



EU-Russia Security Relations: Old Problems in a New International System

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This article aims at both investigating the serious state of security relations between the European Union and Russia as well as comparing it with the traditional difficulties encountered by the Euro-Russian security dialogue during the Cold War period. Far from presuming to offer an exhaustive analysis of this vast issue, this study wants to propose some causes for reflection regarding the historical continuity of the European key security problems. The goals here are in fact those of both identifying the central reasons which continue to prevent the establishment and the strengthening of an efficient European security system as well as highlighting their connections with the historical evolution of the continental strategic system, finally advancing some considerations about current perspectives of an improvement in bilateral wary perceptions.

This analysis must however be introduced by a necessary clarification. Speaking about bilateral Euro-Russian relations is arduous, due to the plurality of approaches traditionally adopted by the European countries towards Moscow as well as towards the Kremlin's course. As historiography has extensively demonstrated, differences in the aptitude of the EU governments have considerably lessened during the Cold War in the light of the common goal of ending the continental divide¹. Deriving from different national strategic, economic and cultural interests, European divergences have nonetheless always been present and they started to deepen again since the eve of the Soviet dissolution, therefore hindering the development of a productive post-bipolar dialogue between the EU institutions and Moscow.

As this article points out, the European political division on the security approach to Russia is one among the main unsolved questions inherited by both the Cold War international system as well as the EU unaccomplished political integration. Though

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¹ Regarding the unifying effect of the *détente* policy on the EU members cf. for inst. A. Romano, *The main task of European Political Cooperation: fostering détente in Europe*, in P. Villaume, O. A. Westad, *Perforating the iron curtain: European détente, transatlantic relations, and the Cold War, 1965-1985*, Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010, pp. 123-142; D. Mockli, *The EC Nine, the CSCE, and the changing pattern of European Security*, in A. Wenger, V. Mastny, C. Nuenlist (eds), *Origins of the European Security System. The Helsinki process revisited, 1965-1975*, New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 145-163; G. Niedhart, *Ostpolitik and its impact on the Federal Republic's Relationship with the West*, in W. Loth, G.H. Soutou (eds), *The Making of Détente. Eastern and Western Europe in the Cold War, 1965-1975*, London-New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 117-132N. P. Ludlow (ed), *European Integration and the Cold War: Ostpolitik-Westpolitik, 1965-1973*, London, New York, Routledge, 2007; D. Allen, R. Rummel, W. Wessels, *European Political Cooperation: Towards a Foreign Policy for Western Europe*, London, Butterwoths-European Studies, 1982.

not new nor alone, this problem is still at the core of the Euro-Russian security confrontation and it has become ever more worrisome in the unstable multipolar system, which has followed the Soviet Union collapse. Recent cross-border conflicts in Eastern Europe have indeed revived the issue of the lack of cohesion among the European foreign policies, as demonstrated by disagreements on what should be the common reaction to the invasion of Crimea as well as on the size of the EU trade sanctions to Russia during the Ukraine crisis². The lack of a common European stance towards Russia is today, as it was in the past century, one of the main signal of weakness of the EU international personality. Only the recovery of the European political integration process would allow to nourish hopes of a substantial improvement of the current situation³.

1. The Missed Institutionalisation of EU-Russia Security Relations after the Fall of Bipolarism

Since the Cold War ending, relations between Europe and Russia have been experiencing an ever more complicated phase, especially worrisome in the security field, as a consequence of the bipolar system dissolution as well as of the international disorder it brought about. Primary reason of this dangerous evolution lies upon the progressive failure of the numerous ambitious projects of international reorganisation, which have been promoted at both regional and universal levels between the end of the '80s and the beginning of the '90s. This does include the striking inability increasingly shown by the European Union to play a leading international role.

At the end of the '80s, a conventional wisdom was widespread that from a prominent EU political personality new significant international responsibilities would have derived, as well as the tools needed to stabilise the European scenario⁴. In the mid of the '90s, however, a growing number of scholars started to wonder about the real shape that the EU political architecture was going to assume as well as about the nature of the new established relations with its continental neighbours. Many observers and researchers therefore started to address the rising issue of the European system, which would have followed the breakup of the Soviet Union. Among these

² The issue of the EU commercial sanctions to Russia after the Crimean invasion, especially, allows to observe very diversified stances taken by the EU members: from those uncompromising, such as the British ones, until the softer Italian or Greek positions, which reveal different levels of commercial cooperation and economic interdependence with Moscow. Cf. S. De Galbert, *A Year of Sanctions against Russia: Now What?*, CSIS Europe Program Report, October 2015.

³ Cf. A. J. Cornell, *The National Security Challenge to Eu Legal Integration*, pp. 151-172, and E. Gill Pedro, *Immunity or Community? Security in the European Union*, pp. 173-193, in A. B. Engelbrekt, X. Groussot, *The Future of Europe: Political and Legal Integration Beyond Brexit*, Oxford, Hart Publishing, 2019.

⁴ Cf. for instance C. Layton, "One Europe: One World. A first Exploration of Europe's Potential Contribution to World Order", in *Journal of World Trade Law*, Special Supplement n. 4, 1986, and, by the same author, *A Step beyond Fear. Building a European Security Community*, London, Federal Trust for Education and Research, 1989; R. McGeehan, "European Defence Cooperation: a political Perspective", in *The World Today*, vol. 41, n. 6, 1985, pp. 116-119.

scholars, Michael Smith can be recalled as well as his article “The European Union and a Changing Europe: Establishing the Boundaries of Order”, appeared in 1996⁵.

During the 90’s, in fact, cooperation between Europe and Russia undertook a very different direction compared with that envisaged during the Cold War final stage, as demonstrated by growing difficulties in handling cross-border relations. Since the mid of the ‘80s, Mikhail Gorbachev and the major European leaders optimistically hypothesised a fruitful reform of their relations into a “Common European Home” under whose “security and confidence roof” all peoples in the continent would have been reunited⁶. That proposal quickly lost its consistency, while the trustful mood that had marked the decade of the ‘80s was overtaken by a pragmatic and rushed transformation of the international relations, rather based on the emerging new balance of military as well as economic powers than on a clear vision and organisation of the international system which had to replace bipolarism and its security foundation⁷. One among the main consequences of this disappointing progression was the lack of a clear definition of the Euro-Russian relations, which progressively lost their sense of direction and kept evolving outside of any institutional framework, leaving unresolved the issue of their security rationale⁸.

Failure of projects of international reorganisation did not only involve the European scenario, but encompassed the whole international picture, given the progressive abandonment of the UN reform plans. It is possible to connect in a common picture both regional and universal cooperation and collective security problems⁹. At the regional level, in fact, the stall of the European political integration prevented the birth of a united as well as influential player, able to talk with Russia on an equal ground and to tackle the most serious issues in the foreign policy agenda, especially in the strategic sector. On a wider level, moreover, the lack of a cohesive European interlocutor in the relationship with the Kremlin jeopardised the whole institutionalising process of Euro-Russian relations, thus contributing to the broader crisis of the UN collective security system as well as to the missed international support to its reform projects¹⁰.

⁵ M. E. Smith, “The European Union and a Changing Europe: Establishing the Boundaries of Order”, in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 34, n.1, 1996, pp. 5-28. Among his more recent works: *Europe’s Common Security and Defence Policy*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2017, and *International Security: Politics, Policy, Prospects*, London, Palgrave, 2010. More generally about the initial pessimistic reflections on the EU ability to improve its foreign policy profile cf. D. Allen and M. E. Smith, “Western Europe’s presence in the contemporary international arena”, in *Review of International Studies*, n. 16, 1990, pp. 19-37.

⁶ Cf. N. Malcolm, “The Common European Home and the Soviet European Policy”, in *International Affairs*, vol. 65, n. 4, Autumn 1989, pp. 659-676; A. Ferrari, *EU-Russia: what went wrong?*, in A. Ferrari (ed.), *Beyond Ukraine. EU and Russia in search of a new relation*, www.ispionline.it, pp. 29-44.

⁷ Cf. A. Varsori, *Le relazioni internazionali dopo la guerra fredda (1989-2017)*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2018; F. Salleo, “La crisi ucraina. Prove per un nuovo equilibrio mondiale”, in *Affari Esteri*, n. 174, 2014, pp. 278-296.

⁸ On the growing international disorder cf. also the analyses published in 2017 ISPI Report, edited by A. Colombo e P. Magri, “L’età dell’incertezza”, www.ispionline.it.

⁹ Cfr. M. Ceccorulli, *Ukraine Crisis: Linking Regional (Dis)Order to Global Order*, October 6, 2014, ISPI Commentary, www.ispionline.it.

¹⁰ Regarding the historical development of the UN activities and the evolution of the UN agencies, as well as the difficulties faced by their more recent reform process, cf. the works recently edited by L. Tosi, *Le sfide della pace. L’Onu e l’Italia per una World Community (1945-2015)*, Padova, Wolters Kluwer/Cedam, 2017.

At the end of the Cold War, the European integration was among the first projects to enter a profound, though not immediately evident, contradiction. In the climate of great enthusiasm that accompanied the fall of the Berlin Wall and the following policies of enlargement to the East, the integration process started to abandon its original goal, that was the creation of a political - and possibly federal - entity. Eastern enlargement quickly became a goal in itself, with immediate and beneficial economic implications but with far more uncertain political objectives in the medium and long terms¹¹. The united Europe, wrapped in the emotional fanfare of the end of the East-West confrontation, was actually going forth with unfurled sails towards the worse setback of its history, which would have matched with a deep and lasting internal crisis, paving therefore the way to the crisis of credibility and democratic support of our days¹². After the fall of bipolarism, member states' interests grew ever more diversified and, unable to share a common political and socio-economic vision, the European governments fell back to limited efforts of reconstruction and reunification, by favouring temporary as well as noncommittal choices. The so-called "horizontal" dimension of the integration process - namely the extension of the internal market - prevailed over the "vertical" one, that is the increase and the deepening of the powers effectively integrated into common institutions, therefore preventing the Eu from acquiring the necessary instruments of government as well as from assuming a clear political profile¹³. Theoretical approaches to the study of the European Political Cooperation too, as well as the empirical analyses, started to diverge, often becoming conflictual¹⁴, until, in more recent years, they came back to focus on comparative analyses of the European national defence policies more than on a trans/supra-national level¹⁵.

Even in the aftermath of the reforms introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, the foreign and defence policy sectors remained ground of sole competence of the national states as well as the common foreign policy goals remained incredibly

¹¹ A similar interpretation in A. Colombo (ed.), *L'Europa in seconda fila*, Rapporti ISPI 2014, www.ispionline.it. Cf. J. O'Brennan, *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*, New York, Routledge, 2006.

¹² About the difficulties faced by the European integration process, in historical as well as current perspectives, there is availability of a wide international bibliography that is impossible here to recall for understandable limits of space. The reference is therefore only to some more recent works: L. Mechi, D. Pasquinucci (eds), *Integrazione europea e trasformazioni socio-economiche*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2017; S. Cruciani, M. Ridolfi (eds), *L'Unione Europea e il Mediterraneo. Relazioni internazionali, crisi politiche e regionali (1947-2016)*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2017.

¹³ Cf. F. Schimmelfennig, "The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union", in *International Organization*, n. 55, v. 01, February 2003, pp. 47-80; A. Moravksic, M. A. Vachudova, "National Interests, State Power, and Eu Enlargement", in *East European Politics and Societies*, n. 1, v. 17, pp. 42-57; H. Sjursen, "Why Expand? The Question of Legitimacy and Justification in the EU's Enlargement Policy", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, n. 3, v. 40, September 2002, pp. 491-513; S. Romano, "Tempo di ripensare l'Unione Europea", *Corriere della Sera*, May 9, 2015; S. Collins, *German Policy-Making and Eastern Enlargement of the European Union During the Kohl Era. Managing the Agenda?*, Manchester-New York, Manchester University Press, 2002; E. Verdun. O. Croci (eds), *The European Union in the Wake of Eastern Enlargement: Institutional and Policy-Making Challenges*, Manchester-New York, Manchester University Press, 2002.

¹⁴ On this plurality of approaches see the works edited by M. Hollande, *The Future of European Political Cooperation: Essays on Theories and Practices*, Springer, 1999.

¹⁵ Cf. H. Meijer, M. Wyss, "Upside down: Reframing European Defence Studies", in *Cooperation and Conflicts*, 2018.

generic. Not by chance, most recent EU initiatives in this fields have pursued limited and sometimes ambiguous aims, as in the case of the launching of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and later of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) which, while aiming at improving relations with Russia and the Common Neighbourhood, were not able to find neither the conceptual coherence nor the practical tools necessary to their effective implementation¹⁶.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that even after the birth of the Common Security and Defence Policy (PSDC) the Euro-Atlantic dimension remained the prevailing dimension of the European security, making up for the lack of a common European integrated defence. Following the 1999 NATO Summit and the creation of a European Union Military Staff (EUMS) within the Shape, the Euro-Atlantic strategic collaboration has been further strengthened thanks to the 2002 Berlin Plus agreement¹⁷. In fact, as Nicoletta Pirozzi observed, the European countries continue to prefer defence and security alliances external to the EU framework, aimed at both pursuing specific agendas and influencing the European policies¹⁸. As a result, the EU does continue to refer to NATO, and therefore indirectly to the US, as a primary security guarantee in the new and highly unstable international system. Plans for strengthening both political and military integrations nurtured during the '80s, for instance the consolidation of the Western European Union (WEO), ended up by taking the shape of partial and inadequate solutions, such as the ambiguous and abstract "window" towards a European Defence Community provided for by the Lisbon Treaty (article 42, paragraph 2).

Moving to a broader level of observation, the whole process of institutionalisation of the Euro-Russian relations over the last decades seemed doomed to failure. The ambitious but unrealistic "great designs" of the mid-'80s, such as the Common European House, were soon deserted by the political discourse, overwhelmed by the mounting rhetoric of the Western prevailing in the East-West confrontation. Even those plans which initially appeared grounded and achievable progressively lost attractiveness and consensus, such as the idea of entrusting the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) with the task of institutionalising the Euro-Russian relations in the security sector. This was due to the concerns of those who feared a dangerous OSCE overlapping with NATO prerogatives¹⁹ as well as to the spreading persuasion that the Russian power had entered a phase of irreversible decay, which would have inevitably led it to orbit around the sphere of influence of the European common market²⁰.

¹⁶ On the difficulties faced by the ENP and the EAP initiatives are quickly increasing scholars' commentaries and have been published numerous self-critical revision documents on the part of the Eu institutions themselves. Cf. for instance R. Alcaro e M. Comelli, *La politica europea di vicinato*, marzo 2005, n. 22, IAI, Quaderni.

¹⁷ Regarding the current state of NATO-EU strategic cooperation cf. NATO and EU official texts: <http://www.natolibguides.info/nato-eu/documents>.

¹⁸ N. Pirozzi, *Ue: "Foedera et impera", l'importanza delle alleanze*, ISPI Commentary, 21 February, 2019, <https://www.ispionline.it/>.

¹⁹ R. E. Hunter, *The European and Security Policy: NATO's Companion – or Competitor?*, Santa Monica, Rand Corporation, 2002.

²⁰ About Western Europe's change of perspective regarding the Russian international *status* cf. D. Allen's paper, *West European Responses to change in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, ECSA Biennial Conference, George Mason University, May 1991.

The project of creating a single area of security, economic and social cooperation was gradually replaced, during the '90s, by the Euro-Russian "Partnership" project which since the outset claimed to pursue far more limited goals, especially in the security sector. Moreover, this project was based on the controversial principle of "conditionality", which related the entity of the EU "concessions" to the post-Soviet Russia's goodwill in carrying on reform processes. This EU growing ambition of standing out as a "norm maker" in Russia as well as in the Eastern neighbour countries has been interpreted by some scholars as a compelling aptitude of the EU institutions to replicate themselves. Benedetta Voltolini, for instance, defines this behaviour as the "tendency of the institutions to export 'institutional isomorphism' as a default option"²¹. The rationale of conditionality, which will later provide the conceptual framework of the whole ENP, was soon perceived by the Russians and by the rest of the Neighbourhood as an annoying instrument of political and social leverage. The ENP itself started to be criticised for its "one-way modality", hinting at the unilateral transfer of regulatory models from the EU to the Eastern countries²².

Finally, to complete this picture, it is possible to observe a connection between the failure of the institutionalisation of the Euro-Russian relations and the broader failure of the reform efforts aimed at revitalising the UN collective security system. At the universal level too, indeed, ideas advanced at the end of the Cold War have been progressively set aside, and especially those proposals aimed at modifying the functioning of the Security Council in order to extend its composition so to make it more correspondent to the multi-centre international system²³. In this way, a precious opportunity went lost of relaunching the UN system by taking advantage of the temporary Russian overtures. In fact, during the '90s, the UN system represented for Moscow an attractive alternative to a feared "unipolar system" and to the assertion of the US as the "controller" of international security. Nonetheless, a growing number of states - and among them many EU members - then embraced the idea of a Western Governance as a possible convenient assurance against the new international disorder. As a result, Russia was induced to focus on a more unilateral approach in foreign policy, based on the restoration of its traditional hard power tools and aimed at reaffirming its regional control. After a quick phase during which it really seemed possible to undertake a reform of the world organisation, the international system inexorably fell back to a traditional division in "areas of influence"²⁴.

²¹ Cf. B. Voltolini, *La politica estera e di difesa europea: approcci teorici recenti*, in G. Bonvicini (ed.), *L'Unione Europea attore di sicurezza regionale e globale*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2010, pp. 45-62.

²² Regarding the difference among the Eastern Neighbours reactions to the introduction of the principle of conditionality, see the 2008-2010 ESRC survey "Europeanising or securitising the Outsiders?", and Elena Korosteleva's research *Eastern Partnership: A New Opportunity for the Neighbours?*, London, Routledge, 2011, that is the result of a field-research based on interviews to officials from both the EU institutions and the Eastern partner governments, together with public opinion surveys.

²³ About the efforts aimed at reforming the UN security system and the obstacles they met cf. for instance P. C. Danchin, H. Fischer (eds), *United Nations Reform and the New Collective Security*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010; K. R. Gupta (ed), *Reform of the United Nations*, vo. 1, New Delhi, Atlantic Publishers, 2006; G. Bhatta, *Reforms at the United Nations: Contextualising the Annan Agenda*, Singapore, Singapore University Press, 2000; L. Blanchfield, *United Nations Reform: US Policy and International Perspectives*, Report for Congress, December 15, 2009.

²⁴ Cf. P. Migliavacca, *Su Mosca soffia il vento dell'Est*, in "Affari Esteri", n. 174, 2014, pp. 310-327.

The failure of any reform project between the '80s and '90s explains the increasingly worrying direction undertaken by the Euro-Russian relations since the end of the last century. EU attempts at establishing new forms of cooperation with the Kremlin were inspired by an unlimited trust in the attractive power of the common market as well as in the European ability to support the Russian transition, which should lead Moscow towards a development model more compatible with the European one. This approach, based on the belief in both the EU market magnetism and the EU institutions' ability to bargain the conditions of East-West rapprochement in Europe, was supported by the so-called "negotiated order" theory, which emerged in the mid of the '80s in the sociological field²⁵. This political rationale underlies the 1991 credit policy which, in 1994, took the shape of the first Partnership Agreement. Meanwhile, cooperation in the security field remained neglected, or at most disguised as timid attempts at cooperation between the Russian Federation and NATO, as in the case of the first joint observation mission during the Yugoslav crisis²⁶.

2. The EU Eastern Enlargement and the Increased Tensions with Moscow

It is well known that EU initiatives of the '90s, based on a too optimistic assessment of its soft power tools, failed to achieve the desired effects and were finally overwhelmed by the 2008 economic crisis. Since the end of the '90s, the EU Eastern policy started to be perceived as ever more hostile by Russia which, after the disorientating phase followed to the USSR dissolution, began to recover its internal stability as well as the desire to fortify its new borders²⁷. In terms of security, Putin's advent marked indeed the return to old foreign policy methods, which traditionally relied on both direct and indirect control of the surrounding "buffer" territories.

Since 1999, moreover, EU and NATO Eastern enlargements started to overlap, according to a dual dynamic that in Moscow's perspective inevitably appeared as preordained and threatening²⁸. The evolving military balance in Europe seemed to fatally renew the blocks' confrontation, now represented by NATO and Russia, since Europe had proven incapable of creating an alternative security and cooperation system²⁹. In the lack of a direct EU security role, NATO represented the only available security net for the former Warsaw Pact countries, which had lost the Russian protection by asking to join the European Union, and its enlargement was unavoidable.

²⁵ Cf. M. E. Smith, op. cit., J. J. Richardson, *European Union: Power and Policy Making*, London, Routledge, 1996; I. Toemmel, *The European Union: What it is and how it works*, London-New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

²⁶ The reference is to the activity of the Contact Group in Yugoslavia. Cf. H. Leigh-Phippard, "The Contact Group on (And in) Bosnia: An Exercise in Conflict Mediation?", in *International Journal*, vol. 53, n. 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 306-324.

²⁷ A. Vitale, "Il potere in Russia: continuità e trasformazioni", in A. Ferrari (ed.), *Oltre la Crimea*, cit., pp. 53-68.

²⁸ P. J. J. Welfens, *EU Eastern Enlargement and the Russian Transformation Crisis*, Springer-Verlag, Berlin, 1999.

²⁹ Since the '90s, the idea of an unavoidable comeback to a "Cold War" style of confrontation with Russia became increasingly popular, as demonstrated by Samuel Huntington's book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996. See also S. Bielanski, "Russia, Poland and the New Europe: inevitable clash?", in A. Ferrari (ed.), *Beyond Ukraine*, cit., pp. 65-78.

Nonetheless, this produced serious repercussions in the EU relations with the Kremlin, leading to a continental strategic status quo far more precarious than in the original idea of the concurrent dismantlement of the two military blocks.

To worsen this situation, from the beginning of the new millennium the EU took two other unwise political stances: the adoption of the unpopular principle of conditionality as ENP and later EAP foundation and, on the other hand, the increased search for energy independence from Russia. In particular, though the EU energy policy remained unclear and unreliable in absence of a common approach, the numerous declarations about a possible transfer of US shale gas technologies to Europe (impracticable until now) combined with recent national investment policies in renewable energy and energy saving were enough to generate Moscow's apprehension³⁰.

High tension between Russians and Europeans increasingly affected the management of the security crises that erupted since the beginning of the '90s. Triggered by the geo-political instability which followed the USSR dissolution, such crises took the shape of re-awakening "frozen" ethnic and territorial conflicts in the former Soviet space, as in the case of Transnistria in 1992 and Nagorno-Karabakh between 1992 and 1994, and they gradually induced the Kremlin and EU institutions to take opposite stances. EU-Russia confrontation easily fueled the following "coloured" revolts in Georgia and Ukraine between 2003 and 2004, which quickly assumed an ideological character, with media and politicians contributing to revive Cold War behaviours and languages, proving once again that 1989 was all but a clear caesura with the past.

Tensions in Euro-Russian relations remained palpable until the explosion of the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict and the 2009 Russian-Ukrainian gas crisis, which originated from an apparently limited dispute between Gazprom and Naftogaz Ukraini, state companies of a gas-exporting and a gas-transit countries. Nonetheless, the latter crisis ended up in the larger conflict that led to the Russian annexation of Crimea and further antagonised EU relations with the Kremlin³¹. Putin's presidential re-election in 2012, against some expectations of a government turnover, was therefore perceived by many Europeans as a confirmation of the authoritarian and warlike course adopted by the Kremlin which, since 2010, had started to threaten to adopt a "povorot" policy by re-orientating its traditional European foreign policy axes towards the East³². The revival of the Eurasian Union project as well as the

³⁰ Literature devoted to the relation between energy and geopolitics is reach. As an example, see M. Verda (ed.), *Energia e geopolitica. Gli attori e le tendenze del prossimo decennio*, 2014, www.ispionline.it; Id, *EU: I costi della sicurezza energetica*, ISPI Commentary, 8 ottobre 2014, www.ispionline.it; M. Nicolazzi and N. Rossetto, *Letà dell'abbondanza. Come cambia la sicurezza energetica*, 2016, www.ispionline.it.

³¹ Cf. A. Paul, *The Eastern Partnership, the Russia-Ukraine War, and the Impact on the South Caucasus*, IAI Working papers, n. 6, February 2015.

³² Cf. W. Rodkiewicz, *The Turn to the East. The Flawed Diversification of Russian Foreign Policy*, Center for Eastern Studies, Warsaw, n. 44, November 2014; A. Borkofsky, *Mith and Reality of Russia's Cina Pivot*, pp. 55-72, and A. Ferrari, *Russia and the Euroasian Economic Union. A Failed Project?*, pp. 115-130, both in A. Ferrari (ed.), *Putin's Russia: Really Back?*, 2016, www.ispionline.it; S. Sideri, *La Cina e gli altri. Nuovi equilibri della geopolitica*, ISPI e-book, 2011, www.ispionline.it.

new energy agreements with China and India gave a certain credibility to what was initially looked as an unrealistic danger. The same is for the enhanced military cooperation and the renewed strategic dialogue between Moscow and Beijing³³.

Political regression in East-West relations in Europe very negatively impacted also the public opinion, favouring the revival of traditional mistrust and grudges, thus compromising a great part of progresses made over the '70s and the '80s in the recovery of a climate of mutual trust. This especially revived the fears of the East European countries, historically and geographically more exposed to the Russian influence. Public perceptions have been inflamed, in recent years, by the public discourse that was dominated by Brussels and Moscow mutual accusations of aggressive expansionist ambitions. The EU is in fact depicted by the Russian media as a fierce competitor, determined to undermine the Russian political and commercial leverage in the Common Neighbourhood area. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) offered by the EaP Association Agreements, in particular, is pointed out as the demonstration of the EU hostile and far from collaborative attitude, due to its controversial membership "exclusivity", which implied the impossibility, for the adhering countries, to become part of other custom unions such as Putin's Euroasian Union. On the other hand, the unilateral foreign policy course adopted by Russia in recent years has induced the EU institutions and the European governments - some more than others - to denounce a Russian will to restore its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, even by the use of force if necessary. Putin's Euroasian projects strongly fuelled this European mistrust. The Kremlin plans, indeed, seem to go far beyond the creation of a simple custom union in order to favour the birth of a new political and institutional organisation revolving around Moscow's direction, aimed at associating the countries in the post-Soviet space in a more effective re-edition of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

3. Traditional European Security Problems and Current Weaknesses

In this climate of hostility, the recent Russian calls for the resumption of the pan-European cooperation on security within the Osce frame ended up falling on deaf ears. At the end of the Cold War, the Organisation on Security and Cooperation in Europe was universally expected to embody the new Euro-Russian security dialogue, by inheriting the experience of East-West cooperation led within the frame of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) between the '70s and the '80s. Nonetheless, the Organisation is currently demonstrating that its heritage include both positive as disappointing experiences, especially unsatisfying when relating to the unresolved issues of the European security. In fact, OSCE is striving

³³ Cf. V. Kashin, *Russian-Chinese Security Cooperation and Military-to-Military Relations*, ISPI Commentary, December 21, 2018, <https://www.ispionline.it/>; F. Indeo, *Russia-China Military Cooperation in Central Asia: A Temporary Convergence of Strategic Interests*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.ispionline.it/>.

today to overcome those same limits already faced decades ago by the CSCE in the context of the so-called “first basket”, where the Soviet and the Western stances proved to be irreconcilable³⁴.

Security matters have always represented the most sensitive and difficult field for Europeans in negotiations with Moscow, given the clearly unbalanced relationship in favour of the Kremlin on the military (both conventional and strategic) ground. This unbalanced relationship had already provoked the failure of the Mutual Balance Force Reduction (MBFR) negotiations, led over the '70s in parallel with the CSCE works. MBFR primarily aimed at promoting a reduction in conventional forces of the two blocks in Europe and, secondly, at subtracting from the CSCE baskets a difficult negotiating sector, in which the Europeans would have found themselves in a disadvantaged position. While the MBFR talks, as expected, did not produce results, the CSCE negotiations, on the other hand, resulted in this way much more productive for the Western countries, though they could not completely avoid the issue of the continental security management, which remained a burden and partly conditioned the broader reform goals pursued by the Helsinki Final Act as well as by the Conference follow-up.

During the Cold War period, only the close alliance with the United States in NATO could allow to balance, at least in part, the unbalanced strategic relationship between the Europeans and the Russians. For this reason, since the '60s the European countries demand a direct involvement of the United States in order to open the pan-European negotiations, by prompting Moscow to accept to modify its original idea of a Conference on Security in Europe (CES) in an “extended” conference including Canada and the United States. The theme of “security”, moreover, had to match with broader themes of economic and social “cooperation”, by contemporaneously working on three contextual “baskets”: security, economic cooperation and human rights³⁵. In this way, thanks to the linkage negotiation tactic, it would have been possible to balance the agreements reached in parallel in the different baskets, putting in place a convenient mechanism of mutual “exchange” between security and economic-social concessions which would have allowed to maximise the leverage of the EC countries’ soft power instruments.

Also today, since the strategic weight of the European countries has not substantially changed, US participation and support continue to be necessary preconditions,

³⁴ Regarding the problems faced by the CSCE in the first basket cf. what I have more specifically observed in the volume *Non dovrà essere un'altra Yalta. L'Ostpolitik italiana degli anni Sessanta e la ricerca di un nuovo ordine europeo*, Padova, Cedam/Wolters Kluwer, 2017, pp. 117-133, as well as in the article *L'Italia e la CSCE: un negoziato a più livelli (1969-1985)*, in L. Tosi (ed.), *In dialogo. La diplomazia multilaterale italiana negli anni della guerra fredda*, Padova, Cedam/Wolters Kluwer, 2013, pp. 372-425. More generally, on the dynamics of the Csce negotiations cf. V. Y. Ghebali, *La diplomatie de la détente: la Csce, d'Helsinki à Vienne (1973-1989)*, Brussels, Emile Bruylant, 1989; A. Bloed (ed), *The Challenges of Changes: the Helsinki Summit of the CSCE and its Aftermath*, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1993; C. Meneguzzi Rostagni (ed), *The Helsinki Process. A Historical Reappraisal*, Padova, Cedam, 2005; A. Wenger, V. Mastny, C. Nuenlist (eds), *Origins of the European Security System. The Helsinki Process Revisited, 1965-1975*, New York, Routledge, 2008; O. Bange, G. Niedhart (eds), *Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe*, Berghen Books, 2008; A. Romano, *From Détente in Europe to European Détente. How the West shaped the Helsinki CSCE*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2009.

³⁵ Regarding the original Soviet project cf. D. Selvage, *The Warsaw Pact and the European Security Conference, 1964-1969*, in A. Wenger, V. Mastny, C. Nuenlist, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-106.

from the European point of view, to enter security negotiations with Moscow in order to avoid agreements negatively conditioned by the greater Russian military leverage. Even if, as mentioned, the EU defence integration process did make some progresses, the persistent fear of a direct negotiation with the Kremlin is manifest, due to the Russian possession of major conventional resources and deterrence tools. This unbalance relationship is in fact the main obstacle which keeps preventing the Osce institutionalisation of the security dialogue which, in the long run, would risk to overlap and weaken the role of NATO in Europe.

A clear signal of these fears was the clumsy response of the European governments to the 2008 Dmitry Medvedev's proposal of relaunching the building of a new pan-European security architecture by resuming the project of an OSCE direct role. Actually, the proposal of the newly elected Russian President was little innovative compared to the past and proved that Moscow does continue to consider the continental security as a form of "crystallisation" of the European *status quo*, without taking into account the will of the common neighbourhood countries to make their own political and economic choices. The Russian side also continues to demand NATO and US exclusion from any possible negotiation. Although there has been no official response on the part of the European countries, Medvedev's initiatives managed to revived a debate in the EU from which very distant opinions have emerged, especially between those who agree with recovering of the "spirit of the Paris Charter" and with turning the OSCE into an instrument of exclusive Euro-Russian dialogue flanking the EU-NATO cooperation, and those who prefer to look at OSCE as a future "Euro-Atlantic Council" including both Russia and the US.

In any case, reasons for rejecting the Kremlin's proposals are not lacking, starting from the fact that, as in the '50s, Moscow still prefers to address bilaterally the smaller European governments on these issues rather than open a direct dialogue with the EU institutions, although it is impossible to deny that the member countries have not yet attributed to the EU the necessary jurisdiction in this field. A further obstacle to the resumption of dialogue is the hard security concept which is at the basis of the Russian security projects. In Moscow opinion, in fact, a true security can only derive from the observation of two key principles of territorial integrity and the prohibition of the use and of the threat of the use of force. This traditional Russian interpretation of international security is today very distant from the European one which, on the opposite, mainly refers to security as a measure of the domestic stability of any single state and implies the right of the international community to inspect - what for Russia is tantamount to interfere - the behaviour held by governments within their own borders. From this concept of security derives the right to observe and verify, for example, other governments' respect of both human rights and the rule of law as well as their ability to guarantee adequate social and political reforms.

Finally, to complicate matters, there was the bad timing of the Russian war initiatives and the blatant contradictions of Medvedev's proposals with the onset of the Georgian crisis in the same 2008. In fact, the Russian military intervention, justified

by the right to protect the self-determination of Russian citizens outside the Russian border, was perceived as an open violation of Georgia's territorial integrity. In this way, the Kremlin demonstrated that, when its interests were at stake, it was ready to promptly trample on those same principles it was proposing as the basis of the new "European security architecture". Equally negative was the European reaction to the parallel presentation to the Western media, again by Medvedev, of the so-called "five guidelines" of the Russian foreign policy, among which stood out Moscow's right to protect Russian citizens living abroad, along with the "special treatment" she was entitled to reserve to her "areas of special interest"³⁶.

4. The Limits of the Western Governance

Not by chance, since the mid-'90s the EU demonstrated a predilection for an opposite process of "de-structuring" and "de-institutionalisation" of its relations with Russia, by setting them at the same level of relations with other major powers of the Asia-Pacific area and therefore denying the existence of a privileged dialogue. Since 1994, the Communication from the European Commission to the Council entitled "Towards a new strategy for Asia" showed signs of a desire to "distance" Russia from a pan-European perspective as well as to abandon the search for a closer and more structured form of cooperation. In 2001, the new Communication from the Commission "Europe and Asia: a strategic framework for an enhanced partnership" reaffirmed this approach, together with the implementation of the diplomatic instrument of the Asem summits. The Asem summits, in fact, started to operate in 1996 and involved over the years a growing number of Asian countries, including Russia, in a wide dialogue mainly focused on socio-economic cooperation and limited other issues of common interest³⁷.

Dangers underlying this progressive de-structuring of the Euro-Russian relations, together with their increasing vagueness, are today intensified by the concurrent weaknesses of the universal security system, of which regional relations should be part. In fact, during the '90s, collective security system reforming and strengthening processes were obstructed by an emerging Western ambition to exert a unilateral governance which should replace the UN role. Key factor of this evolution has been the progressive assertion of NATO as the manager of not only the European but of the whole international security, pursued by a continuous widening of its rights to military intervene out-of-area in order to protect its members' interests as well as to act outside any UN mandate in order to assure the respect of international law and security.

At moments, during the '90s, it seemed possible that a security system based on a Western governance made root, by including Russia in its composition and therefore becoming a sort of new edition of a "concert of great powers". In this direction seemed

³⁶ Medvedev's interview with Television Channel Euronews is available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/48303>.

³⁷ The first Asem summit took place in Bangkok in 1996 on proposal of Singapore and France and, from then on, the ASEM summits kept to gather every two years.

to go both the G7 enlargement to G8, in 1998, and the creation of the Partnership for Peace, in 1994, which NATO opened to Russia and to its former European allies. Nonetheless, the NATO “partnership policy” of the ‘90s did not take into the right account the weight of emerging states such as China and India, and it was completely frustrated, in 1999, by the starting process of direct annexation on the part of NATO of the former USSR satellites. Nato Eastern enlargement, followed by the start of the EU Eastern enlargement, negatively conditioned the Russian perception of both the Partnership’s goals and the minority role Moscow was asked to play in it, thus putting an end to any talk.

NATO enlargement to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary took place in open contradiction with the public commitments made by the Bush Administration at the end of the Cold War, namely the assurance that none of the superpowers would have taken unilateral advantages from the dissolution of the blocs³⁸. The Clinton Administration did not seem to consider itself really bound by its predecessors’ commitments and, since the end of the ‘90s, its relations with Moscow became openly confrontational.

After the inauguration of the G. W. Bush administration, in 2001, NATO cannot be said to have toned down its approach to Russia, further worsened, on the contrary, by the plans to install a new anti-missile system in Poland and an interceptor system in the Czech Republic³⁹. Moreover, the prospect of a NATO follow-up enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia, manifested at 2008 Bucharest summit, was the final blow to the precarious relationship established between East and West after the dissolution of the USSR and lit the Crimean fuse⁴⁰. With the 2008 Bucharest Declaration, in fact, NATO initiated talks with Albania and Croatia about their membership into the organisation, reaffirmed its commitment in the Balkans and Afghanistan, and, at point 23, anticipated the further membership of Ukraine and Georgia: “NATO welcomed the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia to acquire NATO membership. The North Atlantic Council pointed out that the two countries will become members of NATO”⁴¹. NATO enlargement plans involved this time two former Soviet Republics directly bordering with the Russian Federation, both in control or disputing territories considered as legitimately Russian by Moscow⁴². A hypothetical NATO enlargement

³⁸ Regarding the commitments made by the Bush Administration at the end of the Cold War cf. the US Ambassador Jack Matlock’s memoir, *Reagan and Gorbachev. How the Cold War Ended*, Radom House, 2005.

³⁹ See M. Larivé, *The Building of the US Missile Shield in Europe. The Triangular Relationship: US, EU, Russia*, EUMA Special Series, vol. 11, n. 8, June 2011; W. Slocombe, O. Thranert, A. Pikayev, *Does Europe Need a New Missile Defence System?*, ESF Working Paper n.27, November 2007.

⁴⁰ Regarding NATO current Eastern policy, cf. Advisory Council on International Affairs, AIV, *The Future of NATO and European Security*, n. 106, October 2017, esp. pp. 33-41: <https://aiv-advies.nl/download/6934b2f7-1331-4af1-9be0-07c300c28bbc.pdf>. About the risks of an escalation in relations between Russia and Ukraina see S. Romano, *Russia-Ucraina: verso l’escalation?*, in *2019: il mondo che verrà*, December 27, 2018, ISPI Dossier, <https://www.ispionline.it/>.

⁴¹ See P. Gallis, *The NATO summit at Bucharest 2008*, CRS Report for Congress, 5 May 2008, Congressional Research Service, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS22847.pdf>. About the international dispute on Crimea and its history see the recent book of L. Piccardo, *Ai confine dell’Europa: piccola storia della Crimea contesa*, Bari, Cacucci, 2017.

⁴² Cf. H. A. Kissinger, *Quel ponte di Kiev tra Est e Ovest*, Repubblica, March 27, 2014.

to Ukraine, especially, could have provoked not only the Russian loss of the strategic naval base of Sevastopol in favour of a country with a clearly pro-European orientation and linked to the Eu by association agreements, but in favour of NATO itself⁴³.

5. Conclusion

The picture of Euro-Russian security relations is currently all but cheerful. Nonetheless, it seems possible to conclude this analysis with some optimistic comments, based on the experiences of both Cold War as well as more recent difficulties between Brussels and Moscow. It is indeed possible to hypothesise the existence of a sort of “natural” limit to the escalation of confrontation between the two, mainly due to their economic complementarity which continues to nourish a prevailing interest in cooperating, especially in the energy field. The strong interdependence that traditionally connects Russia and Europe, or at least a great part of the European countries, seems enough to guarantee a certain degree of security, although this *modus vivendi* has not been “institutionalised” or made the object of any binding agreement. It is difficult to expect from the EU members, at present, something more than a spontaneous instinct of self-preservation as well as of preservation of their vital interests, given the persistent differences among them on the better approach to Russia and the consequent lack of common positions.

Traditional European mistrust about the real Russian purposes is in fact still alive and the long-standing problems of the European security system remain unsolved. To date, the situation has not substantially changed, although a limited progress has been identified in some of the Kremlin’s most recent foreign policy reforms, such as the upgrades introduced into the 2013 “New Foreign Policy Concept”, which included a partial evolution of the Russian interpretation of international security⁴⁴. Though continuing to depict security mainly in terms of territorial integrity, the 2013 “new concept” for the first time made open reference to other factors that Moscow considers significant in order to guarantee its security, such as the internal economic growth, the technological modernisation and innovation capabilities, the improvement of citizens’ quality life as well as of the quality of democratic institutions, the respect of human rights and individual freedoms. According to some analyses, these changes can be read as a Russian desire, or at least as the desire of a part of the Russian leadership, to elaborate a security concept more suitable for the dialogue with the European countries as well as closer to their ideas. These adjustments in the Russian foreign policy have also been explained by some scholars as a possible effort to abandon a policy solely focused on hard power instruments, in order to exploit the growing Russian soft power tools and better respond to the Western moves. This course, however, does not appear to be

⁴³ See T. Penkova, “La strategia del Cremlino in Ucraina”, in A. Ferrari (ed.), *Oltre la Crimea*, 2014, www.ispionline.it, pp. 13-30; Id., *The Vilnius Summit and Ukraine’s Revolution as a Benchmark for EU Eastern Partnership Policy*, ISPI Analysis, n. 240, March 2014, www.ispionline.it.

⁴⁴ Text of the 2013 document “Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation” is available at http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186.

confirmed at all, nor does it seem to be uniformly accepted by the Russian political élites, thus keeping unpredictable the future of the Euro-Russian dialogue.

In conclusion, it is possible to affirm that the main difficulty which is today hindering the progress of the Euro-Russian security relations is the same that has prevented since the end of the Second World War the stabilisation of the continental security framework, namely the lack of a strong strategic actor in Western Europe and the imbalance between the involved military powers. The Russian military superiority, affirmed since when the USSR evolved into a strategic superpower, is still exerted by Russia despite the dissolution of both its military block and the Union of the Soviet Republics. Nonetheless, the only way to overcome this historical dilemma seems to be, today as before, a radical change in the military dimension of at least one of the involved actors. This perspective, at present, is only conceivable with a relaunching of the EU political and strategic integration and with the EU evolution into an equal interlocutor with respect to the Kremlin.

In order to face the difficulties of the European regional cooperation, it is therefore first of all necessary to focus on the EU internal problems and, only secondly, on the problems of communication and comprehension with Moscow. The strong complementarity between Russia resources and those of many European countries - for instance their geographical extension and population density, the energy availability and consumption rates, the technological development and the need for economic diversification - favours a natural interdependence and a return to a cooperative security framework. Anyway, we cannot demand from Moscow the willingness to equally dialogue with Brussels on security and strategic grounds since the European governments first show not desire to provide the common institutions with the necessary jurisdiction in the foreign and defence policy.