deputy Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, explains it, "The Kremlin's new approach to foreign policy assumes that as a big country, Russia is essentially friendless; no great power wants a strong Russia, which would be a formidable competitor, and many want a weak Russia that they could exploit and manipulate. Accordingly, Russia has a choice between accepting subservience and reasserting its status as a great power, thereby claiming its rightful place in the world alongside the United States and China rather than settling for the company of Brazil and India".¹⁰

Europe seems to be at the centre of these tensions but in fact the whole international system is in a process of deep change. The United States is no longer the dominating global power. Although still powerful, it has serious domestic problems, has lost international credibility and suffers from a lack of strategic vision, all of which have caused it to lose its leadership role. The European Union hopes that Washington will regain its leadership in the post-Bush era, although it may have to accept the need to act alone, without waiting for the United States. China and Russia are emerging from the post-Cold War transition period as powers with strong regional and, in the

⁸ Daniel Dombey, "NATO warns US missiles may divide Europe", *Financial Times*, 12 March, 2007.

⁹ Bertrand Benoit, "US missile shield plan draws fire in Germany", *Financial Times*, 9 April, 2007.

¹⁰ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia leaves the West", *Foreign Affairs*, July-August, 2006.

<http://www.cfr.org/publication/10953/>

case of Beijing, global influence. Likewise, India, Brazil and South Africa have achieved significant regional power. ¹¹

The greatest danger is that this fragmentation of power is, in many cases, moving towards a nationalism based on practical interests, more conservative than cooperative in nature, with each country defending its own interests, rather than moving towards a cooperative multilateral system. Hence, it is moving towards a dangerous multipolarity. Eventually, Europe may be the only multi-state alliance whose union is based on a common will, shared security norms and cooperative policies, including a foreign policy that reflects this way of relating to the world. This, however, makes it all the more urgent for Europe to take a more coherent and proactive stance.

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A shorted version of this article has been published by *La Vanguardia*, Barcelona, April 26th, 2007.

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Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior
C/ Goya, 5-7, Pasaje 2^a, 28001 MADRID. Tel. +34 91 244 47 40 Fax +34 91 244 47 41
e-mail: fride@fride.org - www.fride.org

¹¹ See Working Paper and Backgrounder by Susanne Gratius and Sarah-Lea John, respectively, at www.fride.org on intermediate states and the alliance of IBSA countries. Also, see Alcides Costa Vaz (Ed.), *Intermediate States, regional leadership and security: India, Brazil and South Africa*, Editora UNB, Universidad de Brasília, Brasília, 2007.