

The Euro-Russian Crisis: Dialogue vs. Military Escalation. The Dangers of World War III

Global Systemic Crisis /End of 2017: High Turbulence Zone! Finance – Freedom – Security – Kaliningrad: Avoid the Third World War Now!

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More than three years after the Ukraine-related Euro-Russian catastrophe, there is no hope of an end to this crisis. On the contrary, the tension inexorably keeps climbing: Donbass still at war, annexation of Crimea by Russia not recognised by the international community,... the eyes are now turning to the Baltic Sea where demonstrations of military testosterone is progressing well on both sides of the new iron curtain[1].

Not far from Gdansk, the former Danzig, whose corridor contributed to the outbreak of the Second World War, another corridor is now the object of all desire and may become a trigger of nothing less than a Third World War: the corridor, or the triangle, of Suwalki.



Figure 1 – The triangle of Suwalki. Source: Strafor 2015

Kaliningrad and territorial integrities

Since 2004 and the EU integration of the Baltic countries, a Russian territory, the Kaliningrad Oblast, has found itself isolated in the heart of the EU. In the current atmosphere of Atlantic-Russian tension, Russia may be tempted to secure an access corridor between its Belarusian ally and its strategic *exclave* of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea. The 60-kilometer-long corridor runs along the Lithuanian-Polish border into an area which has been the subject of lively differences between Lithuania and Poland for almost 100 years.

The region of Suwalki is located in Poland; nevertheless it was originally part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania before moving to Prussia in 1795, then to the Grand Duchy of Poland, and finally to Tsarist Russia. In 1919-1920, following the Russian Revolution, Lithuanian and Polish troops clashed during the Sejny revolt and the [battle of the Niemen River](#), until the signing of the Suwalki Treaty, which attributed the cities and regions of Punszk, Sejny and Suwalki to Poland.

Needless to say there is not much to be done to revive tensions in this Polish region, where there is a large Lithuanian minority (the town of Punszk, for instance, is still populated by 80% of Lithuanians), and encourage dreams of independence in an EU where these kinds of claims become common[2]. The Atlantic-Russian crisis in this region could therefore quickly lead to a new front of disintegration of the European Union and, perhaps, to an ethnic conflict between two EU/NATO member states.

Whatever method is used, if Russia ever succeeded in establishing such a corridor, the Baltic countries would be cut off from the EU.

For now, since 2003, an agreement between the EU and Russia has allowed the latter to pass under strict surveillance in Lithuania to gain access to its exclave. But what is this agreement relying on? Certainly not much.

Lack of anticipation, strategic errors, political weakness: the great escalation

Weapons and men are gathering around this region: Americans, Canadians, British, French, Danish, Germans on one side; Belarusians, Russians, Moldavians, Kazakh, and even Chinese on the other. And since the Russian exercise, Zapad 2017, and the Russian-Chinese exercise in the Baltic Sea, Maritime Cooperation-2017[3], the EU has reasons to worry about an escalation that would become uncontrollable, posing the risk that the smallest incident triggers a war with all the characteristics of a world war, given the protagonists involved[4].

Therefore, it is absolutely imperative that something is done to end the sequence of events currently leading to this strategic trap. The integration of the Baltic countries was an error; they should have been given special statutes giving rise to a Euro-Russian dialogue instead. The integration of the Baltic countries into NATO was even worse, inevitably shaking Russia. In 2008, the US plan to install an anti-missile shield in this region began to erode the cordial relations that the EU and Russia were attempting to establish, despite the two previous errors (in particular, it is following this decision that Vladimir Putin decided to end the story of the special statute for the Kaliningrad Oblast which was to become a sort of Russian Hong Kong). The European refusal to negotiate its economic partnership with Ukraine in a tripartite format (EU, Ukraine, Russia) is a major historical fault, inevitably leading to the division of Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimea by Russia.

The Russian bear is now fully awake and the EU can now cry in front of its strategic weakness, the hardening of the NATO-American claw in its neck, the disintegration of its entire Eastern flank (as anticipated in 2014 in these pages) ... being at the mercy of a US plane flying too close to a Russian territory, or a missile penetrating too deep into the European ground to see the great military-diplomatic machine dragging the continent and the world into catastrophe[5].

Traps on all sides

But what needs to be done? As we always say *“in a complex world, anticipation is crucial, because when the problems arrive on the table, there are only bad solutions left to solve them”*. Regardless of Russia’s responsibilities in this escalation, the EU has serious responsibilities itself, notably by lack of anticipation thus falling into every trap. Today the Americans no longer let go of the Europeans, to whom they forbid any exchange with Russia. A particularly frightening example:

“On June 15, 2017, the US Senate passed a bill threatening with fines, banking restrictions and exclusion to American tenders, all European companies that would participate in the construction of Russian pipelines. This text has yet to be approved by the House of Representatives and promulgated by Mr Trump. The five European gas groups involved in the Nord Stream 2 project, to which they each contribute 10% of the financing, are directly threatened by this amendment: the French Engie, the Anglo-Dutch Shell, the German Uniper and Wintershall companies, but also the ‘Austrian OMW [6]”.

Alstom and others know how much it costs to ignore the extra-territorial exception of the American law. If such a bill were to be passed, it would be a further brake on any prospect of resolving the Euro-Russian crisis.

The Russians can not give in to Kaliningrad either. Our team was tempted to think that there could be a bargaining barrier to exchange the Crimea against Kaliningrad (to have the Russian annexation of the Crimea recognised in place of a returning Kaliningrad to the EU or as a special status region). But Russia will not give up its “ice-free” access to the Baltic Sea, especially in the current context of defiance.

However, the Czech president has thrown a rock into the water this summer by suggesting that accepting Russia’s annexation of the Crimea would allow negotiations between Ukraine and Russia[7] on a compensatory policy that would be welcomed in a bloodless country. Poroshenko’s desperate screams might not completely cover the reflections this suggestion inevitably created among the Ukrainians... and beyond. Moreover, the failure of the current government in the fight against corruption, modernisation and the Europeanisation of the country has caused Poroshenko to plunge into the polls and to greatly irritate the EU and Germany. Yulia Tymoshenko, a pro-European politician, but who has been accused in the past of Russian sympathies and has a lot to do with the gas trade with Russia[8], would be the winner of an election if it took place today. Georgia’s very troubled Mikheil Saakashvili, who had woken up one day at the head of the Odessa region, has just been withdrawn from the Ukrainian nationality he had been awarded three years before[9]. Would the wind be shifting direction in Kiev? Heading to where? Would the imperative of returning to Russia have to do with these few reversal indicators?

Hypothesis of Reversal?

In any case, on the EU side, the ranks are tightening around the idea of re-establishing the dialogue with Russia. Whilst France, Germany and Italy have traditionally been aligned with this position, statements in this direction abound, including in the countries on the Eastern flank: the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia are now of this opinion, and their participation alongside Poland in the Visegrad Group is also a way to neutralise the latter, which is now the most anti-Russian of the whole EU. Even the Baltic countries are not united regarding the policy to be adopted vis-à-vis Russia. For example, the Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas has just declared that he sees no reason to question the protocol of

cooperation that binds his country to Russia[10]. The President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, also dares to appeal solemnly and in an argumentative way to renewing relations with Russia[11].

Is Europe far from asserting a common position vis-à-vis Russia? The military rantings in the Baltic Sea suggest Europe cannot afford to lose any more time. Russia's demonstrations of strength certainly aim to put pressure on the Europeans so that they move away from the American influence and regain their strategic independence. But the strengthening of NATO's capabilities in Europe is now a reality that is also turning the clock on Russia: for the moment, in the event of a conflagration, Russia would have the strategic advantage (as a report of RAND clearly states[12]); but the quadrupling of the US military budget for the protection of Europe[13], the strengthening of human and technological capacities, etc., do not allow Russia to wait indefinitely for NATO to be capable to impose its law again. It is a real race against time that is played now, bringing in, at the end of this year, some very significant conflict risks.

Moreover, there is a risk that the re-establishment of the dialogue with Russia would not be enough to find solutions when so many tensions have accumulated over the last 15 years, which are perhaps irreversible since 2014. History does not serve the same dish up again...

What 21st century for Europe?

An EU-Eurasia summit to launch a security partnership between the two areas, an official referendum allowing the annexation of the Crimea to Russia to be recognised with a compensatory policy for Ukraine, a special status for Kaliningrad, a tripartite negotiation on the future of the Balkans, an energy partnership negotiated on equal bases... All the current points of tension can become good themes of the dialogue which should make it possible to build a lasting and mutually beneficial Euro-Russian relationship in the 21st century. A beautiful dream, for now ...



Figure 2 - Gas routes between Russia and Europe. Source: [Le Blog Finance](#), 02/07/2017

Notes

[1] You can read details about the degradation of the situation in the Baltic Sea in these two excellent articles. Sources: [Telos](#), 22/09/2017; [Le Grand Continent](#), 16/09/2017

[2] Source: [Atlantic Council](#), 09/02/2016

[3] Source: [Tass](#), 17/09/2017

[4] NATO is not left behind in the region: missions like [Baltops](#) or even [Saber Strike](#) were set up in those Baltic regions.

[5] For example, the interception of the Russian Defence Minister's plane over the Baltic Sea and the way Russian air force reacted. Source: [Le Temps](#), 23/06/2017

[6] Source: [Wikipedia](#)

[7] Source: [RFI](#), 08/10/2017

[8] Source: [Britannica](#), 21/08/20017

[9] Source: [The Globalist](#), 17/09/2017

[10] Source: [ERR.ee](#), 09/10/2017

[11] Source: [L'Essentiel.lu](#), 13/10/2017

[12] The Rand Corporation is a neo-conservative think-tank very close to the White House, specialised in cold war and military strategy. Its 2016 report justified a reinforcement of all the US troops in the Baltic Sea. Source: [Rand Corporation](#), 2016

[13] Source: [Atlantic Council](#), 09/02/2016

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