Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe

August 29, 2017

In his new Brookings Marshall Paper, Michael O'Hanlon argues that now is the time for Western nations to negotiate a new security architecture for neutral countries in eastern Europe to stabilize the region and reduce the risks of war with Russia. The core concept of this new security architecture would be one of permanent neutrality.

By Andrey Sazonov

Why did you write this book and why now?

I've been a skeptic on NATO expansion frankly ever since the early post-Cold war years and I wrote about my disagreement with some of it even back in 1996. In a sense, I put my marker out there early on the subject and advised against it but as time went on NATO did a lot of enlargement rounds and became very popular in a bipartisan sense. We had the big rounds of expansion in the late Clinton years and then in the early Bush years. We also had the 911 attacks and focused largely on the Middle East for security challenges. During that period I was doing other things myself and it didn't seem as urgent to try to stop the NATO expansion.

I also didn't think it was even possible to see the counter-argument at that moment in time. Even to those of us who would express the counter-argument, there seemed to be no new information coming in to reinforce our concerns. Yet as you go through the history and look at the early 2000s, as Putin is settling into the presidency of Russia and begins to develop a more negative narrative of the U.S., he has antecedence for that with NATO expansion and also with the Kosovo War. As time goes on, he also starts to think that we have this sense of omnipotence in the U.S. That we are out there trying to rule the world and doing a pretty bad job of it. We also sensed that by this period Putin is starting to develop more of a worldview that says “I'm going to push back.”

By about 2006, as my colleagues Fiona Hill and Cliff Gaddy have argued, Putin finally decreases Russian debt and he doesn't feel as subservient to Western institutions or countries any longer. Then, as we go further into that period and the end of the Bush presidency, the Bucharest Summit essentially promises Ukraine and Georgia eventual NATO membership. Whatever Putin felt about the Baltic states or former Warsaw Pact countries joining NATO, now he also has more of a cause and ability to push back combined with a greater sense of grievance at the West for all these multiple perceived
sins - not to mention the colored revolutions which in his KGB mind he thinks were originated largely by the CIA, even though I think that's not at all correct.

In any event, all I'm trying to say is the issue really came together and and we all saw what happened in 2013 and in 2014 in Maidan and in Crimea. That's what reintroduced U.S.-Russia relations as a top tier security issue and also made it possible to consider writing this kind of a book. I didn't want to sympathize with Putin or justify his aggression against Ukraine because of this whole historical narrative. Nonetheless, he did raise the visibility of the issue and made it possible, and arguably necessary, to rethink our basic assumptions about what we were doing with European security.

Starting with the invasion of Crimea, I began to think about these questions and decided that I should go back to it. Over the course of 2016 is really when I decided to write a short book and I began the process about when Donald Trump was elected president, which was a coincidence. I didn't think that Trump would win when I started the book, and I would've wanted to make the argument anyway. One way or another, Trump's presidency may sort of reflect a more fundamental questioning of our basic assumptions about American foreign policy.

I'm not sure if that makes my idea any more realistic now but it creates a little bit more of a conversation. Now, unfortunately, the Russian role in the 2016 elections has made it harder to talk about this issue because people think you are apologizing for Putin or taking Russia's side and that's the last thing I want to do. In that sense, it's not easier to have this debate in 2017 and I believe it's going to be hard to get the debate going. I think there are a few other people with much bigger reputations than myself, like Henry Kissinger, who have made similar or related arguments. There aren't that many of us and it's going to take a while. Maybe there's more openness to this in parts of Europe.

The key principle that you outline in your book is the concept of “permanent neutrality.” Could you outline this concept in further detail?

The concept of “permanent neutrality” is a part of the main idea in my book but it's not the only part of the idea. If it were the only main idea, then this would be essentially a concession to Putin. By saying that Sweden and Finland, ideally, but certainly Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and then perhaps Cyprus, and the Balkans, or the part of the Balkans not currently in NATO, these areas and these countries would be permanently neutral. They would not join NATO and if they did join the European Union they would agree that the security provisions of the European Union would not apply to them in a literal sense, like Article 5. That's part of the main idea and so it is sort of like Sweden in its current state, or Switzerland or Austria. Permanent neutrality, negotiated, first to get all the NATO countries to agree, this is a good idea then to reach out to the neutral countries, and only then to reach out to Russia to try to negotiate this.

My concept would require that Russia negotiates acceptable terms for disengagement from Ukraine and Georgia in particular, and probably pull its troops out of the Transnistria region of Moldova as well. Although, on that issue, and even some of the others, I'm not suggesting that the only acceptable outcome would be for Russia to leave. If Russia could negotiate some kind of understanding with
these countries, then we could live with that too and I don't expect that Russia is going to leave Crimea. We have to finesse that issue or put it off to the side. The idea would include not just permanent neutrality in security institutions, but completely reinvigorated sovereignty and independence for all other aspects of national decision-making, including diplomatic and economic matters, including the right for all of these countries to join the European Union if they were ever invited. Russia would get no say and no veto over that. Russia would have to agree that this would be the policy, and that these countries can then still do lower level security activities with NATO or any other organization on things like counterpiracy, or peacekeeping, or counterterrorism. Finally, this would all have to be verifiable and there would have to be recourses if Russia did not comply.

All that is part of the concept as well and it doesn't work unless all of them are negotiated together. If it is negotiated together, I believe we're getting a better deal for Ukraine and Georgia than they're getting right now. A lot of people, including from those two countries, have been critical of my idea. I'll acknowledge that I've had more critics than supporters by a long shot from the countries that I'm talking about. However, I think some of those countries need to ask if they really think it's realistic they're going to get it to NATO. I will remind folks that it was 2008 when President Bush and Secretary Rice persuaded NATO member states to make an open ended invitation to Georgia and Ukraine to someday be members of NATO. There was no membership action plan, the formal process by which one qualifies, there was no schedule, no interim security guarantees, and no change to the longstanding NATO policy that you can only join once you resolved your territorial disputes with your neighbors. To me, that was an open invitation for Russia to continue meddling in these countries. I would submit to you that the current policy is not giving these countries a very good deal and that we have actually gotten ourselves stuck in a very unfortunate place and we're not likely to get unstuck. We're not likely to offer them membership anytime soon so my proposal is better for them than the current policy and that's why it's more than just permanent neutrality that I'm talking about.

One of the most pressing contemporary challenges for Europe and the U.S. is effectively dealing with Russia's digital intelligence playbook known as “active measures,” that includes tools and techniques to influence the affairs of nations across the globe. What makes you think that Russia will not interfere in the affairs of the neutral states once the new security framework is established?

Russia is indeed doing a lot of things around the world to try to influence countries through digital electronic propaganda purposes. We have to expect that Russia will continue that even if this new security architecture were somehow negotiated. One of the things I say very quickly to anybody who's asking me about this concept and if I'm going to trust Putin, I say of course not. I don't even think that I would trust Putin after this was negotiated, should it ever be possible. I don't want to stop doing anything that we're doing now.

For example, the European Reassurance Initiative and the greater NATO military presence in the Baltics and in Poland. I think that needs to continue and our cyber defenses need to improve. Our ability to counter Russia’s disinformation campaigns needs to improve, including using the same kind
of tools back against Russia that they might use against us. I'm not predicting détente. In fact, even if my plan was adopted, I don't think that Trump and Putin could necessarily get along as well as Gorbachev and Reagan. In a way, the latter part of the Cold War was probably a more profound détente then I would ever see from my proposal. I'm not trying to create happiness here. I'm just trying to reduce the chances of war which have become quite real, certainly higher than they had been and higher than we'd like to see them.

**You are suggesting that the West should be willing to move beyond Crimea. Do you think Russia's transgressions in Crimea should be forgiven?**

I'm not suggesting we forgive this by any means. In fact, one of the fundamental reasons why I expect it to take a long time for the U.S. and Russia to get along well is precisely because I don't think my proposal could undo the Crimea mess. Nor do I think it could undo the fact that Putin has suppressed, and maybe even killed off, some of his own domestic political opposition. I think Putin is fundamentally an anti-Democratic leader and an aggressive leader abroad. Anti-democratic at home, aggressive abroad. This is not a nice person, this is not a person I expect we will have good relations with, and that is not a person I want to forgive.

However, if we can reduce the ongoing catalyst for further deterioration of the relationship, then we will have made the world a safer place. That's my goal. It's somewhat more modest. I think we probably have to, at a minimum, refuse to recognize the Russian annexation of Crimea and never attend meetings or other events that would be officially held there. We may even need to keep some limited sanctions on Russia over Crimea just as a show and reaffirmation of principle.

It is true that I'm saying we should be willing to move beyond Crimea, but I guess I'm saying we should only lightly punish the Russian transgressions in Crimea. Fundamentally, it's because Crimea is a different place, a different kettle of fish, than almost any other area we're talking about. In Crimea, the little green men attack was done quickly and successfully and that's a part of why there was no opposition. The other reason is because Crimea historically has been Russian and it's fairly inconceivable that Russia would ever allow the Black Sea fleet to fall out of Russia's own hands.

If you look at eastern Ukraine, by contrast, Russia may claim its sympathy for the separatists, but there's ten thousand people dead because Ukraine, including many Ukrainians there, is fighting back. Russia’s actions have also created, as my colleague Steven Pifer points out, antibodies against them within the Ukrainian body politic that are probably stronger than ever before and they've created a stronger sense in Ukrainian nationhood that existed previously. Grabbing Crimea was part of the reason for this, but it's the violence and the killing in the east that really are a fundamental cause. I'm suggesting that this is also the danger we need to recognize. Russia's behavior in those places, or Northern Georgia, where Russia may have some friends, is also violating the territory of an independent nation state. These are the kinds of transgressions we really need to push back against and we should keep the sanctions in place until those problems are solved and until this broader security architecture is negotiated and implemented.
What is your response to the advocates of the NATO expansion and how would you define the future role of the alliance?

Most alliances do not see it as their raison d'être to expand. That's more of, I don't want to overstate the point too much, but that's more of an old fashioned imperialistic concept - that the natural way any country or group of countries should move into the future is to grow or expand.

I don't think NATO is an aggressive organization. I'm not suggesting that it's truly imperialistic, but the ideology of expansion as an inherent goal or purpose of the alliance, strikes me as bizarre. We don't have that attitude towards any of our other alliances. Other alliances are created within a group of countries that have a common purpose and set of goals, and purpose for operating together. Whether it's our Middle Eastern association with the Gulf Cooperation Council, or the Rio Pact, or the way in which we're trying to more strongly link existing bilateral alliances in East Asia together. Those all have specific members associated with them, and we're not typically trying to increase the membership.

Somehow with NATO, we've deluded ourselves. I think it's just a delusion into thinking that the alliance must expand. People will go back to article 10 of the 1949 Washington treaty which says that “should it be conducive to the improvement of the European security other members could be brought in.” Well, yes, “should it be conducive to the Improvement of European security…” – that is the key phrase – article 10 doesn't say we shall expand because expansion is good. It says it shall expand if expansion would be stabilizing and good for the security of the continent and it was also obviously written during the Cold War.

Presumably, when circumstances changed so fundamentally, you might rethink this phrase. But even if you interpreted it literally, what it says is that you have to ask whether an expansion is going to strengthen Western security.

We just brought in Montenegro and I don't see exactly why it made NATO stronger. I certainly don't see why NATO would be doing itself any favors to extend a security commitment to a country like Georgia, which by the way is not even in Europe. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Washington Treaty focus on North America and Europe explicitly in their language. Now we have gotten so taken with the idea of expansion for its own sake, that we are stuck with the idea - as Vice President Pence just reiterated a couple weeks ago on his visit to Georgia - of someday taking that country into an alliance that was never designed to go into Asia.

I would just submit we all need to go back to our original documents, go back to original basic logic, and rethink our assumptions. It's not because I want to leave any of those countries out in the cold. They are sovereign countries that should have every right of a sovereign nation. But alliances are not part of that list of choices. There's nothing in the UN Charter that says nations shall have the right to join alliances of their choosing if they wish. Alliances are constructed for specific purposes and they're different than any other organization or any other kind of sovereign state right, and that's what I'm trying to get at in my argument.
How do you respond to arguments that Russia is a revanchist power that seeks to reclaim its traditional areas of influence? Do you consider the possibility that Russia might view the new proposal as a temporary agreement that can be rejected or violated later?

I do agree that Russia is a revanchist power and that any kind of willingness by Moscow to negotiate this kind of an agreement might be only temporary - a holding action, or a sort of opportunity for them to get sanctions lifted and they might come back and change their policy later.

One of the things I suggest in the book as a counter to that concern is that NATO might state that once this new architecture was in place, it would no longer have the same policy of expecting countries to resolve territorial disputes with neighbors before bringing them in the NATO.

In the future, if Russia slices off a piece of Georgia, then I could imagine a very rapid NATO decision to invite the rest of Georgia into NATO. Perhaps Putin wakes up overnight to find that we've got the 82 Airborne Division in central Georgia, just like we woke up overnight to find that he had “little green men” in Crimea. Obviously, I'm not hoping for that outcome. The whole spirit of what I'm proposing is designed to work in the other direction. But to counter the concern here, we might need to clarify that if Russia violates the terms of these negotiations in the future, then not only would we re-impose the sanctions and tear up the treaty and our promise to respect future neutrality, but we might actually hasten the NATO membership of the very countries that Putin no longer had any excuse for messing around in. You can say today in his mind he has an excuse, because he thinks that we want to bring his part of the world into NATO. It's not just a question of insisting on keeping his own sphere of influence; we're trying to take his country into our sphere of influence in his mind. I'm proposing a neutrality concept that would have them being in neither sphere of influence. If he violates that whole set of assumptions, and having been promised that we will respect that neutrality, he is the one that violated with no plausible pretext or rationale. I'm not justifying what he's doing today. But, in his own mind, there is a narrative that justifies it in the future. This security architecture would take this narrative away, and if then a future Russian leader, or Putin himself, were to violate the sovereignty of one of these countries, then, if we decided it's in our interest, we can not only impose even tougher sanctions, but consider the idea of expedited NATO membership for the country that's been otherwise attacked. It might be too late if he takes the whole country, but right now we're not offering those nations Article 5 guarantees anyway. I don't think we should because I don't think it helps our security to promise a tiny Caucasus country of three or four million people airtight Article 5 protection. I just don't see why that makes the world a safer place. It may make some Georgians feel a little better, but it may also increase the risk that Russia wants to prove to us that we can't do that and therefore put Georgia in the crosshairs again.

Right now we don't have an Article 5 promise to Georgia, we have anything but. With my concept, I think not only do we reduce the likelihood that Putin will feel the need to attack Georgia out of opposition to us, but even if he does attack it in the future, then we have other mechanisms that we can more quickly justify employing because it won't be ambiguous whose fault it was at that point.
How do you see the future of Russia sanctions in the context of the proposed Eastern European Security Architecture?

I think Russia sanctions have to stay in place until we get a negotiated resolution to the conflicts that gave rise to them in the first place. My proposal for a new East European Security Architecture would require, just to reiterate, resolution on acceptable terms to all countries involved of the problems in Georgia with Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, the problems in the Donbass region of Ukraine, and the Transnistria situation. Crimea, I don’t expect to be able to solve, but all the others would have to be resolved to the satisfaction of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova or the sanctions can't be removed. That is the basic simple answer there.

You say that “the mechanisms and security systems that involve Russia and the West are inadequate to the task at hand” referring to the OSCE and NATO-Russia Council. Why have these tools not worked? How do you envision the role of these organizations under your proposal?

There's nothing wrong with these organizations, but they've only been able to do what's realistically within their power. They were never designed to enforce a certain security system or architecture. They are about confidence-building, verification, diplomacy. They are not about what I'm proposing here, which is to figure out a way for all the major parties to get most of what they want. I would submit to you that this concept of a zone of permanent neutrality for about a dozen countries does potentially offer core fundamentals of what each of these different areas or nations wants and needs for their own security. The OSCE, the NATO-Russia Founding Act, and the NATO-Russia Council were not intended to do those things, they were intended to be consultative means to promote greater transparency, diplomacy, and confidence building. It's just two different types of entities altogether and we have to highlight that fact.

We have to remind people why we can't expect the OSCE to solve this problem. The OSCE doesn't have any military forces. Even if they did, the whole spirit of the OSCE is not to pick sides or provide militarily reinforcement, but to try to ease tensions. In a situation where NATO's interest in expanding and Russia's interpretation of the purpose of that expansion are fundamentally leading to a hostile situation, no amount of hand-holding, or singing kumbaya, or talking across the dinner table, is going to change the basic structural problem that we've created.

In the end of the book you mention the term you coined together with Clifford Gaddy – “Reaganov Russia.” Could you elaborate on this and explain why such an outcome might be beneficial to the West?

I say at the end of this book that I'm not predicting detente that will come out of this proposal, this security architecture. It could take a long time to ever have the warmth in relations that we seemed to have with Gorbachev or even Yeltsin and I think U.S-Russian relations are going to be poisoned for a while going forward. Even if this kind of security architecture is adopted, and I also don't really think the Russian sensibilities are such that Russia is going to want to join the West or move to an EU-like vision of the nation-state becoming less important and the Westphalian system becoming less relevant.
I see Russia, especially under Putin, as a place where a lot of liberals have been suppressed or even pushed out or killed off. I see Russians themselves as perhaps not being as inclined towards these liberal ideas in general. Therefore, I think aspiring to a U.S.-Russia relationship or a NATO-Russia relationship where Russia is like another Western Country, that's not a realistic goal. What Cliff and I argued is that a Russia that feels proud, that feels like it is one of the major poles of international power, obviously always going to be a huge country, always presumably going to be a nuclear-armed country, always a country with a great deal of scientific and technological expertise, although that's been eroding because of the poor state of its economy and its society in general. I still think Russia's a great country and I have no problem with Russians thinking of themselves as great. I don't think it's inconsistent with American global leadership for Russia to be a somewhat separate bastion of economic and military strength.

What Gaddy and and I are suggesting is that a Russia that is sort of self-confident enough to feel good about itself and feel good about its independence, power, and status - that's a Russia that we can live with. It is probably a safer Russia than today's Russia under Putin, where you sense, as you point out in one of your questions, maybe they're revanchist or irredentist. In other words, they are trying to take back things they believed to be theirs but also, separate from that, they’ve got a little bit of a chip on their shoulder. They're seeking vengeance. They're trying to weaken us irrespective of whether they can enlarge their own sphere of influence, and that's not a very healthy thing for world affairs because it makes Russia hostile.

Russia today is hostile to the West. I think it's not just unpleasant for us to deal with, it's deliberately hostile, it is seeking to weaken and undermine areas of our foreign policy. In some cases that may be understandable, but it's not really desirable. It's not really desirable if that's the set of assumptions that Russia is operating from. It would be much better if Russia could feel somewhat separate from the West but still secure and confident in its own skin so to speak - that's what “Reaganov Russia” is to us. Presumably it is patriotic, it is nationalistic, it is somewhat pro-military, it tries to maintain a certain number of industries that are associated with national power. It's that Russia we can live with, as long as it's fundamentally a status quo power and a confident and secure power.

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