

NATO Must Fight the Real Enemy

by Michael Curtis

How is it with Poland when every word or action from Russia appalls it? Time has not healed old wounds over Russia's invasion of Poland in 1942, nor prevented the memory of those events from becoming an obsession. It is absurd to argue, as did Polish Prime Minister Witold Waszczykowski in April 2016, that Russia was more dangerous than ISIS, and that it was an existential threat to Europe, which ISIS was not, because it could destroy countries.

The reality is that Russia is now back on the international scene, a significant geopolitical player. President Vladimir Putin, who reminds the world that during World War II the Soviet Union suffered the largest number of casualties, estimated at between 20 and 28 million of any country, is determined that Russia remain a world power in spite of its declining economy largely due to falling oil prices. Putin has revived the May 9 military parade in Red Square. The current Russian posture is one of self-confidence, reminiscent of Russian life in the late 19th century with its extraordinary rich cultural scene.

Russia, to use the British phrase, in international affairs and foreign policy is punching well above its economic weight. It invaded Georgia, a former Soviet republic, in 2008 to keep it under Russian influence, annexed Crimea and invaded East Ukraine, and intervened in the Syrian civil war to support the regime of President Bashar Assad. Russian intervention can be interpreted in Syria different ways but most likely it was a prop to induce Assad to come to the negotiating table.

In Middle Eastern affairs Putin has managed to maintain good

relations with both Israel and Iran. On one hand, Russia agreed in April 2016 to sell S-300 antiaircraft missiles to Iran.

On the other hand, Putin made a conciliatory gesture with a surprising decision on June 6, 2016 to return to Israel a tank it lost in the 1982 battle in the Bekaa Valley in southern Lebanon, and which Syria had sent to Moscow. Putin has visited Jerusalem twice and has hosted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Coincidentally, the controversial Russian-born new Israeli defense minister Avigdor Lieberman holds that Israel can do business with the “pragmatic” Russians and that it is too big a power to ignore. For its part, Israel did not condemn the Russian intrusion in Ukraine, nor did it denounce the annexation of Crimea, nor deliver arms to Georgia after the 2008 invasion by Russia.

Russia is not a friend of the US, but neither is it an enemy, nor necessarily opposed to peaceful coexistence and cooperation. It was significant that Putin, who did take action in Syria, but not block the UN Security Council decision to intervene in Libya and overthrow the dictator Gaddafi.

Russia is not threatening any European country militarily, even though it breaches the airspace of Scandinavian countries, and also that of the USS Donald Cook in the Baltic Sea. Nor is there ideological confrontation between East and West as on old Cold War lines. Nor is there a unity in the international community for any action against Russia.

It was not helpful for NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg to suggest that the NATO summit due to take place in July 2016 was taking place at a time of “a more assertive Russia, intimidating its neighbors, and changing orders by force.” Without cynicism it can be argued that NATO needs a bogeyman

version of Russia as a major threat for a reason to survive as an organization.

At the 18th Communist Party Congress on March 10, 1939 Josef Stalin defending in advance the Soviet-Nazi Germany Pact of August 23, 1939 declared that Russia was not going to pull the chestnuts of other countries (France and Britain who feared Nazi Germany) out of the fire. The next US President must consider whether the U.S. will or will not pull the chestnuts out of the fire as Poland and Eastern European countries talk of a Russian invasion.

Poland joined NATO in 1999, and has been concerned to seek protection from Russia, especially after the Russian actions in Ukraine. Everyone can recognize that Russia has been aggressive, and has even talked of tactical nuclear weapons in local conflicts . Russia has been expanding its arsenal of nuclear missiles , tanks, and fighter jets, and plans a large increase, up to 40 brigades, of manpower. The Black Sea is becoming a Russian lake. Russia has placed nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea. Russia in May 2016 said it would send 3 new divisions, about 30,000 troops to its western border, as a counter measure to the NATO decision to send 4 battalions to Eastern Europe.

But is the Russian buildup a danger to the security of the NATO countries and to U.S.? The US pays a disproportionate amount in NATO arrangements in money and manpower. The US spends \$600 billion on defense while Russia spends \$84 billion: the US has 19 aircraft carriers to Russia's one.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has stressed the biggest increase in collective defense by NATO is taking place. It is deploying missile defense systems in Poland and Romania. Most significant is putting 4 combat battalions of up to 1,000 soldiers in East Europe.

On June 6, 2016 it was announced that 20 NATO members had

started Anakonda-16, a large scale ten day military training exercise in Poland and the eastern flank of NATO. More than 31,000 military from 24 countries accompanied by large numbers of vehicles, aircraft and ships have been deployed. It includes a night-time helicopter attack, and the launching of US paratroopers to build a bridge over the Vistula river.

The stated aim of Anakonda-16 is to train, exercise, and integrate the Polish national command and force structures into an allied, joint multi-national environment. The US is providing 14,000 troops for the exercise in which even NATO members, Sweden and Finland, will take part.

The announcement of Anaconda-16 has been followed by information about ongoing exercises and the news of plans for 150 different military exercises, in Eastern Europe, the Ionian Sea and the Baltic Sea. Two include exercises of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), and others the Baltic Missile Defense system. The US is preparing a ballistic missile shield at Deveselu in Romania, adding to the one in Redzikowo in Poland.

NATO is having troop training in Eastern European on a rotational basis, thus technically meeting the agreement made with Russia that it not deploy permanent troops along the Russian border.

Some commentators have questioned the value of NATO's role in intelligence gathering on terrorism. NATO has no law enforcement role and cannot replace Europol as a counter terrorism center. This is the role that NATO should be playing in cooperation with Russia. The present policy of NATO is based on the false premise that Russia is a threat. It should accept that the real threat is Islamist terrorism and the two sides must cooperate on this.

The important thing for the next US President, one who does not lead from behind is to meet on equal terms with President

Putin to wage a war on terror. This does not require an alliance nor any complex institutional arrangements but simply an understanding of what is the main enemy to civilization.