

The Russia-NATO Relationship: Is It Worth Another Try?

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Celeste A. Wallander

Center for Strategic and International Studies

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Russia and NATO are discussing how to implement the decision taken at the North Atlantic Council (NAC) ministerial meeting on December 6, 2001 to develop new mechanisms in order to “give new impetus and substance to our partnership, with the goal of creating, with Russia, a new NATO-Russia Council, to identify and pursue opportunities for joint action at 20.” The mechanisms are to be “for consultation, cooperation, joint decision, and coordinated/joint action,” and are to be in place for the next NAC meeting in Reykjavik in May 2002. (Quotes from the Final Communique of the Ministerial of December 6, 2001, second paragraph.)

Yet despite the decision to move forward with the initiative, reservations in Moscow and Washington may make the initiative another failure in the short and sad history of Russian-Western security cooperation after the Cold War. Claiming that this is the last chance for a NATO-Russia reconciliation would be overly dramatic, but saying that failure this time is likely to be more costly and far more long-lasting is not an exaggeration. Failure would waste the opportunity created by the recognition of the common threat to security posed by global terrorism. It would squander the opportunity to anchor Russia’s political and security institutions and individuals in Western networks and processes in a way that supports long-lasting change. It would also miss the opportunity to make cooperation and engagement with the West in political, security, and economic spheres Russia’s foreign policy priority for the coming decade.

What Has Not Worked and Why

Keeping in mind that we approach this question with considerable context and history is important. Russian concerns about NATO are rooted in German unification. Long after then-President Mikhail Gorbachev had given up arguing that East Germany should remain a separate country, he negotiated for restrictions on Germany’s military capabilities and for limits on NATO’s extension into eastern Germany. In the summer of 1990, agreement was reached on both issues, with the relevant parties (East and West Germany, Britain, France, the United States, and Soviet Union) agreeing, among other points, that NATO forces would not extend east of the intra-German border.

Russian officials would later claim that the provision on keeping eastern Germany NATO-free precluded NATO enlargement because the diplomatic discussions had referred to NATO “not extending beyond its current line” (Gorbachev reports in his memoirs that this was the specific wording by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker) or “not moving east” (as German officials confirmed to me in interviews in the early 1990s). However, the treaty on German unification did not prohibit NATO from enlarging to include new members, and the provisions covering limitations on NATO’s forces were linked to formerly eastern German territory, so there was in fact no legally binding commitment against NATO enlargement. If Soviet leaders believed that they had received such a political commitment, they made a serious mistake in not getting it in writing.

The important lesson here is that ambiguity (intended or not) may facilitate an agreement, but is likely to cause problems in the future if the issue is a serious concern to the parties security interests. This appears to have been a lesson that was not properly learned. When enlargement appeared inevitable, the Russian leadership under then-President Boris Yeltsin again sought assurances that NATO military forces would not move east along with the expanding borders of NATO. The alliance would not agree to a binding commitment on this point, but made unilateral statements that NATO did not plan to deploy nuclear forces nor permanently station conventional forces on the territory of new members.

This time, however, the Russian leadership also wanted assurances that Russia would have some say over NATO’s growing military reach as well. In addition to enlargement, NATO members faced the question of the organization’s military mission after the Cold War. Peacekeeping and peace enforcement in support of UN Security Council resolutions, as practiced in Bosnia, appeared to be the answer. Although Russia clearly would not have a veto over internal alliance issues, NATO’s emphasis on new, out-of-area missions was a focus of concern in Moscow. Therefore, although the Russian leadership did not receive a veto in the NATO-Russia Founding Act signed in May 1997, they did secure a provision binding both parties to “refraining from the threat or use of force against each other as well as against any other state, its sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence.” To Russia, this meant that NATO could not act in non-Article 5 missions without UN Security Council (and thereby Russian) approval. Even if, as proved the case, the Permanent Joint Council (PJC) established by the Founding Act proved meaningless from Russia’s point-of-view, this provision gave Russia the right to limit NATO’s reach.

In terms of NATO’s traditional structure and missions, the Founding Act had not given Russia a veto. NATO alone could decide on membership, integrated command, political decisionmaking, exercises, and so on. In addition, the United States had ensured that the PJC would involve Russia in consultation only after all the NATO members had agreed on policy. However, in order to achieve agreement on the Founding Act, an important area of ambiguity had been left. If NATO adopted nontraditional missions, or “non-Article 5 missions” as they are known, Russia had a veto, not by way of the PJC, but by way of Russia’s seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Once again, ambiguity that had made agreement possible was the basis for Russian accusations of betrayal and threat arising from NATO’s growing size and role. When NATO allies determined in March 1999 that using military force against Serbia was necessary to prevent widespread murder in Kosovo, they had to do so without a Security Council resolution because

of Russian opposition. In the end, NATO launched the mission without a UN resolution, which, in Russia's view, violated NATO's commitment under the Founding Act. The experience had substantial effects in Russia, undermining the arguments for security cooperation, freezing most military-to-military programs, and sparking a revision of military doctrine and security policy to identify NATO as a threat and emphasize the role of nuclear weapons in deterring it in Kaliningrad and the Caucasus.

President Vladimir Putin negotiates the new opportunity for a NATO-Russia relationship in this context. My message is not that the Russian perspective is objectively correct, but that Western officials need to understand the importance of these issues for Russia in its relationship with NATO. In addition, the record shows that it is better to be precise on what is, and is not, being pledged in the new relationship over the next five months. Three strikes, and we may be out, or at least far behind.

Why It Is Worth Another Try

The reason to try once again to forge a constructive NATO-Russia relationship that might provide the basis for a deeper Russian political integration and transformation is not that we owe it to Russia. The reason is our own national security interest.

The September 11 attacks against the United States made clear the extent of the threat global terrorism poses to U.S. political, economic, and security interests as well as the U.S. social system and the values it supports. Because the United States has made countering this threat the focus of its foreign and security policy, we face a different international environment from that of the 1990s. From the perspective of U.S. national interests, several fundamental factors have changed with respect to Russia's position in this new environment. First, global terrorism as a core threat brings into focus U.S. common interests with Russia, which are counterterrorism, stability in Eurasia, and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. During the 1990s, Russia's often chaotic security policy process had nonetheless sustained two consistent themes: that the primary threats to Russian national interests were the failure of domestic economic reform, and instability and terrorism in Eurasia. Therefore, with the change in focus, the scope for common national interests expanded and became more central to both countries. Common interests do not ensure cooperation, but they do create the opportunity, and the incentive.

Another important factor changed more quietly and gradually and is an underappreciated yet solid basis for U.S.-Russian security cooperation: Putin's Russia and its foreign policy have undergone their own evolution in the past two years. The fundamental goals of Putin's pragmatic foreign policy are economic growth and Eurasian stability. Putin priority has been to rebuild the Russian economy. He needs to do much at home to achieve economic growth, but he needs help from abroad as well. Russia needs foreign markets for oil, natural gas, and metals, which are 80 percent of Russian exports. Exports in these sectors are a major reason for the strong warming of Russian-European relations under Putin.

However, Russia also needs opportunities to develop other export markets for new sectors, such as consumer goods. Most importantly, Russia needs foreign investment as one source in the \$2.5 trillion the economy is estimated to require during the next 20 years. Most of that investment will have to come from within Russia, but much will also need to come from foreign

sources. Along with foreign capital, Russia also needs Western business practices and management expertise.

For these reasons, Russian foreign policy had been drawn to the West in the months before September. Many in the United States missed the trend because Putin's efforts were focused primarily on Europe. However the trend was clear in the improvement in U.S.-Russian relations over the summer as well. Successful meetings this summer between President George W. Bush and Putin built on a trend well rooted in Russian national interests and the foreign policy priorities of the Putin leadership.

As a result of the change in U.S. security priorities and Russia's recent evolution, when Putin faced his choice after September 11, the heightened demand for and supply of real cooperation against terrorism created the opportunity for progress in many areas of the relationship, not least NATO.

What Is NATO, and What Will Russia Be?

The question of the NATO-Russia relationship is every bit as much about NATO's dilemmas as Russia's problems. Is NATO a meaningful military institution, with the purpose and capabilities to defend the security interests of its members? In the 1990s, the easy part of the answer was that Article 5 missions (common defense) remained the core mission of the alliance. The debate was about the extent to which non-Article 5 and political security missions (integration, transparency, and assurance) could form the primary task of the alliance.

After September 11, however, NATO's relevance to its core mission is in question. NATO faces irrelevance. We face a new security world, with a new security mission. NATO invoked Article 5 after the September attack, but NATO is not the instrument on which the United States has chosen to rely to defeat the threat it faces. The United States has not relied on NATO for the campaign in Afghanistan because NATO does not have the assets needed to succeed. NATO members (particularly Great Britain and Turkey) have contributed to the military campaign, but not as NATO members per se.

More important to the success of the U.S. campaign of fighting terrorism based in Eurasia have been bases in Central Asia as well as South Asia, and Russian intelligence on Afghanistan. In the next stages of the campaign against terrorism, the active cooperation of NATO and non-NATO members will be required to disable criminal, financial, and the associated terrorist networks throughout Eurasia and Europe. Most importantly, the threat posed by global terrorist networks grows enormously if the networks have weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or their component materials. Russia holds the sad distinction of being the largest source of potential chemical, biological, or nuclear materials that could be used by terrorists to attack the United States or its allies with far greater destructive force than that achieved in September.

In short, if NATO is to remain a viable and valuable military asset for U.S. national security, it needs to adapt to its new security environment, or risk becoming irrelevant to the security needs of its core member. Imagining how NATO can do so without cooperating with Russia in counterterrorism, WMD control and nonproliferation, conflict prevention and stabilization, and related emergency management missions is difficult.

Government officials are currently exploring many creative and promising ideas for areas of cooperation in the NATO-Russia Council. They are discussing ways to ensure that the Council at

20 will not compromise the rights of NATO members to have autonomy to make alliance decisions at 19, including admitting new members, sustaining alliance integrated command, and maintaining the strong coherence of its common values and practices. These details are important, but keeping in mind the broader view is also important: What is NATO's purpose without relevance to the security threats that face us now at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Given the sources and substance of that threat, can NATO be effective without somehow solving the problem of a strong and cooperative relationship with Russia?

The question is posed not only to NATO, however, but also to Russia. NATO is not merely a pragmatic, nineteenth-century style alliance of sovereign states. It is based on the transnational values, practices, and institutions of its members that enable them both to work together and to sustain a level of assurance about one another's intentions that makes meaningful security cooperation possible. NATO must take Russia seriously, but if the Russian leadership continues to approach NATO as it did during the 1990s that will not be enough.

What does this mean? First, Russia has to reform its military to make it not only effective, but also modern. Precisely how Russia reforms its military is an internal matter, but Western standards of civilian control, officer professionalism, and the rights of enlisted personnel are clear. Reform entails organizational, financial, and also training questions with which several NATO members (not least Germany) have some positive experience that might be of use. Second, the Russian leadership has to shed its ambivalence and suspicions about NATO's intentions. That NATO has the capability to harm Russia is little doubted. However threat consists of capability and intention. Without acceptance that NATO does not have the intention to harm Russia—an acceptance that was never achieved in the 1990s—one more try has little point.

Finally, not only Putin but also Russian society must come to grips with the perennial "Russian question": Where does Russia belong? East, West, or drifting in the middle? The solution to such a question has a good precedent, and one rooted in NATO. Time and again, Western security came up against the German question: Could Germany exist as a prosperous, powerful country that did not threaten the security of its neighbors? NATO played a vital role in solving the German question in the twentieth century, not by telling Germany to go away, and come back once it had fixed itself to NATO's satisfaction. It was solved by engaging and integrating Germany. On the German side, the determination of a new generation of leaders beginning with Konrad Adenauer who anchored Germany in relations with its former enemies made it possible. History cannot provide simple formulae, but the opportunity presented by the September attacks is a strong argument for evolving the precedent as a solution to the Russia question. NATO needs to engage Russia, and Russia needs to engage itself.