

The NATO-Russia Relationship

Defining Moment or Déjà Vu?

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NOVEMBER 2008



EUROPE, RUSSIA, AND THE UNITED STATES
FINDING A NEW BALANCE



CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Preface

The joint CSIS/IFRI project “Europe, Russia, and the United States: Finding a New Balance” seeks to reframe this trilateral relationship for the relevant policymaking communities. We are motivated by the possibility that new opportunities may be emerging with leadership changes in Moscow and Washington. In particular, we hope that our analyses and recommendations will be useful as France takes over the chair of the European Union on July 1, 2008.

The title of the project reflects our sense that relations among Europe, Russia, and the United States have somehow lost their balance, their equilibrium. The situations of the key actors have changed a great deal for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the expansion of NATO and the European Union, and the unexpectedly rapid economic recovery of Russia. At a deeper level, we find ourselves somewhat perplexed that nearly 20 years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent conclusion of the Cold War relations among Europe, Russia, and the United States seem strained on a multitude of issues. In Berlin in June 2008, President Dmitri Medvedev of Russia invoked the language articulated 15 years earlier by then-Presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin about “unity between the whole Euro-Atlantic area from Vancouver to Vladivostok.” Despite many achievements over the past 15 years, it is hard not to conclude that collectively we have underachieved in building greater trust and cooperation. We are convinced that, for enhanced European as well as global security, we must increase the level of trust and cooperation among the transatlantic allies and Russia and that this cooperation must rest on a firm economic and political grounding.

We humbly acknowledge that we have no “magic bullet,” but we hope that the series of papers to be published in the summer and fall of 2008 as part of this project may contribute to thinking anew about some of the challenging issues that we in Europe, Russia, and the United States collectively face. We are very grateful to the excellent group of American, European, and Russian authors engaged in this task: Pierre Goldschmidt, Thomas Graham, Rainer Lindner, Vladimir Milov, Dmitri Trenin, and Julianne Smith. We also want to thank Keith Crane, Jonathan Elkind, Stephen Flanagan, James Goldgeier, Stephen Larrabee, Robert Nurick, Angela Stent, and Cory Welt, participants in the workshop held on May 16, 2008, in Washington, D.C., for their rich and thoughtful comments about the papers and the project. Finally, we want to thank Amy Beavin, research associate of the Russia and Eurasia Program at CSIS and Catherine Meniane and Dominic Fean of the Russia/NIS Center at IFRI for their indispensable support in making all aspects of the project a reality.

This project is the continuation of the IFRI/CSIS transatlantic cooperation started in 2006. We would like to thank warmly our financial supporters—France Telecom, the Ryan Charitable Trust, and particularly the Daimler **Fonds**.

By publishing some articles in Russian, *Russia in Global Affairs* will also take part in this project.

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THE NATO-RUSSIA RELATIONSHIP

Defining Moment or Déjà Vu?

Julianne Smith¹

A little more than a decade ago, in 1997, the NATO alliance and the Russian Federation turned history on its head and founded a forum for regular consultation on security issues. No longer adversaries, the two sides decided to trade in decades of escalating rhetoric, intimidation, and high-stakes maneuvers for dialogue and cooperation. Since then, the NATO-Russia relationship has traveled an incredibly tumultuous and unpredictable path, culminating in a complete rupture over the Russia-Georgia conflict in August 2008. At times, the relationship has been defined by genuine pledges of goodwill and cooperation. But the relationship has also generated successive waves of disappointment and frustration, which in the case of the Kosovo war in 1999 caused the Russians to suspend their ties to NATO altogether.

Today, the NATO-Russia relationship is deep in crisis. After war broke out between Russia and Georgia in South Ossetia, NATO suspended all joint activities with the Russians. Before long, both sides were accusing the other of returning to Cold War tactics and making long lists of policy grievances linked not just to the recent Russia-Georgia conflict but to their entire relationship over the better part of the last two decades. For the Russians, NATO enlargement—from the first round in 1999 to the debate about Georgia and Ukraine in the spring of 2008—remains their chief complaint. U.S. plans to install a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic is another sore point. For NATO and the West more broadly, Russia's behavior toward its neighbors, particularly Georgia and Ukraine but also the Baltic states and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, has spurred a steady stream of heated accusations about Russian hegemony.

Once hopeful that they could find common ground and possibly construct a new European security framework, NATO and Russia now view one another with deep-rooted mistrust and suspicion, with few prospects for reconciliation or even dialogue. Bitterness runs deep on both sides, casting a dark shadow on NATO's December ministerial, which will no doubt have to address the future of NATO enlargement. Many in Russia, Europe, and the United States predict that it will take years, if not decades, to restore ties to levels seen in the post-Cold War period when cooperation, however difficult at times, was at least plausible. Before eulogizing NATO-Russia ties, though, it is worth examining the origins of the relationship, the roots of resentment, how the two sides sometimes found ways to work through previous crises, and why this often trying and unnatural relationship remains essential.

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Looking Back: The Inclusion Illusion

While the NATO-Russia relationship was formally launched in 1997, the need for cooperation between these two entities was discussed even before the final dissolution of the USSR in December of 1991.² In one of his first major foreign policy statements, Russian president Boris Yeltsin pledged Russia's participation in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. Yeltsin even suggested that Russia might someday become a NATO member.

Yeltsin's reasoning was simple. In his eyes, the fall of the Berlin Wall was spurring tectonic shifts in the European security architecture, and it was therefore important that Russia not be excluded from such developments. Despite skepticism among his peers, Yeltsin calculated that, however difficult, Russia ultimately stood to gain from a steady policy of cooperation and engagement with NATO.

For two years, the Russian people and the Russian government grudgingly accepted the Yeltsin strategy. But in 1993, when Yeltsin visited Poland and the Czech Republic and granted at least tacit approval for the first round of NATO enlargement, he drew fierce criticism back home, especially from the Russian parliament and military officers.³ Far from an opportunity, these two groups saw the enlargement of their former adversary as a direct threat to Russia's security. Russia's Intelligence Service (SVR) held a similar view. In a report it issued in late 1993, NATO was referred to as the "biggest military grouping in the world that possesses an enormous offensive potential."⁴ Others in Russia accused NATO of violating assurances Russia had received as part of the agreement to accept German unification. Russian foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev responded to critics by stressing that Russia's relationship with NATO was but one aspect of a broader policy vis-à-vis European security. To prove his point, Kozyrev called for a new security system based on the European Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and suggested NATO subordinate itself to this new organization—an idea NATO quickly rejected.⁵

Meanwhile, NATO's plans for enlargement were gathering momentum. In early 1994, at its Brussels summit, the alliance reaffirmed that it was open to new members.⁶ Somewhat surprisingly, those statements generated little reaction inside Russia until U.S. president Bill Clinton, later that same year, recognizing the political currency that NATO enlargement held for

² Martin A. Smith and Graham Timmins, "Russia, NATO, and the EU in an Era of Enlargement: Vulnerability or Opportunity?" *Geopolitics* 6, issue 1 (Summer 2001): 73.

³ The Russian parliament was also furious with Yeltsin for his political and economic reforms. Later that year, in September 1993, Yeltsin would decide to dissolve the entire parliament, creating one of the biggest constitutional crises in Russian history.

⁴ Hannes Adomeit, "Inside or Outside? Russia's Policies Towards NATO," Working Paper FG 5 2007, Research Unit Russia/CIS, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin, January 1, 2007, p. 6.

⁵ See Elisa Niemtow, "The OSCE's Security Model: Conceptual Confusion and Competing Visions," *Helsinki Monitor* 7, no. 3 (1996), http://www.osce.ethz.ch/networking/secondary_literature/helmon/Helsinki_Mon_95_97/helmon_3_1996_niemtow.pdf.

⁶ See NATO, *NATO Handbook* (Brussels: NATO: 2001), p. 61, <http://www.nato.int/docu/handbook/2001/hb030101.htm>.

him both at home and abroad, began emphasizing that NATO enlargement would “not depend upon the appearance of a new threat in Europe.”⁷ In other words, regardless of what Russia did—positively or negatively—enlargement would move ahead.

Russia now faced a dilemma. Should it, fully recognizing its limited influence inside NATO, turn away from the alliance, or should it draw itself even closer? Yeltsin and Kozyrev, still convinced that enlargement could lead to the isolation of Russia, opted for the latter and proposed formalizing NATO-Russia ties. NATO members remained open to that idea and assumed that the alliance’s recently launched Partnership for Peace (PfP) program would serve as the foundation. But Russia wanted more than that. In a June 1994 meeting between Kozyrev and his NATO counterparts, Russia agreed to participate in PfP but only in exchange for a “far-reaching, cooperative NATO-Russia relationship both inside and outside PfP.”⁸ Some NATO members had reservations about that deal, but after some strong and at times threatening negotiating on the Russian side, Russia received a special “16+1” status in the North Atlantic Council and Political Committee in the spring of 1995. No other member of PfP had obtained this status.

Yeltsin and his team did not stop there. The Foreign Ministry presented the alliance with two conditions that would need to be met before Russia would accept NATO enlargement: no deployments of nuclear weapons or allied combat forces on the territory of new member states. NATO eventually agreed to both conditions even though some experts, such as former U.S. ambassador to Moscow Jack Matlock, felt those promises were unsustainable.⁹ Whether or not NATO genuinely believed it could maintain its pledge, the Russians took the alliance at its word and warned in no uncertain terms that any attempt to revise that commitment would be unacceptable.¹⁰

While NATO and Russia fleshed out the details of a new partnership, they also found a way to work together on the ground in Bosnia. At first, it looked like ethnic conflict in the Balkans would drive a wedge between the alliance and the Russians. When NATO conducted air strikes against Bosnian-Serbs in the fall of 1995, Russian policymakers responded with a series of diatribes. Yet Russia endorsed the Dayton peace accords and in 1996 sent troops to Bosnia to participate in the Implementation Force (IFOR). To the surprise of those on the ground and in Brussels, Russia—the largest non-NATO contributor—proved to be a valuable partner.

Formalizing NATO-Russia Ties

Russia’s unique relationship with NATO was outlined in the “NATO-Russia Founding Act,” which was signed by both parties in May 1997. That document led to the creation of the

⁷ Smith and Timmins, “Russia, NATO and the EU in an Era of Enlargement,” 76.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁹ Valery N. Gorokhov and Dmitri Y. Gorovtsov, “NATO Expansion: A View from the State Duma,” *Demokratizatsiia* VI, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 71.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

Permanent Joint Council (PJC), a forum that would allow NATO members and Russian officials to consult regularly on a variety of security issues. Russia, unlike any other PfP member, was also invited to establish a mission at NATO headquarters. In exchange, Yeltsin officially blessed the first round of NATO enlargement to Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary in 1997.¹¹

Even before the first PJC meeting took place, tensions between Russia and NATO flared. NATO started making increasingly bold and consequential statements regarding the fighting in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Worried that NATO would intervene unilaterally, the Russian government used the first PJC meeting to caution against the use of force without authorization from the United Nations. Well aware of Russia's weakened state, NATO ignored such warnings and in October 1998 the North Atlantic Council (NAC) authorized "limited air strikes" and a "phased air campaign" should Yugoslav authorities refuse to comply with UN Security Council Resolution 1199.¹²

The NAC's authorization of the use of force in Kosovo served as a major turning point for Russia's relationship with the West, underscoring its powerless role inside the alliance. It also confirmed Russian suspicions that its definition of "consultation" differed significantly from NATO's. The alliance had indeed consulted the Russians on the situation in Kosovo, but each time it did, it stressed that Russia did not hold a veto. As Yeltsin had predicted in the early 1990s, the European security architecture and NATO's place in that architecture was indeed changing. However, Russia's place in that architecture remained unclear.

While NATO and Russia once again sparred over the conflict in the Balkans, NATO began to discuss the possibility of moving one of its headquarters in Rendsburg, Germany, to northern Poland—something NATO had explicitly promised the Russians it would not do.¹³ The Russian defense minister, Igor Sergeev, in a trip to Rendsburg in early 1998, warned that such a move could lead to a military confrontation—a threat that fortunately never materialized when NATO did make the proposed move later that year. Without question, though, the tone and quality of NATO-Russia exchanges changed dramatically.

The Freeze and Slow Thaw

On March 23, 1999, NATO launched Operation Allied Force against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. That same day, Russia officially suspended ties with NATO and withdrew its representatives from NATO headquarters. Yeltsin had threatened "extreme" measures in response to NATO airstrikes. However, when the strikes began (without a UN mandate), Russia expressed its objections but was careful not to completely sever ties to NATO. Despite the difficulties and

¹¹ Yeltsin made clear, however, that Russia strongly opposed additional rounds of enlargement, especially to the Baltic countries. This new "red line" ran along the borders of the former Soviet Union.

¹² NATO, "Operation Allied Force," <http://www.afsouth.nato.int/operations/detforce/force.htm>.

¹³ Elizabeth Teague et al., "The Fortnight in Review," *Prism* 4, issue 3 (February 6, 1998), http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=5&issue_id=249&article_id=2808.

rising anti-NATO sentiment among the Russian populace, Yeltsin and other Russian leaders calculated that there might come a time when a closer relationship with the alliance could prove valuable. Yeltsin also knew that cooperation was really his only choice, given both the war in Chechnya, which had weakened his country in multiple ways and the subsequent financial crisis.

Four months later, Russia did return to NATO, albeit with a narrowly defined agenda: Kosovo. Still, even on this single issue, the Russians eventually came to play a surprisingly constructive role. They appointed former prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to serve as a lead negotiator and deployed peacekeepers to support NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) in the summer of 1999. The deployment had its challenges (most notably the Russian takeover of the Pristina airport), but as in Bosnia, the Russians sent a clear signal that they were prepared to play a positive role in the stabilization of the Balkans. Of course, Russia's contributions were also driven by their interest in making sure that the Dayton Accords were not prejudicial to the Serbs.¹⁴ Regardless of their motivations, the cooperation on the ground, as in Bosnia, proved to be fruitful.

On the last day of 1999, Yeltsin resigned and Vladimir Putin, who had been serving as prime minister, became acting president. Just as Yeltsin had, Putin faced sizeable recalcitrance to the idea of enhancing NATO-Russia ties. Putin saw no alternative, though, and promised to rebuild relations with NATO in the "spirit of pragmatism." He even returned to the question of membership. During an interview with the BBC in March 2000, Putin was asked if Russia might someday join NATO. "Why not? I do not rule out such a possibility," he responded.¹⁵ At about the same time, in an act of good faith, Russia announced the first full meeting of the PJC since the Kosovo crisis. While the NATO secretary general welcomed these developments, NATO was careful not to send any signals that Russia might one day become a member of the alliance.¹⁶

Putin's pro-NATO stance was heavily influenced by events back home. Between the war in Chechnya, which highlighted the weakened state of the Russian military, and the sinking of a Russian nuclear cruise missile submarine (the *Kursk*) in August 2000, which exposed maintenance failures and the need for greater international cooperation, Putin came to view cooperation with the West, and NATO specifically, as essential.

September 11 as Turning Point?

Presidents Putin and Bush met for the first time in Slovenia in the summer of 2001. Despite promises to toughen America's relationship with the Russians, President George W. Bush emerged from the meeting all smiles. The two spoke of common challenges and pledged to continue the dialogue. Many analysts believe it was the positive tone that accompanied this first

¹⁴ Alton Frye, "The New NATO and Relations with Russia," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 23, no. 3 (September 2000): 95.

¹⁵ "Excerpts from BBC Interview with Acting President Vladimir Putin (March 5, 2000)," Johnson's Russia List, March 7, 2000, <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/4152.html#1>.

¹⁶ Smith and Timmins, "Russia, NATO, and the EU in an Era of Enlargement," 80.

meeting that then led to the supportive Russian response that the United States received on September 11.

Approximately two weeks after the attacks, Putin made a major policy address highlighting the ways Russia would assist the United States and its allies in Afghanistan. One item on that list—the use of airbases in Central Asia by the United States—attracted considerable attention as it allowed U.S. forces to operate in what Russia clearly considered its sphere of influence. This remarkable set of policies was followed a few weeks later in October 2001 by the announcement that Russia would be closing its espionage center in Lourdes, Cuba, and a naval base in Vietnam.

Putin's motives were multifold. First, Russia believed the threat of “international terrorism” was real. Second, Putin wanted to seize on this opportunity to align Russia with the West. He also hoped to benefit from this unique opening. By categorizing the Chechen rebels as terrorists, Putin was hoping the West might ease its criticism of the Russian military operations there. He was looking to counter dwindling public support for the mission back home, as well. If the West could provide some legitimacy for the war in Chechnya, Putin knew his own political standing would improve. Finally, Putin calculated that in the wake of September 11, Europe and the United States would feel more compelled than ever to integrate Russia into a new post–Cold War order.

At least initially, it appeared Putin had played his cards wisely. The White House delivered on Chechnya by quickly folding that conflict into the broader war on terror. As for Russia's integration into a new world order, here, Putin's expectations proved to be overly ambitious. In November 2001, British prime minister Tony Blair did propose a new NATO-Russia relationship that would treat Russia as an equal in discussions on issues ranging from counterterrorism to arms proliferation.¹⁷ But that idea was quickly rejected by the United States and other NATO members, particularly those in Central and Eastern Europe. The general consensus was that the PJC was sufficient and giving the Russians anything resembling a decisionmaking role would be premature.

During these charged discussions of Russia's future relationship with the alliance, the United States announced, in December 2001, that it would pull out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Other than calling the move a mistake, Putin was surprisingly reserved in his opposition. The PJC was about to meet at the foreign minister level for the first time since Kosovo, and Putin did not want to upset the chances that it might lead to new developments, which he still desperately needed to persuade the Russian public that months of cooperation with the West were bearing fruit.

Despite opposition to the Blair proposal, the final communiqué of the PJC meeting did include language that recommended that a new “effective” mechanism be pursued.¹⁸ The document clearly noted, though, that the alliance would maintain its prerogative of independent decision

¹⁷ Ibid., 372.

¹⁸ NATO press release, “Meeting of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council,” <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2002/p020320e.htm>.

and action “at 19.” Only one “at 20” reference (which referred to the 19 members of the alliance plus Russia sitting together as equals) was included. What this meeting confirmed was that, while the alliance was interested in deepening its relationship with the Russians, Blair’s proposal was a bridge too far. Putin returned home from the PJC with little to show for his strategy of cooperation.

Putin’s political standing among the Russian public deteriorated even further when Russian negotiators arrived in the United States in early 2002 to begin talks about arms reductions. Much to Putin’s disappointment, the United States decided to keep Russia on the blacklist as a proliferator. Adding insult to injury, rumors circulated that NATO would invite seven new countries to join the alliance at its Prague summit in the fall of 2002. Without question, Russian policymakers felt betrayed by the West, and many blamed Putin, accusing him of conceding far too much during the first few years of his presidency.

Fortunately for Putin, both Americans and Europeans were closely monitoring his standing back home and understood the implications of rising anti-NATO and anti-Western sentiment inside Russia for their future relationship with the Russians. At this point, NATO had its eye on another round of enlargement and knew that if it had any hope of removing Russian “red lines” on this issue, it would need to help Putin at home. In the spring of 2002, as work moved ahead on the new NATO-Russia mechanism, U.S. and European negotiators deliberately included language that was sure to play well with Russian audiences, notably words like “equal basis” and “compensation.”¹⁹

Strengthening NATO-Russia Ties (...Again)

At its May 28, 2002, summit in Italy, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was established. This new consultative mechanism differed from its predecessor in a number of ways. First, unlike the PJC, which operated under a NATO+1 format, the NRC allowed Russia and NATO member states to meet as equals “at 27” (although the agreement did allow for NATO to retreat to its 19 members when Russia and NATO could not agree). Second, both the structure and timing of NRC meetings differed from those of the PJC. The NRC meetings were to be chaired by the NATO secretary general. Foreign and defense ministers were to meet twice yearly and ambassadors on a monthly basis.²⁰ Finally, the NRC significantly expanded the number of issues that NATO and Russia addressed jointly. In total, 17 committees and expert groups were formed, enabling NATO and Russia to look at a wide range of new threats and challenges.²¹

¹⁹ Adomeit, “Inside or Outside? Russia’s Policies Towards NATO,” p. 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²¹ The 17 areas include the struggle against terrorism, current security issues, nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, control of conventional arms, nuclear weapons issues, counternarcotics, theater missile defense, airspace management, military-to-military cooperation, submarine-crew search and rescue, crisis management, defense reform, logistics, status of forces, civil emergencies, challenges of modern society, and raising public awareness of the NATO-Russia Council.

What the NRC did not change was NATO's security relationship to Russia. Russia did not receive anything resembling a security guarantee. Article V was not mentioned in the founding documents. Despite that gap, however, NATO was hopeful that the new-founded cooperation might produce "spillover" effect to Russia's domestic politics (which Europeans and Americans were observing with increasing alarm) and possibly help resolve the frozen conflicts on Russia's borders.²²

Despite the rather upbeat tone in the relationship, two major issues were casting dark shadows on the Russia-NATO agenda at this time, seriously threatening the success of the NRC. The first issue was the second round of NATO enlargement, a process that was formally set in motion at NATO's Prague summit in November 2002. Russia's objections to additional rounds of enlargement were no secret. Putin continued Yeltsin's "red line" policy, telling NATO members that the only way Russia would find another round of enlargement acceptable would be if the alliance "transformed" itself to a political organization. To be sure, NATO was transforming (i.e., enhancing its military capabilities) but not in the direction that Russia was suggesting. Since NATO had no intention of transforming itself into a political talk shop, it hoped that the launch of the NRC might take the sting out of enlargement.

The second issue casting a dark shadow over the NRC's launch was the U.S. war in Iraq, which resulted in an unlikely alliance between a handful of European countries (most notably France and Germany) and Russia in their opposition to the war and calls for a new, multipolar world. During the fall of 2002 and well into early 2003, Russian, French, and German leaders regularly expressed their strong opposition to the use of military might to oust Saddam Hussein and questioned the evidence the United States was presenting to make its case. In the end, France and Russia (with German support) succeeded in blocking a UN resolution legitimizing the use of force, creating one of the most dramatic transatlantic disputes in history. That tension and mounting frustration on all sides did little to foster enhanced cooperation inside NATO.

Putin's Second Term and the Steady Decline of NATO-Russia Ties

When Putin was elected for a second term in March 2004, the relationship between Russia and the West and, consequently, Russia and NATO, was undergoing a number of dramatic transitions. First, Putin's view of himself and of Russia had changed significantly since his early days in office when Russia was recovering from a financial crisis and was in a much weaker position on the world stage. Thanks to rising energy costs and the resulting economic recovery, Putin entered his second term feeling more confident both at home and abroad. He also felt more comfortable challenging the West, particularly the United States.

²² Adomeit, "Inside or Outside? Russia's Policies Towards NATO," p. 3.

Several incidents accounted for this change in perspective. Putin had reached the conclusion that, like Yeltsin, he had indeed granted the West too much leeway in the post–Cold War environment on an array of issues ranging from the ABM Treaty to Kosovo. NATO enlargement, however, remained his top complaint. In the same month that he was elected for a second term, NATO welcomed seven new members into the alliance, including the three Baltic states. NATO immediately began F-16 air patrols over Baltic territory, adding to Putin’s fury. Putin demanded that those new member states accede and ratify the Conventional Forces Treaty (adopted at the Istanbul OSCE Summit in November 1999) to avoid any sort of a “strategic grey area.”²³

Putin’s rising frustration with the West was also rooted in the Rose Revolution, which took place in Georgia in late 2003. (Later in 2004, Ukraine would follow suit with its own color revolution—the Orange Revolution). Russia blamed the United States for engineering such upheavals and added these color revolutions to an increasingly long list of other “designs” on Russia’s sovereignty. Revealing his deep irritation with the way in which events had unfolded since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Putin started referring to the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a “national tragedy of immense proportions.”²⁴ He called the United States arrogant, hypocritical, and guilty of partaking in military adventurism. Mistrust and suspicion—always part of Russia’s relationship with the West but often countered by moments of pragmatism and optimism—were mounting even among the more progressive Russian thinkers. Alexey Arbatov, for example, who was once Duma deputy in the liberal Yabloko party and widely respected abroad for his pragmatic views on Russia’s relationship with the West, berated the United States shortly after it invaded Iraq for committing “a number of mistakes of historic dimension, [such as] the dismantling of the international security system” without consulting Russia.²⁵

Dramatic changes were occurring inside the West as well. Once united in their common vision for security and prosperity in the broader Euro-Atlantic area, the transatlantic relationship was increasingly becoming defined by external challenges in far away places like the Middle East and South Asia. To the extent that U.S. and European policymakers did focus on Russia, it was not to address Russian complaints about infringements on their sphere of influence or additional rounds of NATO enlargement. Instead, Western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and policymakers became increasingly alarmed with Russian domestic developments—the rolling back of democratic reforms, human rights violations, and the authoritarian nature of the Russian government. Europeans and Americans were also closely monitoring what they often described as the Russian “divide and rule” approach to Central and Eastern Europe.

As for the NATO-Russia Council, both the West and Russia were becoming disenchanted. For all its initial fanfare, the forum simply wasn’t producing concrete policy changes or advancing a

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁵ “Making Foreign Policy in Democratic Russia: Conversation with Alexey G. Arbatov,” *Conversations with History*, Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley, March 4, 2003, <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people3/Arbatov/aratov-con0.html>.

common agenda. And it certainly did not take the sting out of another round of enlargement. Both sides started to question the value of dialogue for dialogue's sake.

Eventually, Russia and NATO started blaming each other for the NRC's diminishing returns. In a speech in 2006, at Moscow University, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov conceded that the NATO-Russia relationship had produced some practical cooperation, or at least the potential for cooperation. But he went on to say, "we firmly raise questions about the transformation of NATO, the alliance's plans for enlargement, the reconfiguration of the U.S. military presence in Europe, the deployment of elements of the American missile defense system here, and NATO's refusal to ratify the CFE treaty. The future of our relations largely depends on what direction the transformation in NATO will proceed in after the Riga Summit, and the extent to which the security interests of Russia are going to be considered."²⁶

NATO reciprocated with its own litany of complaints about the NRC during its summit in Riga in the fall of 2006. In summit documents, the signatories stated that they "believe[d] that the cooperative agenda set forth in the May 2002 Rome Declaration had not yet achieved its full potential. Much more work remain[ed] to be done to this end, and we call on Russia to join us in enhancing our cooperation on key security issues."²⁷

The following year, 2007, brought more rounds of accusations, which came to a head at the annual Munich Security Conference in February. In front of over 350 heads of state and senior experts from the United States and Europe (including U.S. secretary of defense Robert Gates), Putin walked to the podium, casually announced that he would "avoid excessive politeness," and launched into a blistering critique of U.S. foreign policy, NATO policy, the "bureaucrats at the OSCE," and more generally, the unipolar moment.²⁸ It became clear that Putin's main audience was his fellow citizens back home, who no doubt appreciated Putin's attempts to show that Russia was finally free of Western—or U.S.—influence. Russia, he stressed, now had its own approach to democracy, international law, and the use of force. The fundamental message was clear: Russia was back, the United States was down, and the European Union was out.

That same month, the United States began formal negotiations with Poland and the Czech Republic on missile defense, which was the equivalent of pouring gasoline on an already raging fire. This issue had cast a dark shadow on the NATO-Russia and U.S.-Russia dialogue for years,

²⁶ "Highlights of Speech by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov at a Meeting with Faculty of World Politics Students of Lomonosov Moscow State University," December 11, 2006, http://www.ln.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/f68cd37b84711611c3256f6d00541094/0a36c5511edbc45bc32572420053e1c0?OpenDocument.

²⁷ NATO, "Riga Summit Declaration," November 29, 2006, <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2006/p06-150e.htm>.

²⁸ "Wladimir Putin, Speech at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy," February 10, 2007, <http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?sprache=en&id=179>.

with Russia repeatedly describing the system as a “clear threat.”²⁹ The Czechs and Poles called that accusation absurd, but nonetheless the Russians promised negative consequences if both countries agreed to host the system.

The year concluded with a complete breakdown of the NRC. In December 2007, as NATO and Russia sat down to agree on their work plan for the coming year, the United States blocked the agreement, blaming Russia’s refusal to comply with the CFE Treaty. The official communiqué from the meeting, noted “serious differences on the CFE Treaty, the final status of Kosovo, and missile defense.” Days later, Russia officially announced it was formally suspending its participation in the CFE Treaty. In another move designed to highlight Russia’s frustration, Putin appointed Dmitry Rogozin—well known for his anti-Western rhetoric—as Russia’s new ambassador to NATO.³⁰

In the months that followed, all eyes were on NATO’s upcoming summit in Bucharest in April 2008, where the question of Ukraine and Georgia’s membership in NATO was slated to be a key feature of the agenda. As in the past, Russia warned of the political and military consequences of moving forward with such plans. Having heard it before, though, the alliance discounted Russia’s threats until Rogozin suggested that Russia might point warheads at Ukraine if it were to join the alliance. That got NATO’s attention, especially among those members that had opposed offering Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Ukraine and Georgia. Countries such as Germany and France were claiming that their opposition to MAP was based on Ukraine and Georgia’s frozen conflicts, but there was no doubt that Rogozin’s harsh words also played a role.

President Bush was not discouraged, though, and arrived at the summit hopeful that MAP for Ukraine and Georgia was still in the cards. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and President Nicolas Sarkozy of France succeeded in blocking the offers but, somewhat surprisingly, they agreed to a final communiqué that stated that membership for these two countries was not a question of whether but when. Putin was no doubt relieved that Ukraine and Georgia were not offered MAP, although the clear language in the communiqué about NATO’s intentions spurred more Russian warnings. Rogozin called it an “obvious affront to any vision of partnership or democracy.”³¹ A top army general, General Yuri Baluyevsky, went so far as to vow to take military action if NATO expands eastward.³² Despite the drama, NATO and Russia did manage to produce one important initiative. Russia signed a transit agreement with the alliance, enabling NATO members to send supplies through Russia to their troops in Afghanistan.

²⁹ “US To Start Talks On Eastern Europe Missile Defence System,” SpaceWar.com, January 22, 2007, http://www.spacewar.com/reports/US_To_Start_Talks_On_Eastern_Europe_Missile_Defence_System_999.html.

³⁰ Rogozin is a staunch Russian nationalist and former leader of the Rodina Party, which is known for championing rights for ethnic Russians and campaigning for and promoting nationalist causes.

³¹ Dmitry Rogozin, “Global Security and Propaganda,” *International Herald Tribune*, July 1, 2008.

³² “Russia Talks Tough in Response to NATO’s Eastward Expansion,” DW-World.de, April 11, 2008, <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,3261078,00.html>.

During the summer, tensions continued to simmer as Dmitry Medvedev replaced Putin as president. On his first trip to Europe, perhaps channeling his predecessors, Medvedev proposed a new security pact for Europe and Russia that would replace NATO. “I’m confident that Atlanticism as the only principle has become obsolete historically,” he said in June 2008. “We should talk about the unity of the entire Euro-Atlantic region from Vancouver to Vladivostok.”³³ The proposal lacked details, but at the very least, many Europeans and Americans appreciated Medvedev’s tone, which was a far cry from Putin’s recent speeches in the West. However, any hopes that Medvedev might set Russia’s relationship with the West on a more pragmatic, if not positive, path were dashed on August 7, 2008.

Back to the Future: The Russia-Georgia Conflict

Although the danger of military conflict between Russia and Georgia had flared several times in recent years, much of the world was caught by surprise when, in early August, Russia and Georgia went to war over the separatist region of South Ossetia. While there had been a series of clashes between Georgian and South Ossetian forces throughout the summer, few could have envisioned the crisis that unfolded on August 7 when Georgia launched an aerial bombardment and ground attack on South Ossetia. The Russians responded by sending thousands of troops into South Ossetia and some on to Georgia. Whether or not Russian forces entered South Ossetia before or after the Georgian bombardment is unclear. What is clear is that this short war (which was halted days later thanks to a cease-fire agreement put forward by the Europeans) has rocked the relationship between Russia and the West to its core.

The aftermath of the conflict has revealed a slew of casualties, both literally and figuratively. (In terms of lives lost, exact numbers are hard to come by, although estimates range from the dozens to the hundreds.) In terms of the figurative carnage, the conflict inflicted a sizeable wound on NATO’s relationship with Russia. As soon as NATO announced it was suspending future meetings of the NATO-Russia Council until Russia pulled its forces out of Georgia, Russia decided to halt cooperation with the alliance indefinitely. NATO-Russia cooperation in Afghanistan, counterterrorism, and other areas now hang in the balance.

The fallout from the Russia-Georgia conflict could not have taken Western-NATO allies completely by surprise however. U.S. and European recognition of Kosovo’s independence in February of this year had already ramped up tensions between Russia and NATO partners long before the war in Georgia. For months prior to Kosovo’s independence, Russia was already predicting what the effects of a unilateral declaration of independence would do for international security—even going as far as threatening that it would retaliate by recognizing the independence of the breakaway regions of Georgia if Kosovo’s independence was indeed recognized.³⁴ The

³³ Brian Whitmore, “Russia: Medvedev, Putin Launch ‘Two-Headed’ Foreign Policy—But Who’s Winning?” *RFE/RL Russia Report*, June 6, 2008, <http://archive.rferl.org/reports/FullReport.aspx?report=574&id=2008/06/574-08-07>.

³⁴ Megan Slack, “Kosovo a Frustration for Russia,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 2008.

repeated parallels made by Russia regarding Georgia and the independence of Kosovo earlier this year fell on deaf ears. In retrospect, Russia's prediction that Kosovo's independence would open a Pandora's box, "set[ting] a precedent for other breakaway regions" not only in Europe, but in "several [areas] in or near Russia," was a self-fulfilling prophecy.³⁵ More than anything, however, Kosovo for Russia was another example of the NATO partners' ambitions for the spread of Western dominance in the region and their blatant disrespect for international law.

Regardless of how surprised or unsurprised NATO was with Russian actions, the alliance's core mission—collective defense—became another casualty of the conflict. Unsurprisingly, the newer members of the alliance have started to second-guess Article V of the NATO Treaty, which requires all NATO members to come to the defense of another under attack. Georgia was not a member of NATO and, therefore, did not require NATO to invoke Article V. But, as many countries in Central and Eastern Europe repeatedly stress, the West's response to the conflict was tepid, leaving more than a few members anxiously looking over their shoulders. In fact, shortly after the conflict, Poland decided to abandon any objections it may have had to U.S. plans to install ballistic missile interceptors on its territory and signed on to the missile shield agreement (in exchange for Patriot missiles), a move that greatly angered the Russians.

Finally, the Russia-Georgia conflict also created heated debates inside NATO Headquarters about the future of enlargement. Sadly, both proponents and opponents of MAP believe that the Russia-Georgia conflict vindicated their original position. Those countries that supported MAP for Ukraine and Georgia argue that had that process been set in motion, the war between Russia and Georgia would not have happened. However, those countries that opposed MAP, notably Germany and France, claim that had NATO offered MAP to Ukraine and Georgia, the alliance could have been faced with the disastrous choice of going to war with Russia or imploding in the face of a Russian aggressor.

Russia and the West: Rebuilding from the Ground Up

Given the crisis of confidence inside NATO and the deep-rooted resentment on all sides about the overarching state of the West's relationship with Russia, it is hard to imagine a scenario in which NATO and Russia return to a common agenda. Interest in resolving policy differences, especially on the question of Georgia's membership in NATO, is waning on all sides. In truth, though, neither the West nor Russia can afford long-term disengagement. Too many pressing security challenges—ranging from Iran's nuclear ambitions to Afghanistan's deteriorating security situation—require the resources and influence of both. How can NATO (and the West in general) launch a new and constructive relationship with the Russians in light of recent events?

³⁵ Sam Cage, "Russia issues new warning over Kosovo independence," Reuters, February 12, 2008.

As history has shown, cooperation tends to take root when the two sides shift their focus from tactical differences to broader strategic aims and first-order issues. That means that Georgia and Ukraine's future relationship with NATO should not and cannot be the point of departure for NATO-Russia talks. To be sure, the question of enlargement is important and cannot be brushed aside, especially in light of the commitments the alliance made in the spring of 2008 in Bucharest. But in the short term, as NATO and Russia look to find ways to reestablish ties, the two sides will need to start with a more far-reaching discussion about the future of their relationship. The immediate challenge is to agree on a desired end state.

A good place to start would be with an examination of the West and Russia's common challenges (radical extremism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, global health, the financial crisis, and energy security). This process could include a series of joint threat assessments (conducted in or outside of NATO), similar to those they have conducted vis-à-vis the Balkans and Central Asia. Furthermore, a series of Track I and Track II dialogues should be held to outline future scenarios for the NATO-Russia relationship in 2030. What kind of partnership will bring the biggest possible gains in 2030? What is the relationship Russia wants with Central and Eastern Europe in roughly 20 years? With the Baltic states? Such forums should aim to spawn ambitious and innovative ideas that may seem preposterous in today's climate.

Only after a strategic benchmark for the future of the NATO-Russia relationship has been established (which will hopefully be more ambitious than the NATO-Russia Council), will the two sides be able to turn their attention to specific policies and common threats. Somewhat ironically, the least contentious issue on that list is Afghanistan. In spite of the Soviet Union's failed guerilla war against the mujahedeen during the Cold War, Russia has found surprising ways to contribute positively to Afghanistan's future. In addition to the transit agreement signed in Bucharest, NATO and Russia have been running a successful counternarcotics training program for Afghan and Central Asian personnel since December 2005. Close to 450 officers from the six beneficiary countries have been trained under this NRC project, which is implemented in cooperation with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. This project should be expanded and accelerated, especially in light of a leaked draft of a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Afghanistan that highlights the destabilizing impact of Afghanistan's booming opium trade.³⁶ NATO and Russia should also move ahead with their planned Air Transport Framework Agreement, which would make Russia's airlift capability available for joint efforts.

Renewed efforts to cooperate on Afghanistan will do little to ease tensions over NATO and Russia's most contentious issue: MAP for Georgia and Ukraine. This is an issue that will be an inevitable part of the NATO ministerial in December and the alliance's 60th anniversary summit in April 2009. While NATO might succeed in delaying substantive discussions about enlargement in December, the issue will certainly be part of the April summit hosted by France and Germany.

³⁶ Julian Borger and Richard Norton-Taylor, "US faces downward spiral in Afghan war, says leaked intelligence report," *Guardian* (London), October 10, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/10/afghanistan-usforeignpolicy>.

At that point, the alliance will have three options—reach consensus and offer MAP to either Ukraine or Georgia (or both); push the decision to a future summit; or launch MAP “lite”—a partnership agreement that falls somewhere between intensified dialogue and MAP. Germany and other NATO members that oppose MAP will make option number one improbable, and the fact that the alliance has essentially promised membership to Georgia and Ukraine makes option two unworkable. NATO should therefore make every effort to pursue MAP “lite” as the compromise solution. To be sure, few countries will find this ideal, but given the circumstances, it is the only viable option.

Unfortunately, enlargement will not be NATO’s only challenge in rebranding and rebuilding its relationship with Russia. In addition to reassuring the Georgians and the Ukrainians that their NATO aspirations will continue to be taken seriously (which will no doubt ruffle feathers in Moscow), NATO must reassure some of its newer members that its commitment to Article V remains sound. That strategy should be implemented via diplomatic channels, using official statements and high-level visits to send clear signals about NATO’s resolve. The alliance should not, however, move military assets to the Baltics or other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The Russians would likely overreact, diminishing the already limited prospects for improved NATO-Russia ties. Of course, fears of Russian reactions should never fundamentally alter NATO decisionmaking, but NATO and the West more broadly do need to find creative ways to balance the often-conflicting goals of unwavering support for new or prospective members and a constructive and unemotional relationship with the Russians.

Because NATO only encapsulates the security side of the equation, Russia, Europe, and the United States must widen the aperture of their relationship to focus on nontraditional threats such as energy security, climate change, and global health. Climate change might be the easiest place to start, in part because U.S. president-elect Barack Obama has promised to reengage the United States in global efforts to tackle the issue. While Russia is expected to suffer fewer cataclysmic consequences than many countries in the southern hemisphere, there is no denying that climate change will pose serious economic, security, and political challenges for Russia and its surroundings (particularly in regards to anticipated disease outbreaks). It is therefore imperative to bring Russia into a long-term dialogue about the consequences of climate change in order to develop not only a post-Kyoto framework before 2012 but also a wealth of innovative adaptation and mitigation measures. The melting of the Arctic will also open new transport passages as well as facilitate exploitation of massive hydrocarbon resources (estimated to be 25 percent of the remaining reserves on the planet) formally below the ice. Indeed, the issue of Arctic security will quickly grow more acute given the economic stakes, and this forum can be used to address those challenges.

Whether it is in regards to climate change, radical extremism, or tackling Iran’s nuclear ambitions, there is no question that the new U.S. administration needs to review U.S. policy toward Russia. The incoming administration should begin by designing an unemotional and pragmatic strategy that allows the United States to enhance its cooperation with Russia but also raise occasional objections to Russia’s behavior, particularly toward its neighbors. Fortunately, there are a number

of areas that could serve as ideal starting points for a new cooperative agenda, including arms control and the global fiscal crisis. The NATO-Russia Council is another forum that should be used to foster dialogue, regardless of how contentious that dialogue might become. However, revamping the United States' relationship with Russia, as well as NATO's relationship with Russia, are just two important items on a long list of pressing challenges that the new U.S. president will need to address.

In times of conflict, both Russia and NATO's instinct has often been to walk away, to devalue the relationship, and take a more confrontational stand. While that strategy suffices in the short term, it rarely benefits either side in the long term. Whether they like to admit it or not, the United States, Europe, and Russia need one another for economic stability and the safety and security of their own citizens. Sure, the United States is the sole superpower, but recent operations in the Middle East have shown the limits of its world class military. Yes, Europe is a beacon of soft power, but halting Iran's nuclear ambitions has proven to be an almost insurmountable challenge even for Europe's most skilled diplomats. Russia, one of the world's energy giants, lacks wide ideological appeal and the ability to project power. In short, not one of today's complex challenges can be solved without the combined strengths of all three powers.