

Russia's Relations with NATO: Lessons from the History of the Entente Cordiale

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As NATO contemplates the second wave of enlargement, many wonder what the Russian response might be. The experience of 1996-98 might suggest an optimistic scenario: the first wave was met with harsh words and threats, but the actual response was mild. Russia signed the Founding Act, largely on Western terms, and has entered a cooperative relationship with NATO. For Russia, historical memory reaches back further, and offers other precedents with less promising scenarios. The emergence of the Entente Cordiale, the Russo-French-British alliance against Germany in the late 19th century, is one such precedent. Patterns of behavior change slowly, rendering a century-old experience contemporary validity.

Radical Words, Moderate Action

With respect to both the 19th century German threat and the 20th century's NATO enlargement, Russia responded to what it saw as unfavorable external conditions with harsh rhetoric and calls for an immediate action to redress the situation. But in each case it also proved reluctant at first to take radical steps and disrupt the existing international order.

In the 1880s, a wave of anti-German rhetoric engulfed Russia, even though the Alliance of Three Emperors bound Russia to Germany and Austria. A separate, 1879 alliance between Germany and Austria ensured that any conflict with Austria, which was competing with Russia in the Balkans, could bring about war with Germany. The intensity of anti-German sentiment suggested that Russia would break with Germany and enter an alliance with France. Although Russia did eventually abandon the Alliance of Three Emperors, it agreed to a Reinsurance Treaty which continued association with Germany, albeit in a weaker form. In 1890 the new German Emperor Wilhelm II terminated the Reinsurance Treaty, leaving Russia in total international isolation. At that point, Russia began talks with France, but refrained from signing a treaty.

There are direct parallels between 1887-90 and 1996-98. NATO enlargement generated very strong rhetoric and threats of retaliation, but in reality Russia was reluctant to do anything radical. It concluded an agreement with NATO and, no matter how grudgingly, pursued cooperation. Russia's actions certainly did not match its words.

Restraint Can Snap

However, the policy of strong words but moderate action need not continue indefinitely. Indeed, Russian policy can change unexpectedly after a period of moderate behavior and even go further than the situation requires, appearing to "snap" with little warning. This is what happened in 1891. Rumors spread that Great Britain was about to join the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria, and Italy. Russia reacted sharply and quickly by signing a political convention with France, supplemented a year later by a military convention. Russia responded to a threat that did not actually exist: a balanced analysis should have suggested that the probability of Britain joining the Triple Alliance was zero.

In today's context, the currently moderate Russian policy toward NATO might change with little warning. It is difficult to predict what might trigger the change. A second wave of NATO enlargement is a fair candidate, but less dramatic events could also cause sharp reaction, such as NATO action in the Balkans or NATO exercises on the territory of one of the Newly Independent States.

Once a Friend, Always a Friend; Once a Foe...

Perceptions and biases always affect foreign policy, but Russia stands out in this regard. Historically, it has displayed a remarkably strong propensity to disregard or reinterpret information that contradicts the preexisting image of a country. An unfriendly act by a friendly country is apt to be disregarded, while a neutral act by a country perceived as a foe is often interpreted as hostile toward Russia.

When a Bulgarian delegation toured Europe in search of a new king in 1887, Russia (incorrectly) suspected Germany of foul play. The delegation was given a cool reception in Berlin, with much counsel to make peace with Russia. Later, in Paris, it encountered exactly the same reception and advice; in fact, the French deliberately copied the Germans. But Alexander III publicly praised France for its position on Bulgaria, while overlooking the restrained and even friendly German approach. The reason was simple: Germany was increasingly perceived as a foe, while France was emerging as a friend.

Today, no state is yet classified as an implacable foe or a true friend, but the trends already exist. Germany and France are the leading candidates for "friend" status; almost anything they do will be treated with consideration and interpreted in positive light. The United States is a candidate for "foe:"

- it is blamed for NATO enlargement (Germany's role is all but forgotten);
- its activities in the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia elicit hostility;
- it is suspected of attempts to turn Ukraine against Russia; and
- many believe US policy seeks to destroy Russia and break it into several parts.

This perception is not yet solidified. Perceptions take a long time to form and to change, but once the negative image of the United States is firm, Russian policy will be guided by anti-

Americanism rather than Russian national interest. Emotion, rather than calculation, is likely to provide the overriding rationale for foreign policy.

Regimes Are Fleeting, Power Is Enduring

Traditionally, Russia has paid much attention to the balance of power underlying international agreements. If the balance of power is unfavorable, agreements cannot be relied upon. This rationale can be seen in a 1912 letter of Foreign Minister Sazonov, explaining Russia's refusal to embrace a multilateral regime for the Turkish Straits: "We believe that the fundamental interests of Russia cannot be secured by any type of treaty guarantees because [they] can always be circumvented; we must always keep in mind, what kind of real power can, in reality, insure a regime against any violations." This attitude parallels the contemporary Russian view toward the Founding Act with NATO: the unease stems from doubt that NATO will implement it in good faith given Russia's weakness. If the feeling of unease is allowed to grow, it might cause Russian policy to snap: Russia might seek allies against NATO.

There is evidence, however, that Russia's views about international institutions may be slowly changing. At least on the official level, Russia has embraced the idea of becoming part of the network of international agreements and conventions, and is increasingly relying on them for security and economic purposes. It is doing so out of necessity, of course, but if these institutions prove to yield benefits and ensure "fair play," ingrained Russian views might finally change.

Conclusion

What does this historical case suggest about future Russian relations with NATO? The Entente tells us little with respect to specific scenarios, but much in terms of useful warnings. Russian policy is likely to be stable for a long time, marked by explosions of strong rhetoric, but restraint in terms of action. If tension continues to build, however, policy is likely to snap at an unpredictable moment, perhaps with little apparent provocation. Russia's external relations will be guided by emotion instead of rational calculation, and follow preexisting perceptions of who is friend and who is foe.

A comparison of NATO-Russian relations to the history of the Entente suggests that so far Russia has not truly reacted to NATO enlargement. The real response might come years from now, and is impossible to predict. To a large degree, it will be formed by the way the relationship with NATO develops in the next several years. Historical patterns warn that Russia, while appearing to drop its grievances, may at some point suddenly demand "payment" for the events everyone else will have forgotten.