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Russia and NATO

Does the Kremlin Suffer from an Encirclement Syndrome?

Oxana Schmies *

A syndrome is both a medical and a psychological term. In any case, not a political one. However, the rhetoric and actions of the Russian political leadership in relation to NATO's eastward enlargement can indeed be captured very well by the term "syndrome". Based on syndromes, one can diagnose a disease. The question is: what is the disease and what are the methods of treatment? So, one by one.

To check the truth of the thesis about the "encirclement" makes no sense. It is no longer conducive to refute the encirclement thesis - to this historical science, based on files, records, and contemporary witness statements has already contributed a lot (see also an anthology that is rather a collection of opinion pieces on NATO Enlargement and Russia - <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/natos-enlargement-and-russia/9783838214788>). Not an allegedly given and broken promise of the West not to expand NATO eastwards of the former GDR border after 1991, but rather the military conflicts resulting from the 1990s, such as those in the former Yugoslavia and, later, the war in Iraq, and the failed attempts to establish trust between the Allies and Russia in the 1990s, the de facto not well functioning structures of cooperation between NATO and Russia, could have been responsible for the emergence of the "encirclement syndrome".

Being a partner or an adversary: serious thinking about this dilemma has obviously become obsolete in the Russian leadership itself in the years 2007-2008 at the latest, with the start of Russian malign activities in the international arena. The theme of NATO's eastward expansion as a threat to Russia is and remains a political tool for the Kremlin. It is for Russia's leadership a quasi-moral justification for the military actions on Russia's western borders and its

interventions in neighboring states. At the same time, it is also an *internal* instrument. Because the enemy images of autocratic regimes have often multiple functions, directed at the same time at the outside world and at the national population. NATO represents also, more generally, “the West”. Today, any Russian citizen can be accused of cooperating with the West, which implies having harmful intentions towards the Russian state. Russia, therefore, needs the argument of an alleged encirclement by NATO, and in this respect little will change until a fundamental political change occurs in Russia.

The argument of an “encirclement” is being used both domestically and in foreign policy with noticeable dangerous consequences for Europe. The willingness of the Russian leadership to escalate is being demonstrated again and again. Thus, on June 1, 2021, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu referred to the “fight against NATO” in an interview to the Russian TV channel Dozhd', when he announced plans to “deploy about 20 additional formations and military units” in the Western Military District of Russia by the end of the year. Literally, he said, “the actions of our Western adversaries destroy the security system in the world and force us to take appropriate countermeasures.” We can assume that these plans will be implemented. The shadowing of the British destroyer vessel HMS Defender sailing near Crimea at the end of June 2021 by the Russian military also clearly signals the willingness to increase threatening gestures. In its rhetoric the Kremlin hardly refers to facts. The reason for this “encirclement syndrome”, however, is that since the 1990s there has been no real integration of Russia into a common security system with Europe. The NATO-Russia Founding Act is, for instance, an attempt to create an institutional framework for Russia to participate in transatlantic security decisions - without giving it a veto right over decisions taken by the alliance. The Founding Act is now a testimony to an unrealized vision of cooperation.

The eastward expansion of NATO is a fact. The alliance is the core of the transatlantic security system and Russia, which is not a part of this framework, represents a threat and has been labeled with good reason by NATO “a main military threat” in the near future – as close as 2030. It is therefore helpful to note that the “encirclement syndrome” is an integral part of the Russian foreign policy and will continue to play a central role in it.

We can deduce the following strategic questions from it:

1. What political significance does this "syndrome" bear for European politics?
2. What does European policy conclude from it and how does it deal with it?

What do we do in case of the next Russian military build-up on the border of a neighboring state, such as the military build-up near Ukraine's border in March-April 2021? Once more waiting for the US President to take the initiative with a phone call and a proposal to meet his counterpart? How does Europe deal with the different threat perceptions concerning the EU's "Eastern flank" in the member states of Central and Eastern Europe on the one hand and in the rest of Europe on the other? How not to divide (even more) the East-Central and West-European states within the EU by such an initiative as that of German Chancellor Merkel and French President Macron of June 2021 to invite Putin to a dialogue with the EU?

The Russian foreign policy line is well known and is quite predictable. A necessary European response - within the framework of the EU - is basically also well-known. It is the greatest possible support for the democratic forces and civil society in Russia, which, at the beginning of 2021, seemed to be awakened with mass protests in many Russian cities. It is further the application of sanctions against the regime, with more European unity and decisiveness in the process. The long-term goal remains the integration of Russia in the common European or even transatlantic security framework. The signs that Europe can position itself more decisively and more strategically are there. After the parliamentary elections in Germany in September 2021 the economically strongest European member state will show how it defines its Russia strategy and whether it readjusts it in the direction of supporting democracy. However, we should not forget that the path to implementing these ambitious goals is fraught with major challenges which require a more deep analysis.

Oxana Schmies is Editor and Co-Author of *NATO's Enlargement and Russia: A Strategic Challenge in the Past and Future* (Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society Book 229), (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2021).

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