

Repairing Relations with Russia Through NATO

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Repairing relations with Russia should be one of NATO's top priorities in the next five years. Given the centrality of NATO to American security, the US and Russia will not be able to make progress in their bilateral relationship as long as NATO's capabilities, missions, and role in European security remain sources of bitter disagreement and mistrust.

Fortunately, Russia's transition to a new political leadership creates the potential for a substantial improvement in NATO-Russia relations. On May 7th, Vladimir Putin will be inaugurated as President, and there is good reason to believe that we will soon thereafter begin to see the outlines of his political and economic priorities. If those priorities favor a newly formulated commitment to international economic integration and international investment, they suggest a corollary commitment by this Russian leadership once again to try to make practical progress in political and security relations with the West. Russian ratification of START II was one step in this process: finding a positive and productive relationship with NATO is the obvious next step.

In order to have any hope for making this progress, we need to understand what NATO is and what it does well, which explains why its members and so many other countries in Europe view it positively. Russia also needs to realistically face how it must shift its approach to NATO, in light of what the alliance really is and does.

What NATO is and Does Well

Without any doubt, NATO is a political-military alliance for the collective defense of its members. This obvious fact can hide more than it reveals about the organization, however. NATO's success lies less in the aggregate power of its members' military forces than in the patterns and procedures of cooperation it supports.

NATO's success after the Cold War is due to four features the alliance developed during the Cold War. First, NATO's day-to-day procedures, committees, and political offices create an ongoing, normal stream of consultation and groundwork for decision-making. NATO works in part because it is mundane: it does not convene only in crises to deal only with the most difficult and high stakes international problems confronting its members. Instead, the alliance builds on the mutual familiarity of its members and the pragmatic focus of its everyday tasks. When crises--such as conflict in the Balkans--arise, members can move from everyday problems to more difficult ones without having to

start from scratch. Officials know one another and have already discussed on many occasions their governments' views of security problems and solutions. This by no means insures speedy agreement, as delay and disagreement over policy in Bosnia demonstrates. But it tends to make NATO more capable of building a political decision in comparison to other international organizations.

Second, NATO has been successful in the 1990s because during the Cold War its procedures and norms for consultation were meant not only to foster effective policy and action directed outside the alliance, but to create integration and transparency within the alliance. It is wrong to attribute NATO's success to community and trust among its members. Instead, NATO itself built that community and trust: one needs only to look at the bitter alliance debates about rearming Germany in the 1950s to dispense with the notion that community and trust preceded NATO, rather than the other way around. NATO's military practices in particular were designed to create an ongoing process of multinational training, exposure to the personnel and cultures of other member countries, and transparency to establish working assumptions about the absence of threat among members.

Third, NATO's post-Cold War success has been due in large measure to the practical achievement of a multinational integrated military command, accompanied by joint planning and exercises, as well as interoperability. Like the alliance's day-to-day political consultations, the ongoing nature of NATO's joint planning and operations puts the focus on practical issues and process, rather than on high stakes and difficult obstacles that have continually emerged throughout the alliance's history. NATO's multiple successes in Partnership for Peace (PfP)--success in engaging non-member militaries and in increasing their readiness and training for post-Cold War missions such as peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance--did not come from the theoretical clarity or coherence of the original concept, but from the incremental benefits of practical activities and a focus on the process of extending NATO's intra-alliance procedures for military cooperation and joint action to the "partners."

The most important lesson of NATO's success, therefore, is that process and practice have mattered more than solving high-profile issues. While NATO was confronting the dramatic question of when and how to enlarge, the alliance was quietly changing in fundamental and virtually unrecognized ways through Partnership for Peace, which through its activities over time has eroded the meaning of the barrier between members and non-members. American officials and the American public create unnecessary obstacles for progress in our relations with Russia by treating NATO enlargement as the core issue of the alliance's future.

Lessons for Relations with Russia

First, since "consultation" is key to NATO's processes of integration, cohesion, and non-confrontational decision-making, NATO and Russia need to reconcile two different meanings of the term, and focus on practical activities to make "consultation" productive.

Within the alliance and among members, "consultation" means building on the daily stream of political interactions to reach consensus agreements. Through its everyday processes NATO is able to avoid having to face public and frequent confrontations on policy issues when alliance members disagree. NATO officials insist that there is such a thing as a "Luxembourg veto" by which the smallest member can prevent alliance action against its wishes. Russian officials dismiss such a notion (to the considerable annoyance of NATO officials) and point out that the US and other large members can and do bring pressure to bear on smaller members when the stakes are high enough. What both miss is that both are right: it is the process of consensus building and "consultation" that makes public veto and disagreement largely avoidable.

This misunderstanding is compounded by the use of the same word "consultation" to mean something entirely different for NATO interactions with Russia in the Permanent Joint Council (PJC), primarily before the Kosovo conflict in March 1999. NATO officials insist that they "consulted" with Russia, that Russia would not agree on action to prevent Serbian plans to attack Kosovars, and that therefore NATO had to act as it chose. Russian officials point out that NATO did not "consult" in good faith with Russia, precisely because the interaction was not one of taking into account Russian views and objections. Russian officials understood that they did not have a public "veto," but they read too much into the meaning of NATO's commitment to "consult" them.

On the one hand, this clash of expectations cannot be reconciled as long as Russia is not a member of NATO. On the other hand, since the consensus-building processes and a practical focus on daily interactions and problem-solving are what make NATO's internal "consultations" work both for effective decision-making and for cohesion, the focus should be to get Russia and NATO involved in daily, practical, lower-stakes issues addressing a greater range of common interests. For example, both Russian and NATO officials identify terrorism and nonproliferation as among the highest priority common security issues. If Russia returns to the PJC, the focus of its activities should be discussion on these problems (e.g., practical issues like border and export controls), rather than divisive issues like Kosovo. If NATO's experience is transferable, practical day-to-day cooperation on these issues can provide a basis for discussing a broadening range of tougher problems.

Second, while integration and transparency as mechanisms to create common views of security and trust will be limited as long as Russia is not an alliance member, more can be done in this area, as well. For example, in the early 1990s there was considerable doubt that the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty could be brought into force after the disintegration of the Soviet Union: eight new countries had to agree on allocation of the Soviet allotments of treaty-limited equipment. In many cases, those countries viewed one another with great suspicion (such as Russia and Ukraine), and in some cases the countries were at war (such as Armenia and Azerbaijan). Through intensive consultations, training and seminars, and other process- and transparency-oriented mechanisms, NATO contributed to eventual agreement in May 1992 among the post-Soviet states. After the downturn in NATO-Russia relations it is too easy to forget that Russia welcomed NATO involvement--through the inclusive political mechanism of the

North Atlantic Cooperation Council--as a resource for bolstering some of its negotiating positions.

This lesson should be extended to similar military concerns that preoccupy Russia's security leadership today. For example, Russians have expressed concerns to high level NATO officials about PfP military activities in the Caucasus and Central Asia, arguing that such exercises (even if for peacekeeping missions) reinforce its sense of encirclement and isolation, particularly in unstable regions. The obvious solution is to involve Russians in observation of all aspects of these PfP activities. Russia has not been able to participate as fully as it should in PfP planning and exercises for a combination of political and financial reasons. If the Russian military is unable to participate for these reasons, the practical benefits of NATO integration and transparency argue at least for Russian political and military delegations as observers at every one of these activities. In the mid-1990s during his time as the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR), General George Joulwan made it a standard practice to create as much inclusiveness and transparency as Russia's military representation to NATO sought, in line with NATO's basic recipe for intra-alliance success in fostering security.

Third, to build upon the strength of its integrated command structure and interoperability as a way to get militaries engaged in practical activities and focused on process rather than big political issues, NATO should build upon its demonstrated skill at adapting successful practices to new situations. For example, proposals for Russian participation in the Implementation Force (IFOR) in Bosnia following the 1995 Dayton Agreements faced what appeared to be an insurmountable obstacle. Russia refused to serve under NATO's military command, since Russia is not a member of NATO. Based upon long experience and the recent example of failure of the UN protection force in Bosnia, NATO insisted on unity of command. The apparent incompatibility of these requirements was reconciled when it was decided that IFOR would retain the structure of unified command, with the flexibility of allowing the Russian commander of Russian IFOR troops to report (as deputy) to General Joulwan in his parallel capacity as commander of US forces in Europe. At the same time, General Shevtsov continued to report to his proper national command in the Russian Ministry of Defense, and exercised operational control over IFOR's Russian contingent. This built upon long-standing NATO practices of retaining national command authority while serving under unified NATO command.

In this example, then, what appeared to be an obstacle (NATO's standard procedures), proved to be the solution when the focus shifted to practical arrangements and the process of implementing the military mission. Obviously, the parallel command was a fiction, but it is a fiction that has served the US in NATO for some 50 years. If NATO and Russia do turn to practical measures for combating terrorism and controlling proliferation, NATO's successful day-to-day procedures would be the best place to start.

Russia's Part in the Process

For its part, the new Russian political leadership has to invest political and economic resources in becoming a more reliable and professional partner. The Russian leadership needs both to confront the need for military reform (which is going to cost more, not less, money), and accountability on the part of Russia's military in cracking down on illegal activities by Russian military personnel (ranging from everyday corruption to engaging in the international traffic in women through the Balkans).

Just as important, Russia's political and security elite needs to refocus its watchful view of NATO away from the high level appearances of the alliance's military hardware and advanced technology down to the ground level reality of the organization's everyday activities and practice-oriented processes. Russia needs to engage itself in the process of what NATO does, especially by availing itself of the unrealized potential of Partnership for Peace. Russia must focus its concern less on working out all the theoretical issues beforehand, and more on whatever activities get the process going. The new Putin leadership needs most of all to realize that the best way to influence NATO is by dropping Russia's insistence that it must be treated as a special case. Russia will be most effective in influencing NATO by quietly joining in the process and working from within.

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