

Contact Lenses: Transparency and US-Russian Military Ties

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US and NATO soldiers and sailors are making an extremely important contribution to American security interests by doing the unexpected: fraternizing with their counterparts from Russia, a country that may one day pose a new threat to US national security. Policymakers hope that these programs will serve to build personal connections and positive feelings among officers and troops on both sides of the old cold war lines. The most important contribution these programs will make, however, is one that is often not emphasized: military-to-military programs serve vital communication and intelligence functions. They allow the United States to broadcast its benign intentions to Russia, while permitting US officials to better monitor the changing dynamics of Russia's intentions in the international arena.

Sometimes these military-to-military programs are portrayed by their advocates as a way of "taming" Russia, or of transmitting democratic values to Russian military officers. Yet this attempt at value transmission is unlikely to succeed. Russian nationalists, some of whom occupy positions of power within Moscow's fragmented state security apparatus, believe that the US is trying to undermine Russian autonomy and to influence Russian domestic politics, and they see military-to-military education programs as evidence of this attempt. They have been known to act on this belief by derailing the career paths of military officers who participate in explicit "education for democracy" programs. As a result, those officers who will likely have the most impact on Russian civil-military relations in the future are mid-level personnel with great potential for advancement who are the least likely to volunteer to attend such programs. Education for democracy should not be the fundamental focus of US military cooperation with Russia, even though it may represent the fondest hope of those who have designed such programs as NATO's Partnership for Peace.

Instead, the key components of military-to-military programs are the institutions that encourage officers from both countries to talk to their counterparts about their security concerns and to work side by side on real problems. These institutions allow each side to monitor the attitudes and moods of the other. They can help allay Russia's obvious fears about such things as NATO expansion and ABM Treaty amendment, by providing day-to-day demonstrations of America's defensive posture and cooperative intent. They can also provide US officials with better information about the likely direction of developments in Russia, helping to clarify whether any threats to US security are likely to emanate from the Russian military. Together these things will help to resolve the so-called security dilemma: the need all countries have to protect themselves from threats, while avoiding defensive actions that are themselves misinterpreted as threatening by the other side.

Three institutions in particular provide important opportunities for both sides to observe and communicate with the other. They are the 1989 Dangerous Military Activities (DMA) Agreement, the 1993 Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation on Defense and Military Relations, and the involvement of Russian troops in the US IFOR and SFOR missions in Bosnia. These institutions have received continued support from senior military officers on both sides, and in fact have been steadily strengthened in scope even as US/Russian diplomatic relations have fluctuated and sometimes plummeted. This has been true even though the stated cooperative goals that each institution was ostensibly designed to achieve have not always been met. Cooperative policy outcomes, then, are not the primary value of these programs. Instead, each has helped to solidify communication and information exchange between the two sides in the face of an uncertain relationship. I will briefly describe each below.

The DMA Agreement, which was both designed and negotiated primarily by military officers, was originally intended (at a time when the Cold War was just beginning to end) to prevent the unintentional or miscalculated use of force in peacetime. Its goals were to reduce the incidence of harassing military activity by one side against the other (for example, by controlling the use of laser beams near vessels operated by the other side) and to work out agreed procedures for the resolution of unforeseen occurrences (such as the accidental incursion by one side's aircraft on to the other's territory). Potentially harassing military activity has not completely ended; for example, there was a recent claim that a Russian naval vessel may have temporarily blinded a US pilot with lasers.

Yet the DMA Agreement did achieve one lasting success: it established regular annual and semi-annual meetings between US and Russian senior officers and defense officials, giving each side the opportunity to raise key concerns with the other, as well as the chance to measure attitude changes against an established baseline of interaction. One example of this success was a June 1992 meeting in Moscow, where Russian General Staff officers privately raised concerns with US air force officers about US violations of Cuban airspace during Haitian refugee crisis operations. According to one American observer, "Having this issue successfully resolved with a minimum of fanfare helped build trust and confidence between the leaders of the two forces."

The Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation further solidified this trust and confidence-building process. It expanded the periodic meetings mandate of the DMA Agreement to include annual and semi-annual interactions between officers at a variety of ranks. It also established a Bilateral Working Group that meets each year to prescribe a program of lower-level unit activities and exercises. The number of such activities and exercises has steadily increased with time, with over 100 scheduled for 1997.

While these exercises have become so common that they now seem normal in the United States, it should be remembered that they still provoke great controversy in Russia, as some political figures have seen them as a means for the United States to spy on Russia in preparation for future invasion plans. Thus joint exercises held in Totsk, Russia in 1994 had to be delayed for several months, under pressure from nationalists who feared American intentions. Yet the Russian Defense Ministry has continued to strongly support these programs, and has gone through great effort to explain their value to the public.

The crowning achievement of US-Russian military cooperation thus far has been the shoulder-to-shoulder service of troops from the two countries in Joint Endeavor peacekeeping operations in Bosnia. As in the case of the other programs cited here, policy coordination between the two sides has not always gone smoothly, and each side has attempted to preserve as much of its autonomy and influence over the process as possible.

Yet despite repeated cases of disputed unilateral action (ranging from the private meetings that Russian commander Gen. Leontii Shevtsov held with indicted war criminals Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, to the US-approved attacks by NATO against two Bosnian Serbs under sealed indictment without prior consultation with Russia), cooperative and interwoven military activities (such as joint patrols, joint reconnaissance, and mine clearing) have continued and are generally viewed as having accomplished their mission successfully. Russia renewed its commitment to keep troops under US command when the IFOR operation was extended into its SFOR stage in late 1996, and Shevtsov proudly exclaimed: "We military have set an example for our politicians by demonstrating that the question of Russian participation in a peacekeeping operation [jointly with the Americans] can be successfully solved."

Russia gains a variety of benefits from these programs. Russian military leaders have learned how to train personnel to interact peacefully with civilians in situations where the potential for violence is high (a skill of great practical value in the unsettled post-Soviet areas), and are picking up practical ideas to use in their own military reform efforts (for example, Russia currently lacks an NCO system and has expressed interest in how the US uses NCOs). The Russian state also gains a new arena through these programs for expressing its views and concerns about security in Europe, an asset that is important to Russia with its recent decline in world influence.

In turn, the United States gains transparency: the ability to avoid unnecessary future conflict by transmitting to Russia its own benign intentions, and an additional window through which to view the progress of Russian intentions and capabilities. Through such programs, the United States can help to mitigate the fears that NATO expansion is causing Russia, and thereby avoid another spiral of cold war-type threat perception. Simultaneously, by keeping these programs in operation even while diplomatic relations fluctuate, the United States gains additional channels of information about Russian security concerns, and the potential for advance warning should Russia ever become a US adversary again in the future.