

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

A risky attempt to buy time

The Wehrkunde conference on security policy in Munich revealed fatal flaws in the West's approach to Russia.

The traditional Wehrkunde defense policy annual conference in Munich, at which prominent NATO military and political leaders and defense experts are brought together, was once again held on the first weekend of February. Although the conference last year was dominated by open clashes between the United States and the British over Britain's sabotage of western intervention against the Serbs in Bosnia, this year's conference displayed no such discord. These conflicts clearly continue to exist, as shown by recent revelations of British sabotage of U.S. plans for anti-Serbian air strikes in 1995, even if not mentioned in Munich. Thus, one may interpret the "harmony" among the various Western delegations here, as resulting from a consensus not to publicly air such discord.

If the motive for that was to present the Russian guests at this conference, notably Deputy Defense Minister Andrei Kokoshin, with the facade of a unified West, it is doubtful whether the Russians bought it. From Kokoshin's remarks, one may instead conclude that Moscow is quite aware the West has no well-defined strategy, not to mention one that is agreed upon by NATO members, concerning how to deal with Russia. The Russians did what they have always done in such situations in the past—resort to warnings and threats.

Kokoshin had a prepared written statement distributed at the conference, and it provoked quite some turmoil. But his Feb. 3 address, and other remarks made at the conference, appeared somewhat more conciliatory and omitted some more harshly

worded passages of the written paper, within which are found the following warnings concerning the proposed expansion of NATO:

"With zones of prevailing Western influence approaching the heart of Russia, the prospects of Poland, Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, and particularly the Baltic States joining NATO, enhances the power of the Western challenge which cannot but cause a negative, if not painful, reaction in Russian society. . . .

"The destruction of the belt of actually neutral countries, created in the center of Europe as a result of the dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty Organization, aggravates in Russia the feeling of vulnerability, and with unpredictable political implications, given the existing state of minds, especially if the rapprochement of Russian borders and those of the expanded NATO should in fact strengthen the militaristic mentality in Europe, to exclude the likelihood of which would be quite light-minded."

"One must also take into account the mentality of mutual suspicion and hostility which had been accumulated during the decades of the Cold War and how deeply it had been inculcated in the minds of people on both sides of front lines of the now-past Cold War; no matter how hard we try to dissociate from it, it has not yet disappeared completely. Any steps not fully thought over, in the sensitive zones of international relations, will easily revive it and instantly bring it to the surface of international political life. Under these conditions, the expanded NATO can play the role of catalyst in sharpening the hostility."

In his spoken address, Kokoshin emphasized that the West should be more grateful to Russia because its troop withdrawal from eastern Europe from 1990 on, had made the advance of democracy and market economy possible in the first place. Kokoshin also emphasized that none of his statements should pose any serious obstacles to cooperation between Russia and NATO.

Of course, the West had also removed some of the most obvious points of controversy with Russia from the conference agenda: no mention of the Chechnya issue by Germany's Chancellor Helmut Kohl in his keynote on Feb. 3 was heard, nor was it mentioned by U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry in his Feb. 4 speech. But neither was there any sign of Western commitment to deepen cooperation with Russia in the crucial area of economic projects. In an address which recalled Stalin's rejection of the 1947 Marshall Plan, Perry stated, "We don't need a second Marshall Plan, but we do need to draw on Marshall's vision," adding that cooperation with Russia would be limited to security consultations and military confidence-building measures. No economic offer to Moscow, however. While this has mostly to do with the Western policy of buying time along the line, "first wait and see how the Presidential elections in Russia develop," it may be misread in Russia as "proof" that the West's plans toward Moscow are not good ones. This pours fuel upon the fire for anti-Westerners in Moscow.

Thus, the conference missed an opportunity to outflank this situation, just as the elites of the West have missed so many other chances since 1990. This "wait-and-see" approach is risky, and not very wise; for, it will engender precisely what it now seeks to avoid, in the end.