



Research Report

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From Lisbon to Munich: Russian views of NATO-Russia relations

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Key Points

- Since the agreements at Lisbon in November 2010, NATO-Russia relations are again coming under strain.
- Discordant notes stem from the fact that Brussels and Moscow define “indivisibility of security” rather differently.
- Hopes for greater cooperation from Moscow appear to be optimistic, since Moscow will seek to defend what it sees as Russia’s interests above simple partnership.
- This will be amplified since it is an election year in Russia and robust language is likely to increase.

From Lisbon

The Lisbon Summit and NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in late November 2010 ended on a positive note for NATO-Russia relations – or, perhaps more accurately, a flurry of positive notes rendered all the more dazzling given the prolonged and pronounced difficulties in relations.

NATO’s Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, announced a ‘fresh start’ in relations, that the time had arrived for the ‘modernisation’ of the relationship and the building of a true “strategic partnership”, points echoed in the new Strategic Concept and the Summit declaration.

President Medvedev, too, spoke effusively of the meeting, calling it ‘historic’, because it demonstrated how far Russia and NATO have come in their relations: the ‘period of distance in our relations and claims against each other is over now. We view the future with optimism and will work on developing relations between Russia and NATO in all areas’, he stated. The final draft of the new Strategic Concept ‘reflects the NATO countries’ desire to build constructive relations with Russia and move towards a full-fledged partnership. This is good’, he continued. Russia’s Ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin echoed such views observing that the relationship had improved and entered a ‘qualitatively new level’.

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Other senior figures on both sides hailed the meeting and agreements as reflecting the success of the NATO-Russia reset and marking the end of the Cold War. The “fresh start” and “breaking the cold spell” in the relationship were widely and loudly echoed in much of the media in both Russian and English. Much Western media and analysis saw this as part of a new trend in Russian foreign policy, one marked by a softening of the aggressive rhetoric of the latter part of Vladimir Putin’s presidency and returning to greater cooperation with the West.

Building a partnership

The positive notes sounded at Lisbon continued the strains increasingly audible since December 2009, and in a recent context of many high-profile meetings including the NRC ministerial meeting in September, the meeting between the Presidents of Russia and France and Chancellor of Germany at Deauville in October (the first such meeting in five years) and the visit by the NATO Secretary General to Moscow in early November.

And results there were from Lisbon. Extended arrangements for the transit of equipment to ISAF via Russia were completed. It was agreed that Russia and NATO would begin work on missile defence cooperation – ‘for the first time, NATO nations and Russia will discuss cooperating to protect, together, European territory and populations’, the Secretary General stated at the NRC.

The NRC also saw the completion of the Joint Review of Twenty First Century Common Security Challenges. In effect, this review has a dual purpose. First, it underscores the attempt to change perceptions – stating that NATO and Russia share common interests and face common challenges. Second, it hones the NATO-Russia agenda by identifying a range of cooperation projects. These are:

- cooperation in Afghanistan, including on counter-narcotics;
- non-proliferation of WMD and their means of delivery;
- counter-piracy;
- counter-terrorism;
- disaster response.

The agreement thus framed the re-emergence of practical cooperation between NATO and Russia over the last year, not just in Afghanistan, but in counter-terrorism activities, such as the joint development of technology to detect explosives (STANDEX) and examining possibilities of countering terrorist threats to civil aviation.

Defining Partnership: Common but not yet “Mutual” or “Joint”

Since Lisbon, however, discordant notes have sounded louder, particularly in announcements by senior Russian officials. This is in large part due to ongoing differences in defining partnership, not just in terms of the agenda but also approach. Although there may be a common agenda, it is not yet “mutual” in terms of defining priorities, nor is it “joint” in terms of how cooperation is planned and enacted.

Despite some cooperation in counter-terrorism and the public show of unity in the wake of the terrorist attack in Moscow on the 24th January, a tragic reminder that the cooperation has considerable potential merit, there are ongoing differences in defining the problem politically and how to address it. Senior Russian officials have also questioned NATO's prioritisation of missile defence – essentially suggesting that it is NATO's 'new ideology' and that Moscow does not understand against whom or what the missile defence system would be aimed, and that the USA and NATO exaggerate such threats. As Rogozin said in September last year 'where these missiles are coming from, what they are carrying and whether or not they are flying at all is a serious question'.

But perhaps the most important difference in agenda is something more conceptual: the definition of the "indivisibility of security". In his opening statement at the NRC, the NATO Secretary General stated that 'all the nations represented here today understand that our security is indivisible. We share important interests and face the same threats to our common security'. Yet over the last eighteen months, it has become increasingly clear that definitions of this important term differ substantially. In the Euro-Atlantic community, it tends to be defined in terms of the comprehensive nature of security in its three dimensions (human, economic, political-military); the security among states (all states have the right to choose their own alliances and that no state has a sphere of privileged interests); and the recognition that European and Eurasian security is deeply embedded in wider global security and that security within states is as much a part of security as security between states.

For Moscow, however, the term means something rather different: a whole and balanced pan-European common security space and the removal of different "levels" of security. Currently, Moscow sees a two-tier European security agenda, framed in the distinction between Euro-Atlantic organisations (NATO and the EU) and the pan-European level (OSCE). This serves, Russian officials argue, artificially to expel states that are not members of the regional organisations, thereby fragmenting European security. Vladimir Voronkov exemplified it thus in October last year: legally binding obligations are in effect between NATO states, yet between OSCE states and countries outside NATO, this agreement is not binding, but purely political'. Without legal commitments, Moscow sees Euro-Atlantic security as rendered "divisible". A lack of consensus here strikes at the foundation of a really "mutual" agreed agenda, with matching priorities and approaches, rather than just interests common to both.

Moscow links such conceptual definition to practical approaches, as underscored by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who stated that 'we would like the NRC proclaimed principles of indivisibility of security in Europe to be translated into practice'. 'We expect that the principle of indivisibility of security will be confirmed by all, not only in words but in achieving a practical embodiment of how we do business', he continued. This latter observation reflects Moscow's concerns about the joint agenda; the link between the two again made explicit by Rogozin: 'we would like the fundamental principles of our relationship to be affirmed, the principle of the indivisibility of security in the entire Euro-Atlantic area', on such principles, 'issues concerning Russia should be formulated as issues of partnership, not practical utilitarian cooperation'. If NATO proposes "Strategic Partnership", 'we understand this as above all the issues of values, our common

approach to the philosophy of security': if NATO regards 'our security as second rate and its own as first rate, we do not like this', he stated.

This raises two points. First, Moscow is sceptical about what it considers to be gaps between NATO's words and deeds: as Andrei Klimov, Deputy Head of the Duma's International Affairs Committee stated, 'NATO should be judged by its actions, not by the words of its leaders'. Indeed, it is a commonplace in Russian official and analytical discussion that NATO breaks its promises, most notably that allegedly given Gorbachev to not enlarge. This was (yet) again raised by Prime Minister Putin during an interview in August last year – it was 'a straight-forward deception'. 'They said to us one thing, and did something completely different'.

Second, Russia seeks full equality with the alliance if it is to be a joint approach to common issues and threats. But Moscow sees itself on the sidelines of NATO planning – that NATO remains ambivalent about Russia considering it both a partner and a potential threat, that the NRC in practice retains a "28 + 1" format and that Moscow's proposals are ignored or rejected. Ambassador Rogozin has, in typically vivid style, accused NATO of being a 'tennis player' in the way it 'strikes Russian proposals' – rejecting Lavrov's proposals to draft a document defining 'essential combat forces', for instance, ignoring Moscow's demands for European states to ratify the CFE Treaty, rejecting Moscow's initiative to create a missile pool in Europe, and most importantly, rejecting the "Medvedev proposals" instead guiding them into the Corfu Process, which is only about improving the OSCE, rather than considering and balancing interests and potentials across all of Europe.

It is in this context that NATO-Russia cooperation on ballistic missile defence should be seen – an issue which Medvedev has announced to be 'exceptionally important'. It is so because Moscow sees it to be no less than a 'real test of the sincerity of the partnership and indivisibility of security', as Lavrov has said. This is why the tone has become discordant once again, with Rogozin criticising the missile defence plans that 'cannot be called cooperation', 'not even a marriage of convenience, but living separately in different apartments with different entrances and addresses'. Missile defence is in danger of being the lightning rod for the differences in understanding the meaning of the indivisibility of security.

To Munich and Beyond

The Munich Security Conference is, among other things, a place to transmit messages. Certainly, Moscow has used it to this effect. For those listening intently, in February 2008, Sergei Ivanov indicated that Moscow sought a reconsideration of the European architecture.² However, this idea, brewing even by then for a considerable time in Russian foreign policy only gained wider prominence four months later when Dmitri Medvedev gave his now well-known speech in Berlin in June that year – at which he spoke about the need to reconsider the European security architecture. Of course, the clearest example of Munich being used to transmit messages is then-President Putin's speech in February 2007, which for many indicated the stirrings of a

² His speech, it should be remembered, was entitled "Where is Russia Heading? New Vision of Pan-European Security".

new Cold War – despite the fact that he was only emphasising what senior Russian officials had been saying already for some time.

As the 2011 Munich Conference approaches, it is worth remembering two things. First, President Medvedev has already made his Munich speech, four months ago at the “Moscow Munich” meeting in October 2010. His core message reiterated two points – the importance of the Medvedev proposals on European security and a “common European agenda”, and the increasingly active position that Russia is taking in making proposals. Here it is worth remembering that the Lisbon NRC joint declaration states that the parties are bound to reaffirming the goals and principles found in the OSCE Charter for European Security, including the Platform for Cooperative Security. It also states that NRC members can benefit from ‘visionary and transparent policies aiming at strengthening security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area’. Since, for Moscow, these are the very definitions of the Medvedev proposals, there is now likely to be an expectation in Moscow that NATO will (at last) take these proposals seriously. This may not be how NATO itself sees the situation.

Second, some basics about Russian foreign policy are worth remembering. Its foundation assumptions have not changed, particularly since senior Russian officials believe that Russia has come out of the financial crisis ahead of many other states. There are many in Russia who do not seek an active, positively developing relationship with NATO, either because of concerns about NATO enlargement and its potential global roles and thus threatening Russian interests, or because they see the alliance as a fading entity in international affairs, one that has not come to terms with the current international agenda and one that is unable to address current and future challenges. At an “operational” level, the former view tends to hold sway; at a more strategic level of Russian thinking, however, the latter view predominates.

In broader terms, therefore, there is considerable continuity in Russian foreign policy, and, despite some rhetoric at the operational level, NATO is in fact not high in overall Russian foreign policy priorities – indicated by a commensurate place in the foreign policy document, signed in February 2010 and leaked in May, which outlined the most desirable partnerships for Moscow.³ Partnership is restricted to those relationships that are considered by Moscow to be mutually beneficial to both parties – particularly, of course, to Russia and its own modernisation. This was underscored by Medvedev as he briefed Rogozin on the 25th January – ‘our partners must understand that the reason for our attention to the subject is not our wish to join with NATO in playing with toys but our intention to ensure proper protection for Russia’. This is all the more important to remember as we enter the Russian election year, during which the Russian leadership is likely to emphasise further its protection of Russian interests.

The language at Lisbon, including the Russian side was, as noted above, “dazzling”. This can be interpreted to mean ‘a brilliant display or prospect’ – and it

³ The document focused on developing mutually productive relationships with individual states. Other priorities for Russia include its relationships in the space of the Commonwealth of Independent States, particularly the CSTO, and in the European region, with the EU. The G20 is a particular institutional focus. China is a major partner for Russia, reflected in 6 meetings between the heads of state, among a large number of other senior meetings.

was that. But it also means to 'blind temporarily or confuse the sight of by an excess of light'. It is this latter definition that we should be more aware of as we proceed this year: the brilliant display at the summit served to confuse those who have been hoping for some time to see a softer, more cooperative (even compliant?) Russian foreign policy approach, blinding them temporarily to the realities of Russian priorities and aims. Even directly after the summit, Medvedev was frank: speaking in his annual address to the Federal Assembly on the 30th November, he stated 'either we reach an agreement on missile defence and create a fully fledged cooperation mechanism or, if we cannot come to a constructive agreement we will see an escalation of an arms race'.⁴

It is right that the alliance seeks to re-establish a more stable foundation for relations and pursue a more effective relationship with Russia: instability in NATO-Russia relations clouds European stability and security. The emphasis that the Secretary General has placed on this will require further attention and resources to build on what has been achieved so far. There are clear ongoing differences between the parties: both openly acknowledge their (well known) disagreements. But at Lisbon a somewhat separate agenda was also established, one that in time would help to embed partnership and trust between the parties. And progress is evident.

Moscow will not shy away from vocal criticism, however, if and when it believes that its interests, especially those it considers to have been agreed at Lisbon, are not being met. And here we return to the importance of the music at Munich, and the evolution of Moscow's signals. Often dismissed as mere rhetoric, Moscow's choice of language will be interesting – and important. So far, it has evolved from 'we are examining proposals and ideas' to 'we await direct and unambiguous ('nedvukhsmuislenni') answers from our NATO partners'. If Moscow begins to phrase its statements in terms of "we have concluded", then it may well herald greater discordance in NATO-Russia relations in the year ahead. The message may be transmitted *sotto voce* in Munich. If it is not heard there, the volume will increase.

⁴ During the news conference following the NRC on the 20th November, Medvedev had stated 'Russia would 'participate only as a partner' on an 'absolutely equal basis'. 'Any other kind of participation, for the sake of appearances, would not be acceptable. Either we are fully involved, or we do not take part at all. But if we do not take part at all, it is understandable that we would have to take defensive measures accordingly'.