

Resetting Relations with Russia

Central Asia and missile defense are two areas in which
NATO and Russia could launch a long-term rapprochement

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Russian missiles at a military parade in May 2012
near the Kremlin in Moscow. Russia views NATO's
anti-ballistic missile system as a threat to its missiles.

Despite the “reset” that began in 2008, current relations between Russia and the West are characterized by noticeable complications. More than 20 years after the end of the Cold War and its ideological confrontation, relations between Russia and the countries of the West are contradictory in nature, with areas of close cooperation offset by mutual criticism and distrust. And rather than being a mitigating factor, Vladimir Putin’s return to the Russian presidency has exacerbated the numerous differences of recent years.

On a positive note, Russia and the United States have made considerable progress in establishing a dialogue on nuclear disarmament issues; there has been cooperation on a broad range of projects in politics and economics between Russia and European Union countries; and joint Russia-EU-U.S. efforts to resolve problems in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Iran continue.

However, by no means have these instances become a prologue to closer cooperation and converging viewpoints between Russia and NATO. There are significant differences in understanding



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and perception of the current international security agenda. Distrust, competition, political discord and differences in approach regarding the future of European and Eurasian security structures are still clearly visible in relations between Russia and NATO.

Partnership building

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia-NATO relations have seen periods of close cooperation and rapprochement and disagreements accompanied by breaking off of contacts and freezing of joint projects. A clearer picture of relations between Russia and the Alliance after the collapse of the USSR can be seen by dividing it into several phases, each with its own particular characteristics and features.

The first phase, 1991-1998, was characterized by a lengthy process of constructing a legal and regulatory basis for bilateral relations through strategic documents signed by Russia and NATO that would define and formalize cooperation. During this period, the Russia-NATO Permanent Joint Council began operation. Both parties took cautious, positive steps toward one another, rejecting once and for all the legacy of the Cold War. Russian and NATO leaders demonstrated the political will needed for rapprochement, slowly but surely forging a path of political and military cooperation. Russia and NATO even conducted joint peacekeeping operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The second phase, 1999-2000, saw a considerable downturn in relations, sparked by Russia's reaction to the NATO operation in Kosovo, conducted without explicit mandate of the United Nations Security Council and, Russia believes, in violation of international law. Meanwhile, in 1999, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic joined NATO, extending the Alliance eastward. Cooperation between Russian and NATO peacekeeping contingents in Kosovo was also not always successful.

The third phase, 2001-2004, was characterized by a new wave of rapprochement, largely associated – as paradoxical as it may seem – with Vladimir Putin coming to power. As president, he took several demonstrative steps toward the West, supporting the U.S. in the war on terror and joining the anti-terrorist coalition. There was a reassessment of common threats and challenges and significant progress in relations with NATO. In 2001, the NATO Information Center and the NATO Military Liaison Mission opened in Moscow. In 2002, a new body coordinating bilateral cooperation was created at the NATO Summit in Prague – the Russia-NATO Council – moving consultations and cooperation to a higher level. As NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson put it, the transition from the Permanent Joint Council of “19+1” to the Russia-NATO Council of “20” is not a question of arithmetic, but of chemistry. This phase can be described as one of the most successful and positive in the history of bilateral relations.

The fourth phase, 2005-2012, is the longest and most complex phase in terms of its structure. Russia-NATO relations encountered various challenges and compromises, but fell within a specific formula that can be defined as

“pragmatic cooperation and strategic competition.” There were downturns (the 2008 Russia-Georgia war over South Ossetia) and serious steps toward rapprochement (creation of a NATO transshipment base on Russian territory for redeployment of NATO forces from Afghanistan). However, besides the visible and sophisticated military-to-military cooperation, the political tone throughout this phase remained cool.

Other events that Moscow saw as unfavorable happened during this period. A series of “color revolutions” that the Kremlin was convinced were backed by the U.S. and Western Europe shaped regime change in several former Soviet republics. Additionally, the NATO enlargement process continued, with the accession of the Baltic states, while steps were taken to attract Ukraine and Georgia into NATO's sphere of influence, provoking open irritation in Moscow. Implementation of the program to deploy anti-ballistic missile (ABM) components in Europe also sparked sharp criticism from Russia.

The Kremlin did not expect its Western partners to move so decisively in the East. These U.S., NATO and EU programs in the post-Soviet space were perceived in Moscow as interference in the most sensitive sphere of Russian foreign policy. Moscow had believed that supporting the U.S. and its allies in the war on terror and encouraging a policy of political rapprochement would preserve the status quo in the post-Soviet space, perceived by Russia's leaders as a zone of vital interest. However, the reality was different. Russia's decisive August 2008 action in Georgia can be viewed as a specific response to the pressure it perceived in previous years.

None of this, however, indicates a return to confrontation between Russia and NATO. Understanding the psychology and mentality of modern Russian elites is key to understanding Russia's vision of bilateral cooperation with NATO. Moscow has repeatedly confirmed the common nature of modern threats and seeks to sustain constructive cooperation, at least to the extent this is understood among Russian military and political leadership. Viewing the history of Russia-NATO relations, it's clear that complications have occurred alongside a considerable number of successful joint projects and operations in military, civilian and scientific areas.

More than 600 significant actions and projects were conducted between 2001 and 2012, including joint exercises and operations. Operational compatibility improved significantly, confirmed by numerous successful exercises, such as coordinated actions in protection of critical infrastructure, counterpiracy operations and combating terrorism. This has unquestionably benefited participating parties considerably and helped strengthen trust between Russian and NATO military personnel.

Russia acknowledges that the years of cooperation were important for its armed forces. In particular, NATO provided serious assistance in developing and organizing the system for transitioning active duty service personnel into reservists. In the past 10 years, more than 150,000 Russian military officers have passed instruction and training courses



Anti-drug chiefs, from left, Zarar Ahmad Moqbel Osmani of Afghanistan, Victor Ivanov of Russia, Rustam Nazarov of Tajikistan and Syed Shakeel Hussain of Pakistan meet in Moscow in December 2010 to discuss regional counternarcotics cooperation.

at the Joint Russia-NATO Information and Consultation Training Center in Moscow and its regional branches. The experiences of NATO countries have considerably influenced the process of reforming the Russian Army. For example, Russia borrowed ideas about new troop dispositions, integrating tactical military garrisons into larger strategic commands, and reforming air forces and air defense forces. Some principles of military structure were also largely borrowed from NATO countries.

The process of building Russia-NATO relations indicates that, during the past 20 years, the parties have learned to cooperate on a wide range of issues. They have resolved conflicts and complex situations and overcome seemingly acute and fundamental differences. This experience can be used to intensify cooperation and search for compromises on disputed issues in the future. However, despite reasons for optimism, the most problematic areas in Russia-NATO relations require special attention.

Russia's view of enlargement

The issue of NATO enlargement traditionally evokes a negative reaction in Russia. Twenty years of Russian foreign policy show that this perception is anchored in something deeper than the nature of Russian power, the personality of the president, the state of the economy or social activity. There are several causes of this perception, both rational and emotional. First, as a continental state, Russia has always sought to secure itself from possible threats by surrounding itself with a belt of friendly states and allies. Given that two large-scale invasions – in the 19th and 20th centuries – came from the West, it is very difficult for Russian political tradition and strategic thinking to disregard NATO expansion.

Including neighboring states in military-political alliances to which Russia does not belong has a powerful negative psychological effect.

Second, NATO expansion into former Soviet republics suggests a painful loss of international status, a feeling common not only among contemporary Russian political elites, but among ordinary Russians. And putting emotions aside, most Russian experts and military strategists view NATO expansion as a violation of the strategic balance of forces in Europe. Russia has no clear answers to significant questions such as: How will the inclusion of former Soviet republics in the Alliance increase security in the region? What threats are prompting NATO to accept new members? How will NATO enlargement ease Russia's own security concerns?

Nevertheless, the negative attitude toward NATO expansion does not mean that the Alliance is perceived as a

threat to Russia. Russian officials, however, often use critical and, at times, harsh rhetoric to discuss NATO and its policies, which creates a certain image of a persistent external threat. In practice, Russia is eager to cooperate in areas such as Afghanistan, counter-drug trafficking and terrorism. An example of this dichotomy is the NATO transit hub in Ulyanovsk. After years of anti-NATO discourse, the Russian government was forced to explain to its citizens that cooperation between NATO and Russia is necessary. Ironically, Dmitry Rogozin, former Russian ambassador to NATO (and known in Russia as a prominent NATO critic), was forced to defend cooperation with the Alliance against criticism within Russia.

No one seriously considers the likelihood of armed conflict. Russia has no disputes with NATO countries that could even hypothetically serve as a reason for conflict, and it is very unlikely that any such conflicts of interests will appear in the foreseeable future. But many in Russia view NATO as an outdated 20th-century alliance unrealistically expanding to strengthen Europe in a modern international security environment, despite rhetoric about fundamental changes in the nature of security threats in Eurasia requiring new methods. In 2008, Russia proposed that adapting European security architecture to the current international environment required a new framework. It's proposed European Security Treaty outlined a new common security space "from Vancouver to Vladivostok" in which Russia would be a stakeholder. That idea was criticized by many NATO members, and finally rejected, raises serious concern in Moscow.

So changes in the Russian position on the Alliance's expansion can hardly be expected, regardless of what leader occupies the presidency and which party has the

majority in Parliament. But neither can NATO abandon its open door principle, which is fundamental to the Alliance. This is not always understood or taken into account in Russia. States that pursue NATO membership also have their own motivations that Moscow prefers to ignore. The current status quo and the absence of any plans to bring Georgia into the Alliance in the foreseeable future – not to mention Ukraine's waning enthusiasm for membership – fully satisfies Moscow. Much will depend on the normalization of Russian-Georgian relations, in which NATO could play a constructive role in helping the Russian and Georgian leadership find points of common interest.

Anti-missile defense

NATO military experts and political leaders generally regard Russia's attitude toward stationing ABM components in Eastern Europe as extremely negative. This is partly true, but the situation is more complex than it seems. There are experts and politicians in Russia who believe the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) for deploying the Euro-ABM system undermines global strategic stability. Loud commentary claims the anti-missile system's ultimate goal is to create conditions allowing an annihilating nuclear strike on Russian strategic targets. The existence of a complex ABM system, with hundreds of interceptors, would deprive Russia of the ability to deliver a retaliatory strike. The press and an entire range of expert publications actively paint frightening pictures of Russian strategic nuclear forces being deprived of their ability to deter a potential enemy attack. Alarmists consider the planned deployment of the Euro-ABM by 2020 to be a factor in increasing the likelihood of armed conflict because the strategic balance between NATO and Russia will be more disproportional.

Such assessments are largely the result of a high level of uncertainty regarding the potential and configuration of the Euro-ABM. How far can it be expanded? What are its future capabilities? No significant progress has been made in bringing the Russian and NATO positions closer together. At the NATO Lisbon Summit in November 2010, Russia and NATO committed to increase cooperation in the area of ABM. However, Moscow's initiatives to create a joint ABM defense system for Europe, which would have assumed Russia's direct participation in the Euro-ABM system, were not supported by NATO partners. Nor was there progress on many other issues concerning ABM and its future operation.

Military experts in Russia cannot help being concerned by the unilateral nature of NATO's buildup in ABM. They lack a clear understanding of the potential and the ultimate configuration of the system, which theoretically may be supplemented by new programs and components after 2020, or of NATO's goals for the system. Many Russian observers stress their assessment that the overall potential of the Euro-ABM considerably exceeds the capabilities necessary to repel a potential Iranian missile attack. Such conditions make it easy to convince the public and inexperienced politicians that the ABM goals of the U.S. and NATO are threatening, especially given the complex relations between Russia and the Alliance.

In response to NATO actions, Russia has called for a

significant increase in defense spending, as well as placement of nuclear-warhead capable tactical missile systems in Kaliningrad Oblast. Concurrently, Russia's Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov officially announced in early December 2012 a Russian proposal to create a joint air defense-ABM system under the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) alliance. The idea of integrating air defense and missile defense systems has existed for a long time, but its implementation was accelerated by NATO's resolve to station ABM components in Eastern Europe.

Initially, the joint CSTO plan would have established three independent air defense-ABM system zones: an Eastern European zone, a Caucasian zone and a Central Asian zone. The Eastern European zone would control the air space of Russia and Belarus. Agreements to create an integrated air defense with Belarus and Armenia were signed relatively long ago, and the necessary agreements with Central Asian allies were signed in recent months. It is noteworthy that Uzbekistan, despite withdrawing from CSTO, supported Moscow's initiative. In July 2012, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Air Defense Coordinating Committee, met in Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbek Air Defense and Air Force commander Elmurad Mashrapov said Uzbekistan had no plans to abandon participation in joint CIS air defense.

Thus, by strengthening the CSTO's air defense and ABM capabilities, Russia is not only sending signals to Washington and Brussels, but also increasing the value of any future Russian participation in a joint European ABM System. Russian officials have repeatedly articulated that creating a Euro-ABM without Russian participation will not strengthen European security or mutual trust between Russia and its NATO partners.

However, a large number of respected Russian foreign policy, security, and nuclear weapons specialists, many of whom are directly involved in the creation of new missile technologies and ABM systems, say the Euro-ABM system does not represent a threat to the capabilities of Russian strategic nuclear forces. These experts' analyses indicate that the technologies employed in the Euro-ABM system are not only ineffective against Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles, but the Euro-ABM is not oriented to intercept Russian missiles. Even when the EPAA is completely deployed in 2020, the ABM system will not be capable of shooting down Russian missiles equipped with the latest anti-ABM technologies, not to mention submarine-launched ballistic missiles located beyond the coverage area. The majority of the most prominent Russian experts, who include Sergei Rogov, Aleksandr Kalyadin, Pavel Zolotarev, Vladimir Dvorkin, Yuri Solomin, Viktor Yesin, Aleksei Arbatov, share this viewpoint to one degree or another.

The absence of a real threat to Russia by the EPAA does not mean Russian concerns are completely unfounded, given the nuances and a lack of clarity on a considerable range of issues. The parties tend to speak different languages in negotiations on Euro-ABM. Meanwhile, cooperation in the area of analysis and mitigation of WMD proliferation still leaves space for rapprochement. There is good potential for cooperation in

strengthening the compatibility of Russian and European air defense and ABM systems in light of possible changes in the strategic situation in the Middle East and North Africa. This could not only extend missile defense coverage in area and efficiency, but would also deter some countries from developing offensive weapons and technologies.

Improved cooperation

Russia's and NATO's conflicting views on a number of issues certainly do not place them on the brink of confrontation. On the contrary, there are many key issues that may become very important in strengthening and increasing bilateral cooperation.

The question of maintaining security in Afghanistan and Central Asia following the withdrawal of coalition forces in 2014 presents numerous opportunities for cooperation. Research by Kazakhstan's Institute of Political Solutions shows that, in 2012, the index of security in Central Asia was gradually decreasing while the likelihood of conflict between states in the region was increasing. This is associated with growing competition between Russia and NATO for a regional presence. Central Asian republics are very sensitive to tensions between Russia and NATO in the region, and they rely on their ability to play on antagonisms between the competitors to resolve cross-border disputes and interstate conflicts. Several low-intensity, armed clashes were reported in autumn 2012 between Uzbek and Kyrgyz and between Uzbek and Tajik border guards, events that could grow into a larger regional conflict. These appeared to be attempts by Uzbekistan to use relatively favorable political circumstances, particularly its rapprochement with the U.S. and withdrawal from CSTO, to put pressure on its neighbors.

NATO countries, especially the U.S., would unquestionably be interested in establishing military and logistical infrastructure in the region capable of monitoring functions and serving as a security cordon against transborder activities by al-Qaida and other violent extremist groups. Russia has traditionally been cautious about strengthening military infrastructure of third-party countries in a region close to its borders. Still, both Moscow and Brussels understand the seriousness of the threat that may come from the South. This could be a good starting point for negotiation and advancement of regional cooperation. A new agenda for resolving a wide range of regional security issues would meet the interests of NATO and Russia.

Such a division of labor would give greater clarity to the strategic tasks of each and could be formalized in bilateral framework documents. An agreement between Russia and the U.S./NATO on delimiting spheres of responsibility could significantly reduce uncertainty inherent in the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan and diminish attempts by Central Asian nations to manipulate disagreements between Moscow and Washington. Establishing a clear, joint vision on Central Asian regional security development would send positive signals to Central Asian and other post-Soviet republics, encouraging them to take a common course and contribute to the positive development of regional security.

However paradoxical it may sound, the Euro-ABM

system also has great potential for strengthening Russia-NATO cooperation. Remaining differences on missile defense actually open up new windows for rapprochement. This would require a number of preconditions. First, NATO would need to make the Euro-ABM system clearer and more predictable for Russia. This requires more than simple assurances that the ABM system is not directed against Russia or granting regular monitoring privileges. Practical mechanisms would need to be implemented, enabling the Russian military to do more than just observe the EPAA transformation. These mechanisms would have to contain options and opportunities, through the forthcoming years, for Russia to become an integral part of the architecture to repel potential threats. It may take years to find common ground as existing differences are still substantial and the rapprochement process is unlikely to move quickly. The parties, however, should leave themselves options for unification of their missile defense capabilities, if and when it might be necessary in the future.

The second precondition stems from the first one. Russia and NATO need to move forward in identifying threats for which the new European missile defense system should be designed to repel. It is increasingly obvious that an adapted ABM system will be able to accomplish more complex tasks than intercepting the few nuclear-warhead equipped missiles that Iran will hypothetically be able to deploy in the foreseeable future. Russia and NATO could increase trust with a frank discussion of potential threats regarding the dissemination of nuclear and missile technologies, with detailed delineation of specific aspects and areas of cooperation.

The general nature of threats, such as instability in the Middle East and North Africa, the spread of extremist movements and ideologies in Central Asia and South Asia, terrorism and many others, require NATO and Russia to establish some degree of technical compatibility and, if possible, integration of their ABM systems. This is clearly not a one-year task – it could possibly require a decade or more – but Russia and NATO have a chance to set a course of cooperation for the long term. Defining a “road map” of Russia-NATO cooperative measures, parallel to the implementation of the existing EPAA, would be a good start. Specifically, each successive step in implementing the EPAA would be linked to measures that would increase cooperation with Russia. Such an agreement, supplemented by a specific list of joint measures, could significantly increase trust and reduce tensions between Russia and NATO. It is possible that military cooperation could become a bridge to smoothing political disputes between Russia and NATO member states. It is an opportunity worth taking.

Successful implementation of the opportunities presented by the two courses mentioned could become part of the agenda for the Putin and Obama governments to resuscitate the “resetting” of bilateral relations. In the end, military cooperation might succeed in smoothing out the political differences between Russia and the United States. In any case, this is a chance both countries should take. □

Editor's Note: The U.S. government recently announced plans to abandon Phase 4 of the European Missile Defense Plan.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author.