

Analysis

Prospects for Developing NATO – Russia Relations

By Andrew Monaghan, London

Abstract

The NATO-Russia relationship has gone through an important evolution. Following the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council, a bureaucratic framework has been built up in which cooperation can develop across nine areas of mutual interest. Yet political tensions have become increasingly evident in the last few months. These difficulties have emerged against a background of frustration with the progress of practical relations. As the relationship becomes ever more complex with new problems adding to old tensions, both sides need to commit to developing the relationship more actively.

Progress and Problems

NATO – Russia relations have come a long way. From the regional confrontation in northern and central Europe of the Cold War years, the relationship has since passed through controversy and then cooperation in south eastern Europe to one of a more global aspect. Relations and even collaboration extend to the Mediterranean, the Trans-Caucasus region and Central Asia. Indeed, instead of being locked in confrontation, NATO and Russia are now partners, linked by the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). Established in 2002, the NRC meets regularly and provides the trappings of equality for Russia in the relationship, bringing together 27 members, rather than 26 + 1. Both sides have now established a presence with the other, given the Russian mission to NATO headquarters and an office at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and NATO's Liaison Mission and Information Office in Moscow.

The NRC's five-year anniversary provides an opportune moment to evaluate the progress of this evolution, especially given the tensions that have become all the more apparent this year, repeatedly noted by analysts and the media in both NATO member states and Russia. Western commentators depict the development of a new Cold War, pointing to Russia's aggressive Soviet-style rhetoric, while Russian media sources describe the relationship as a "poor peace" and "bitter friendship." Official statements are also more frank than usual. Though stressing the need for cooperation, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer recently noted Russia's confrontational tone and the need to "lower the volume" in NATO-Russia diplomacy. For his part, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov noted both the successes and problems in the evolution of relations and stated flatly that the work ahead would not be easy. Disagreements over the status of Kosovo, the Conventional Forces in Europe

(CFE) Treaty, US ballistic missile defense plans, and Russian statements about re-directing its missiles at sites in Europe illustrate the difficult agenda.

This article traces the evolution of the relationship, looking first at the progress made and some of the cooperation achieved before turning to the difficulties, which are both political and practical in nature. The key point to emerge is that though the difficulties are both numerous and high profile, the achievements made are important steps forward which could not have been envisaged just a few years ago. Though the partnership is uneven across the different areas of cooperation, the relationship is now on a different footing compared to the years of confrontation. Moreover, despite significant differences over several important issues, there is no ideological gulf between NATO and Russia as there was during the Cold War and there is an established mechanism for discussing problems.

NATO-Russia Cooperation

The NRC provides the basic framework for a broad range of cooperative programs across nine areas. Progress has been made in all nine areas, particularly in military-to-military cooperation, albeit to varying degrees in others. In recent times, there has been visible progress in theatre missile defense (TMD), with a series of yearly command post exercises and exchanges of information and ideas between NATO and Russian experts leading to the development of a common operational doctrine. Additionally, there has been cooperation in civil defense and emergency management and nuclear munitions security, with joint exercises being held in both areas.

The two sides have also cooperated in submarine search and rescue. A framework agreement in this area was signed in 2003, and Russia subsequently participated in the major NATO exercise Sorbet Royal in the Mediterranean in 2005. Russia plays a

part in the NATO-led Submarine Escape & Rescue Working Group. Indeed this framework provided the basis for the UK-led team which rescued the Russian submersible off the coast of Kamchatka in 2005, one of the high points of both UK and NATO military cooperation with Russia. Russia is also contributing to NATO's Operation Active Endeavour, naval operations in the Mediterranean to demonstrate NATO resolve and solidarity. Such cooperative measures – this list is by no means exhaustive – provide an important background to understanding the current situation.

NATO-Russia Problems

There are, however, a complex range of problems, both conceptual and practical, which have limited the progress of the relationship. Indeed there is some disappointment among important constituents on both sides with the extent of the achievements to date. Several “direct” problems in the NATO-Russia relationship have been enflamed further by a series of “indirect” problems in the broader context which have become part of the NATO-Russia dialogue. Indeed both direct and indirect problems are serving to exacerbate each other: disappointment with the slow and uneven progress in the relationship spills into the wider international situation; tensions in the wider international situation serve to entrench and perpetuate direct problems.

Key small, but nonetheless important, practical problems hindering the development of the NATO-Russia relationship include linguistic, budgetary and technical constraints. There are too few translators to facilitate the joint exercises, reflecting a wider shortage of personnel on both sides who speak the relevant languages. There are also differences in equipment standards, training techniques, and doctrinal assertions between NATO and Russia which have affected interoperability.

Though clearly each side is important for the other, each has a number of other important priorities, some of which have tended to push the development of the NATO-Russia relationship into the background. NATO, for instance, is deeply involved in Afghanistan and is attempting to establish a more effective relationship with the European Union (EU).

Moreover, NATO is also still undergoing important internal transformation. While this transformation in itself absorbs considerable attention, importantly it also means that Russia is becoming increasingly a priority for NATO. NATO's enlargement to include new members from eastern and central Europe has meant that the concerns these states have about Russian policy become part of NATO's agenda. The arrival of the

new members has not been a wholly positive development for the relationship, given that it has brought the tensions that exist between Russia and these states to the NATO-Russia agenda. Furthermore, it has served to highlight the differences within NATO about how to deal with Russia. A number of member states press for a more robust, critical approach towards Russia, while others seek more cooperative relations with it. This lack of consensus within NATO creates a practical difficulty for the development of the relationship: without consensus, NATO lacks effective policy-making with regard to the relationship. A lack of coherence on NATO's part thus serves to weaken the functioning and development of the relationship. The inability to formulate a coherent policy also provides ammunition for those in Russia who argue that NATO is more about talking than action and therefore not a major priority to be actively pursued.

For its part, Russia, though attempting to re-establish itself on the international stage, is still preoccupied by many domestic issues, including economic development. Moreover, Russian elections are approaching, both absorbing political attention and slowing the development of foreign relationships. The Russia electoral cycle is beginning to pose other problems for the development of NATO-Russia relations because it highlights the fact that apart from a handful of individuals at the summit of the decision-making executive, there are few constituencies within Russia that really support such a relationship. The Russian Defense White Paper of 2003 illustrated well the ambiguity within the Russian military establishment about NATO. While partnership with NATO and the NRC is emphasized, and large scale war with NATO is excluded from the list of likely conflicts, NATO is still considered by many in the Russian military establishment to pose a threat. There is also serious opposition to NATO among political and public circles, and its image is still associated with that of the enemy. Such perceptions become particularly salient as Russia heads to the polls: the increasing rhetoric from Moscow about the international situation and Russia's foreign relations is largely aimed at a domestic audience and connected to securing votes. Moreover, the point that it is only a rather narrow section of the Russian establishment that seeks to develop cooperation actively with NATO signals NATO that the majority of Russians are not really interested in developing a relationship and are simply treating NATO as an international actor rather than a real partner.

It is against this combination of progress and disappointment and a relationship structure that is not fully supported by either side that a number of unre-

solved political problems have come to the fore – some of which are new, some of rather longer heritage.

Though Russian officials reacted favorably to NATO's Riga summit declaration, Russian opposition to elements of NATO's transformation continues to stand out. First, NATO enlargement is extremely unpopular in Russia. Russia has objected to previous rounds of enlargement and still opposes the development of NATO infrastructure on the territory of new member states. Further enlargement, and particularly the discussion of potential membership for states such as Ukraine and (especially) Georgia, seems particularly fraught with complexity for the NATO-Russia relationship. Second, though initially supportive of NATO operations in Afghanistan, many in Russia question and do not accept the increasingly active role that NATO has adopted internationally, particularly its operations outside Europe, arguing that NATO is simply a tool to facilitate US unilateralism on the international stage. This wide-ranging opposition has raised questions about the desirability of developing cooperation and therefore interoperability: where would such cooperation be possible? If some Russians have argued for peacekeeping cooperation in areas of the former Soviet Union, many oppose such efforts, some vehemently. If it is not possible to find areas to cooperate, why enhance interoperability?

Likewise, there has been an extension of the old agenda into new problems. Enlargement is associated with democratization – and thus increasingly a conceptual difference between NATO and Russia. De Hoop Scheffer recently challenged Moscow's objections to NATO enlargement, questioning why Russia should object to the rule of law and democracy approaching Russian borders. Furthermore, the NATO-Russia relationship is being drawn into complex international issues such as the US missile defense shield and energy security which represent important risks for the development of relations. Energy security particularly has been brought on to NATO's agenda as a result of concerns among some member states about Russia's role in supplying global energy needs. Though there is potential for cooperation, for instance in civil defense and emergency management, there are also concerns in Russia about the use of NATO military assets and the role NATO might play.

Conclusions

The relationship currently has a rather paradoxical appearance. Bureaucratic relations have been developing and the foundation for a partnership exists. Indeed there has been some important military cooperation. This, it should be remembered, is in itself a major step forward given the longer term historical context.

Yet, alongside these accomplishments, there are several important political tensions which can stall or reverse this progress, and relations have clearly become more complicated in 2007. Moreover, to judge by official pronouncements, both sides are taking a rather passive approach to the relationship: each side places the emphasis for relations on the other. NATO officials note that this partnership can go as far as the Russian government is prepared to take it. Recently, Lavrov stated that the limits of cooperation will “depend on the course of NATO's own transformation.” Both sides seem to believe that their own actions in the relationship are sufficient and that the other needs to do more.

But to continue to develop the relationship – and make it bear positive fruit – both sides must take a more active stance and make positive contributions. Progress requires more resources and more effective use of them: as note above, the lack of language skills should be remedied. Politically, both sides could further clarify their agendas regarding the other; currently each side seems to be either not explaining or talking past the other regarding its intentions. If NATO's transformation has not been clearly understood in Russia, it is also the case that NATO, broadly speaking, does not understand Russian frustrations.

The important point for both sides in the immediate future is to protect the institutional structure built up so far and not let political tensions undermine the progress made. The NRC was established to facilitate dialogue. As the NATO Secretary General has stated, it is a forum not only for agreement, but also for serious, open and frank discussion on issues about which NATO and Russia do not agree. The mechanism must be used to calm tensions and prevent any over-reaction to them. Accomplishing these goals will not be easy since the two sides must manage both the old agenda of unresolved problems and also a complex new agenda at a time of considerable mutual misunderstanding.

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