



# Conference Report

*Research Division  
NATO Defense College*

June 2013

## **“Political and Military Cooperation or**

## **NATO-Russian Roulette”**

### **Proactive Management of a Difficult Relationship**

On 14 June 2013, the NDC Research Division ran an international one-day workshop on the prospects for NATO-Russia relations, bringing together leading experts from the US, Europe, the Caucasus and Russia with high-ranking practitioners from NATO HQ. The title of the roundtable as a whole and those of the individual sessions (“NATO-Russian Roulette”, “Drop in Political Temperature”, “High Potential or Constant Headache”) set the tone for the event: the persistent deterioration of relations between NATO capitals and Moscow means increasingly pessimistic prospects for NATO-Russia relations.

Against this background, the following bullets are intended to capture the core findings of the discussion – obviously with no claim to reproduce every single nuance or point raised by each participant contributing to this intense debate. The conclusions are those of the authors, not necessarily reflecting consensus among roundtable participants.

1. When representatives from France, Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom (in that order) gave their national views on their respective relations with Russia, the picture became gradually more sombre – leading to the general acknowledgment that NATO-Russia relations are in a state of severe crisis. Widespread “Russia fatigue” and an increasingly negative mood have, in most cases, led to a continuing low in bilateral relations. However, it should be emphasized that many NATO countries differentiate between “Russia” and “the Kremlin” – thereby distinguishing between the current government (whose key goal seems to be to preserve its power) and the Russian people.

2. If the diagnosis of a crisis is correct, the key question remains: what caused this decline in relations? A broad-brush answer could point to three factors, arguably all responsible for the present situation to differing degrees:

- each side’s perception of misconduct by the other, revealing a severe values gap;

- fundamentally different approaches to international political “power issues”, which cannot be bridged by compromises;
- the acknowledgment that, despite some remaining “economic diplomacy”, both sides are now far less relevant for each other than during their honeymoon period of “strategic partnership”.

3. With the two sides continuing to manifest their discontent, greater realism is needed by both in terms of mutual expectations:

- Russia will not switch to Western style democracy – the Kremlin rejects societal modernization according to NATO’s values and political stand-ards. Instead, there is (rightly or wrongly) a perception of Russian self-confidence and strength after years of humiliation in the 1990s. “They will not become like us, and the majority of Russians seem to be comfortable with this”;
- NATO will not give Russia any real voice in its decision-making processes (as the formula of meetings “at 29” might insinuate). NATO will try to confer with Russia in those areas where agreement could be possible. In other areas (enlargement, missile defence), NATO will continue to follow its own course despite Russian scepticism.

4. The question is: what do the current situation and the two sides’ respective views mean for the ambitious “strategic partnership” they constantly emphasize? Apparently, the level of disagreement is much more serious and the areas of agreement are much more limited than in NATO’s “normal” partnerships. “Modernization cooperation”, tougher conditionality and the “reset” in relations all failed to move the West and Russia above the “low-hanging fruit” and closer to a real breakthrough. The stalled missile defence project can increasingly be seen as an indicator of the obstacles to smooth relations.

5. At least military cooperation between NATO and Russia seems to run much smoother than the political tensions between both sides would suggest. This shows a familiar pattern, which can be observed among countries or institutions contemplating the idea of cooperation with NATO – India, Brazil, the African Union: the military side appears much more interested in concrete cooperation, whereas the political side harbours all kinds of misgivings. Military to military cooperation between NATO and Russia extends to six areas (logistics, combating terrorism, search and rescue, counter-piracy, military academic exchanges, missile defence). In all these areas, practical cooperation takes place – with varying degrees of intensity. Arguably, the most sensitive issue seems to be missile defence, where not much progress has been achieved. Anticipated projects like common threat analysis or the creation of common missile defence centres (data fusion and joint planning) are still pending.

However, even military cooperation does not measure up fully to the ambitious concept of “strategic partnership”. The menu of cooperation and the level of ambition, which were – and still are – determined by political fluctuations, show no signs of progress.

Mutually frustrating projects, such as missile defence and “high-level strategic talks” (often in practice superficial compulsory events), will hardly move relations on to a fast track.

## **Conclusions**

NATO-Russia relations are neither a loving relationship (as they seemed to be at the beginning in the 90s) nor a marriage of convenience (which some still hope for). They seem more like a marriage heading towards divorce (whatever “divorce” comes to mean in the end). Russia wants real recognition of its importance: talking is not enough. However, the values gap and the fundamental differences in approach to world politics are obstacles for relevant behaviour such as constructive crisis management and major participation in (NATO-led) multilateral military operations.

A number of on-going or foreseeable developments will further determine relations between NATO and Russia (which will always be crucially dependent on those between Washington and Moscow).

On the Russian side:

- economic prospects are not particularly good. Oil revenues may continue to drop and the “shale gas revolution” will have significant geo-strategic implications – not least for Russia. There is not a single product – except raw materials and weapons – with which Russia is competitive on world markets;
- it remains doubtful whether Russia can achieve economic modernization without carrying out societal modernization. Current domestic support for the Putin regime could crumble if the economic situation worsens;
- there is hardly any chance that Moscow will become more supportive of UN mandates for crisis management operations – whether in Syria or elsewhere;
- in Russian domestic politics, NATO will continue to be used as a scapegoat for all kinds of problems and will therefore not be regarded as a true partner.

On the NATO/US side:

- missile defence (US as well as NATO) is going to be implemented, with or without Russian cooperation;
- the 2014 NATO Summit might agree on a further step towards Georgia’s NATO membership;
- tensions over Syria (with the US delivering arms to the rebels, and Russia not acknowledging the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime) will worsen.

With regard to the potential future development of NATO-Russia relations (again limiting the analysis to broad trends), two options seem likely. In a best-case scenario, Russia would continue to be a “frenemy” (neither friend nor foe) for NATO – remaining engaged in cooperation where mutually beneficial (like counter-narcotics operations),

but at the same time maintaining fundamentally different security agendas. All in all, this relationship would be characterized by disengagement or mutual indifference. NATO-Russia military cooperation would have to further sell its “baby steps” as a big success with both sides seeming to embrace a philosophy of “not against each other, but without each other”.

Given the likely developments mentioned above, the worst case scenario would be characterized by continuous antagonism between NATO and Russia, with all that this would imply.

In both scenarios, the prospect of a “strategic partnership” seems a chimera.

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