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THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND NATO: A SCENARIO FOR THE FUTURE**

Abstract. Since the end of the Cold War the relations between the Russian Federation and NATO have undergone significant changes. As the all-out confrontation ended they became more cooperative. The author discusses five possible scenarios of future Russian-NATO relations from continued rivalry to the Russian Federation's membership in NATO. The author concludes that neither of them might be fully implemented. Much will depend on extraneous factors and internal politics.

Keywords: *Permanent Consultative Council (PCC), Russia-NATO Council (RNC), Partnership for Peace Program, Draft Treaty on Security in Europe*

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During the Cold War the main axis of conflict in international relations had been the confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Treaty. It contained virtually all aspects – military, ideological, political, economic, and etc. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of the Communist bloc has led to qualitative changes in the world. A new system of international relations has started to take shape, although some of its features are not yet clear. Both the Russian Federation and the North Atlantic Treaty organization are trying to find their place in the globalizing world and in the new system of international relations.

The evolution since the end of the Cold War

The relations between Russia and NATO over the past two decades have differed significantly from what they were during the Cold War. First of all, the all-out confrontation has come to an end. The numbers of troops and weapons deployed have been significantly reduced, especially in Central Europe. The Russian Federation and NATO have solemnly declared that

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they “do not consider each other as adversaries.”¹ The remaining differences and contradictions are no longer antagonistic. Virtually all the tools of the Cold War have been eliminated. Therefore, despite sporadic propaganda campaigns and controversies, a complete comeback of the Cold War is impossible. Moreover, the influence of political and economic circles that are interested in such a scenario is rather thin both in the Russian Federation and in the West.

Secondly, both the Russian Federation and NATO are acutely aware of the need for cooperation, at least in some areas of common interest. Among those are the struggle against terrorism, crisis management, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, arms control and confidence-building measures, theatre missile defense, search and rescue at sea, military-to-military cooperation and defense reform, civil emergencies, as well as new threats and challenges.² During the Cold War cooperation between the USSR and NATO on these issues was absolutely out of the question.

Thirdly, a mechanism of cooperation between the Russian Federation and NATO has been established. Initially it was called the Permanent Joint Council, and from 2002 – the NATO-Russia Council. Under the auspices of the NATO-Russia Council contacts are being made in the political and military fields. The work of the NRC has repeatedly provoked criticism from various quarters. Despite high expectations, the effectiveness of the NRC has not been higher than that of the PJC. However, the mere existence of such a mechanism following decades of serious confrontation is an evidence of important positive shifts.

So far the relations between Russia and NATO have been tested by two crises – first in Kosovo in 1999 and then in the Caucasus in August 2008. The latter one was particularly damaging. For the first time since the end of the Cold War NATO and Russia openly supported the opposing sides in an armed conflict. Though the existing mechanisms failed to prevent the crisis, they helped to restore the relations after the hostilities ended. With respect to that two more specific features of relations between Russia and NATO should be emphasized.

First of all, during the Cold War the relations between the two rival blocs were strategic to world politics and had a great (if not decisive) influence on developments in other parts of the globe. Now it is no longer the case. The relations between Russia and NATO are largely dependent on exogenous factors and political conjuncture.

Secondly, during the Cold War, both the opposing blocs were equally

¹ *Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in Paris, France, May 27, 1997.*

² *Statement NATO-Russia Council. Rome, Italy, May 28, 2002.*

interested in preserving the relations with each other. Today it is Russia that is more interested in relations with NATO than NATO with Russia. As noted by Madeleine Albright, Russia is just one of the partners of NATO and should not be “the tail that wags the dog”.³ It was a scathing remark for many Russian politicians, but in essence it reflected the reality.

Nevertheless, the importance of the development of relations between Russia and NATO in the future should not be underestimated.

One can sketch several conceivable *scenarios* of Russian – NATO relations in the future:

- preservation of present character of relationship, “a kind of associated partnership mainly through the Russia-NATO Council;
- Russia’s joining NATO or the political organization of the Alliance;
- minimization of the scope of Russia-NATO relationship focusing on the relations between Russia and some NATO member-states;
- the relationship between two blocs, in one of which Russia is playing the key role;
- the relations within the framework of a new Treaty on European Security which the Russian President Dmitri Medvedev proposed in June 2008.

The first scenario means that the current state of relations will be maintained and developed on the basis of the Founding Act of 1997 and of the Agreements of Rome of 2002. The central role in that kind of relationship has been played by the consultative body originally titled the Permanent Consultative Council (PCC). In 2002 it was renamed into the Russia–NATO Council (RNC). Russian authorities criticized PCC for the fact that at every meeting NATO used to bring a joint position. That position was almost impossible to change during the meeting despite all efforts by Russian diplomats. Thus, in PCC there was a very limited possibility to compromise. RNC seemed to be a very different institution compared to PCC. Every country, both NATO members and Russia could express their opinion on the issue under consideration. Like in the North Atlantic Council, meetings of RNC were chaired by the NATO Secretary General. Both parties underlined with satisfaction that RNC had issued its documents classified as confidential for the third parties. However, very soon it became clear that the establishment of the new institution has not led to a breakthrough in the relations. It is true that discussions in RNC became more concrete and even sometimes more productive than those in PCC. However, the NATO members have taken similar to close positions on all issues even without preliminary consultations while Russia remained isolated. The original over-expectations turned into a disappointment.

³ *Madeleine Albright’s speech to the European Parliament. Brussels, January 28, 2010.*

Even a brief analysis of RNC proceedings indicates that most of its decisions concerned issues outside Europe: Afghanistan, the pirates from Somalia etc. Relations between the parties, including Russia's integration into the Euro-Atlantic space appeared very rarely on the agenda. Even more rarely such discussions resulted in meaningful decisions. Neither PCC during the Kosovo crisis in 1999 nor RNC during the Caucasus crisis in 2008 managed to prevent the freezing of relations between the parties, although the councils played an important role in the resumption of these relations once the active phase of the crises was over.

At the first glance, it seems that PCC and RNC are the key bodies in Russian-NATO relations. In practice, however, the cooperation between the military institutions has played a bigger role. At the same time, that aspect of cooperation seems less effective than the cooperation between civilian institutions. Moreover, the difficulties in the military sphere seem to result in a decline of effective negotiations in the political sphere. The Cold War inertia is also the strongest among the military.

The main feature of Russia-NATO relationship is its unpredictability in many aspects, irregular development also due to populist reasons. There is no evidence that the relationship might change in the near future. There are at least two reasons for this.

Firstly, both parties seem to be satisfied with the relationship. The West continues to build a European security system based on NATO in which Russia would have the right to be consulted, but will not co-decide. This tendency is most visible in the military sphere, to Russia's obvious displeasure. The West is doing its best to use RNC as instrument to involve Russia in the implementation of its policies, which are decided upon without Russia's participation. Russia however avoids committing itself preferring to enjoy the wide freedom of maneuver. Both sides believe that time will work for them and thus put them into a better negotiating position. Both sides are well advised to give up this assumption if they want to improve their cooperation. NATO needs to understand that Russia would never agree to be a part of a security system, in which it would not play a decisive role. In its turn, Russia should understand that no country can enjoy veto right in which it is not a member.

Secondly, and most importantly, the instability and unpredictability in Russia-NATO relations have resulted from the transition from the bi-polar international system into a still undefined new system and not from the inability of the two sides to act. Despite its low effectiveness of the present level and quality of relationship between Russia and NATO are most likely to continue.

The most difficult challenges to the NATO-Russia Council may come from new local armed conflicts. Especially, if they happen to break out in the

post-Soviet space and Russia is directly or indirectly involved in them. Given the high degree of tension in the Caucasus, instability in Central Asia (the events in Kyrgyzstan etc.), acute ethnic and social strife in several regions of Russia there is a high probability of that. The experience of previous crises has revealed what, in our opinion, was an overreaction of both parties. In 1999 Russia made a mistake of withdrawing from the work of the Permanent Joint Council after the NATO bombing of Serbia, and in 2008 a similar mistake was made by NATO – freezing the work of NATO–Russia Council at the height of the Caucasian conflict. We can only hope that in the event of any new such conflict NATO-Russia Council could become the center for negotiations and finding solutions, and would not end its activities in order to achieve any short-term political gains.

The second scenario, i.e. Russia's joining NATO has been occasionally discussed in the past. In 1954 the Soviet Union proposed to the governments of the U.S., Great Britain and France a new security system for Europe one aspect of which would have been the Soviet Union's entry into NATO.⁴ With this propaganda maneuver the Soviet leadership tried to put an obstacle to West Germany's membership in NATO. The Western powers ignored the Soviet proposal. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the Russian leaders changed their attitude to the idea of NATO membership. At some points both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin seriously considered that option.

The first to openly express it in the autumn 1991 was Russian Vice President Alexander Rustkoy who was known for close links with the military. Russia expected that the issue should be considered by the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, which Russia had overestimated at that time.⁵ However, the West was not ready for such a breakthrough and this possibility was dropped from political discussions also in Russia.

Russia's attempt to join NATO in 1991 was inspired by the euphoria among the Russian leaders when it seemed then that Russia's integration into the Western community would come soon. NATO's refusal to discuss Russia's membership in the short run did not harm however the generally positive relationship between Russia and the West. In 1992/1993 Russia signed with NATO member states numerous agreements, declarations and other documents containing the statement that they do not consider one another as adversaries. However, the Russian authorities soon became suspicious of NATO's activities in the Commonwealth of Independent States and of the Alliance's enlargement in terms of both a wider sphere of responsibility and inclusion of new members.

⁴ *Nota sovetskogo pravitel'stva pravitel'stvam Frantsii, Velikobritanii i SShA (Soviet Government's Note to the Governments of France, Great Britain and the U.S.) Pravda Daily, April 1, 1954.*

⁵ *Diplomaticheskij vestnik. Vol. 1, 1992. 12–13.*

Another attempt was better prepared. During his electoral campaign in March 2000 Vladimir Putin stated that he did not write off Russia's becoming a NATO member.⁶ Contrary to Boris Yeltsin's pronouncements in 1996, Vladimir Putin avoided to criticize NATO openly. Upon 9/11 Russia joined the counter-terrorist coalition, closed its military bases in Cuba and in Vietnam, agreed to building US military bases in Central Asia and assisted NATO troops in Afghanistan. Practically Russia entered the Western security space and started examining the possibilities of joining NATO. The West was apparently divided on this issue. The more influential turned out to be that part of Western elite which viewed Russia's willingness to cooperate as a sign of its weakness. NATO then ignored Russia's willingness which some Western scholars recognize as a mistake. The possibility of a radical shift in Russian - NATO relations was thus missed. This time the disappointment among the Russian elite was much deeper than in the early 1990s. This disappointment became the key factor in shaping of Russia's policy towards NATO in the future.

Despite the Caucasus crisis of summer 2008 and the freezing of its relations with NATO Russia's possible membership in the Alliance remains on the agenda. In November 2008 President Dmitri Medvedev stated that the issue is not urgent but one should "never say never". Some Western politicians support the idea that Russia should join the Alliance. In early 2009 Polish Foreign Minister R. Sikorsky and ex-Foreign Minister of Germany J. Fischer expressed such an opinion. Italian Prime Minister S. Berlusconi has stated more than once that Russia should enter both NATO and the European Union. If Russia's third attempt to join the NATO will face a similar response as at the two previous occasions the consequences for future Russian - NATO relations would be disastrous. In order to avoid this outcome, the Alliance should decide at least theoretically, whether it would or would not wish to see Russia as its member. If the answer is in the negative NATO should clearly and publicly explain the reasons. The answer will not be easy. In the absence of clear criteria any negative response to Russia's efforts to join the Alliance would provoke suspicions among Russian elite.

If the answer will be in the positive there would be hard work ahead - bringing closed both the military and civilian spheres, searching for compromises on all relevant issues and eliminating mutual suspicions in general. For Russia, this will mean a profound transformation of all aspects of the inner life, not just the reform of the armed forces and the military-industrial complex. This, of course, will cause the resistance of some in the

⁶ *President Putin's Interview to the BBC, March 5, 2000. Broadcasted on ORT news program "Vremya" on March 5, 2000. Cited in: Sysoyev G. Putin ne vozrazhaet protiv vstupleniya Rossii v NATO (Putin Does not Argue against Russia's Joining NATO). Kommersant Daily, March 7, 2000.*

influential political and business circles. However, the logic of this process objectively coincides with the course of modernization of Russia, as declared by President Dmitry Medvedev. Modernization of Russia can be successful only in cooperation with the West, which may also include membership in NATO. In turn, striving toward membership in NATO can be a boost to the process of modernization. The attitudes of third countries to Russia's possible membership in NATO should be considered as well. Obviously China and Islamic countries would be concerned about it. In the long run however, Russia's membership in the Alliance would be beneficial to all parties concerned. In the early 1990s when discussing NATO's enlargement with the members of his administration U.S. President Bill Clinton remarked that Russia's joining NATO is a "blue-sky staff" which will require "different Russia, different NATO, different Europe" (Talbot, 2003: 132). One cannot help agreeing with this statement. Though it does not seem probable at the moment, Russia can become a NATO member in the long run or, at least, a member of the Alliance's political organization. As stated by the ex - NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson at the tenth anniversary of the restoration of relations between Russia and NATO after the Kosovo crisis, Russia seems to have come close to joining NATO. Moreover, now it is even more possible than 10 years ago.

The Russian political elite's attitudes toward NATO

Unfortunately, there are some controversies in the relations between the Russian Federation and NATO. Within the whole spectrum of relations between the Russian Federation and the West the most difficult and problematic issues are those related to NATO. It is the very area most affected by the legacy of the Cold War, namely mutual suspicion and mistrust, and by persistent old stereotypes and perceptions.

Some influential figures in the Russian military establishment are convinced that the evolution and expansion of NATO present a more serious external military challenge to the Russian Federation than terrorism.⁷ Symptomatic of such views were the Russian police maneuvers held in Lipetsk in April 2010 to practice the assistance to refugees from Belarus which according to the exercise had been attacked by NATO forces from the territory of Ukraine.⁸ From time to time Russian politicians much rather speculate on the relations with NATO than addressing domestic problems. Likewise, some influential NATO figures express the same attitude towards the

⁷ *Military Doctrine of Russia, 2009.*

⁸ "Uvol'nenie - mat' ucheniy" (*Dismissal - the mother of exercise*). *Kommersant Daily*, April 16, 2010.

Russian Federation as to the former Soviet Union. Clearly, it is also not conducive to constructive dialogue.

Among the Russian elite *the third scenario* is being discussed, i.e. the minimization of relations with NATO while politicians on the margin very frequently even call for the termination of all relations. These discussions usually come to the conclusion that Russia should have relations with its separate member – states and not with NATO. It is important to underline that these discussions take place from time to time among politicians of different, sometimes opposite political orientations. They include also anti-Western politicians whose positions are based on old-fashioned communist or radical nationalist ideas. Some politicians in Russia are nostalgic about the Cold War even though they understand that its return is impossible. They believe that contacts with NATO should be used only as the last resort. It is remarkable that even these politicians understand that Russia needs stable relations with NATO member – states.

Other politicians advocate the minimization of contacts with NATO for completely different reasons. For example, former Governor of the Bank of Russia Sergey Dubinin believes that relations with the U.S.A. play the key role for Russia. Thus Russia should not develop its relations with NATO but sign an agreement on joint defense and military cooperation directly with the U.S.A (Dubinin, 2008: 97).

The third group of politicians calling for minimization of relations with NATO consists of those, who would like to negotiate additional concessions for Russia exploiting differences among NATO member – states. An example of this position is the proposal of a “grand three” alliance of Russia with Germany and France. That line gained prominence at the turn of the century, particularly during the Iraq crisis in 2003. It should be noted however that even Boris Yeltsin, the initiator of the “grand three” strategy held that Germany and France were paying attention to Russian solicitation in order only to soften controversies between Russia and NATO caused by Russia’s concern about the Alliance’s enlargement (Yeltsin, 2000: 130–131). An expression of the “grand three” strategy was Russia’s allowing military transit through its territory to Afghanistan given not to NATO as whole but to its individual members such as Germany, France and later Spain. One of the results of “reset” proclaimed by President Obama, was the agreement on American transit to Afghanistan through Russian territory.

The realization of this strategy is hardly probable in the long run. Russia and NATO are too interdependent and no bilateral cooperation can compensate for the lack of multilateral cooperation between Russia and the Alliance. There are no indications that the U.S.A. are inclined to accord Russia a special and privileged kind of relationship. Anti-Americanism is widespread and strong in Russia, especially among the elite. There will be probably new

attempts to extract additional concessions for Russia exploiting controversies among NATO members. These attempts however will concern minor aspects of Russian – NATO relations only.

The forth scenario calls for the restoration of bilateralism in European and Eurasian security. This is a sweet dream of some members of the Russian political and military elite. On the one hand, NATO will remain the key actor in Europe while on the other hand, Russia will be the key actor in another security alliance in Eurasia. The two alliances will be this playing similar roles in European and Eurasian security.

At the beginning the Russian leadership hoped that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) would be such an alliance. It was the first major security alliance without U.S.A. which emerged since the end of the Cold War. Some politicians hurried to declare the Shanghai Cooperation Organization an “Eastern NATO”. It became however evident rather soon that China does not favor such role for SCO. Having realized it the Russian elite pinned its hopes on the Organization of Collective Security Treaty which the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2008 declared as the “key instrument of stability and security in the Commonwealth of Independent States”.⁹ Nikolay Bordyuzha, Secretary General of the Organization, as well as other Russian officials have stated a number of times that the Organization must establish formal relations with NATO. However, NATO has not yet accepted this proposal.

There are several reasons why NATO continues to decline the proposal. Firstly, the two alliances are too different in terms of their aims, models of organization, capabilities etc. The Organization of Collective Security Treaty resembles a miniature of the Warsaw Pact having thus repeated its several weaknesses. Some NATO officials expect that the Organization of Collective Security Treaty will sooner or later follow the fate of the Warsaw Pact. The establishment of formal relations with NATO will only prolong its agony.

Secondly, NATO maintains active relations with most members of the Organization of Collective Security Treaty. All members of the Organization participate in the Partnership for Peace Program and in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. These countries maintain their representatives at the NATO Headquarters in Brussels as well as host information bureaus and even invite NATO military missions to their territory. Even those members of the Organization of Collective Security Treaty who have no intention to join NATO and in their security policy rely on Russia, underline the importance of their relations with NATO. For example, the President of Armenia Serge Sarkisyan stated that cooperation with NATO is a part of Armenia’s

⁹ *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation adopted by the President of the Russian Federation on July 12, 2008. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2008/07/204108.shtml>*

national security. At the moment NATO can deal with all the important problems in relations with those countries without addressing the Organization of Collective Security Treaty. Moreover, no NATO member-state has ever expressed its wish to establish relations with the Organization, neither the Organization has ever attempted to establish such a relation. Therefore, direct relations between NATO and the Organization of Collective Security Treaty are hardly possible. Some indirect contacts through the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe could be maintained, but their influence on security in Europe would be minimal.

Last but not least, *the fifth scenario* follows the proposal by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev of a Treaty on Security in Europe containing new security arrangements for the entire Euro-Atlantic space from Vancouver to Vladivostok and establishing a security partnership of Russia, the European Union and North America as three branches of the European civilization.¹⁰ At the first glance European politicians viewed the initiative skeptically, but later paid it more attention. Despite some similarities with the Soviet proposal in the 1950s, this initiative is significantly different. It does not mention the widening gap between the European Union and the U.S.A., neither hegemonic relationship with any country, inside or outside Europe. The aim of the initiative is to establish a new security system in which Russia could be a partner with a decisive voice. The Russia-NATO relations would be stabilized within such a system although their importance for international relations in general would decline.

Russian diplomacy views this initiative as part of its long-term strategy. Some members of the Russian political and academic elite see the NATO Summit Declaration of April 2009 as an indicator of NATO's readiness to discuss Medvedev's proposal. At the same time NATO and Russia at present evidently favour different approaches. NATO takes the view that new initiatives should be discussed in the OSCE framework, while Russia considers OSCE as an important but not the only possible forum. Instead Russia proposes the convening of a Pan-European Summit. Another difference is that Russia while taking a complex approach to security issues pays most attention to hard security issues. NATO hardly agrees with this position.

The autumn 2010 marked several key events in Russia NATO relations. Of the highest importance was the participation of President Dmitri Medvedev in the Lisbon NATO Summit. There were several constructive discussions regarding such complicated issues as anti-missile defense systems, situation in Afghanistan, etc. The entire atmosphere of negotiations was totally

¹⁰ Medvedev D. *Speech at Meeting with German Political, Parliamentary and Civic Leaders*. Berlin, June 5, 2008. URL: http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/06/05/2203_type82914type84779_202153.shtml

different as compared to what it was a year ago. The positive shift is obvious, but it did not occur due to the reversal of the mutual suspicion.

One of the difficult problems in Russian-NATO relations is the plans to build the anti-missile system in Europe. The Russian leaders are publicly threatening a new arms race if Russia and NATO are unable to come to consensus regarding these issues. The propagandistic nature of such a statement is obvious because Russia does not have sufficient resources for a new arms race. It will be more productive if both sides find the way to combine their defense potentials. The Russian government suggested the idea of creating joint anti-missile system with sectoral responsibility, but some NATO countries rejected it. They don't want to give responsibility for their defense to the non-NATO member. Despite the difficulties and problems, the Russian position begins to change from total opposition to adoption the anti-missile defense on several conditions. I suppose that this evolution to more realistic attitude will continue. Generally the Russian ruling circles and public begin to realize that differences on anti-missile defense should not be the barrier for development of Russia-NATO cooperation in other directions. On the contrary, according to the WikiLeaks, the USA had insistently recommended to the French Republic not to sell its weapons to Russia as if it was still a threat and not a partner.

Among the possible aspects of Russia-NATO cooperation now the first steps for coordination of activity against narcotic danger from Afghanistan should be mentioned.

The conclusion of this overview of conceivable scenarios in Russia-NATO relations may be that none of the scenarios will be implemented in full. The unpredictability will remain among their main features. Much will depend on movements in world politics and on domestic political situation in Russia, U.S.A., and in other European countries. The political will of the relevant actors will be required in order to achieve a significant shift in Russia-NATO relationships.

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