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Does Russia Matter? Purely Political Relations Are Not Enough in Operational Times

Heidi Reisinger¹

On 27 January 2014, the NATO Defense College Research Division hosted its Russia Roundtable, where international experts from various research institutions meet senior practitioners from the International Staff and International Military Staff from NATO HQ.

Relations between Euro-Atlantic capitals and Moscow seem to have reached an all-time low. As a result, NATO-Russia relations are also continuing to lose momentum. After 20 years of NATO-Russia cooperation, Russian military forces have become a relevant operational partner for neither NATO nor its individual member states, and appear to be in a woeful condition. At the same time, the increasing relevance of Asia's "rising powers" is attracting the attention of major Euro-Atlantic players, including Russia itself. With all this in mind, the Roundtable discussion focussed on the question of whether Russia still matters to the Alliance.

This report summarizes the core issues/findings of the discussion, obviously without covering every part of the intense and sometimes outspoken debate in its entirety. The conclusions are those of the author, not necessarily reflecting consensus among roundtable participants.

NATO-Russia Relations: A Cold Cooperation

The recent history of NATO-Russia relations is hardly a source of inspiration. Neither side has moved towards the other – indeed, the gap has widened. Political dialogue seems to be more ritualized than substantial, with military cooperation failing to move beyond a handful of projects. It would be easy – and not incorrect – to blame Russia's lack of transparency and increasing self-assertiveness which leaves little room for NATO. However, NATO has not been an easy partner for Russia either.

The question as to what has really been achieved, after 20 years of political window-dressing and limited military cooperation, leads to worrisome observations:

¹ Heidi Reisinger is Research Advisor at the NATO Defense College. The opinions expressed are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NATO Defense College or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

- the dysfunctional nature of the NATO-Russia-Council (NRC). The NRC has become a kind of institutionalized Potemkin village: despite its high political visibility, it is dysfunctional when needed most (e.g. during the Russia-Georgia War in 2008);
- superficial political upgrading, with a continued lack of substance. This “diplomatic” approach has suited a Russian leadership which shows little interest in meaningful contributions or in substantial cooperation with NATO;
- discontinuation of collaboration in missile defence: disputes and irritations over possibility of a common missile defence system have transformed this former showcase project, which should also have consigned the Cold War once and for all to history, from a potential game changer to a major stumbling block. Russian Defence Minister Shoigu put an end to this protracted state of limbo by declaring that Russia needs a “pause”;
- a one-way street: almost all initiatives for military cooperation come from Brussels. Russia seems to be interested in cooperation with selected NATO nations, but not as part of the NATO framework. Many projects have failed to make any noticeable progress (e.g. communication capabilities, replenishment-at-sea systems). Russia is not in the least interested in becoming or being seen as a “normal partner” of NATO, but observes NATO’s partnership initiatives with other nations, which it perceives as within its sphere of influence (and with special concern to NATO’s open door policy);
- within NATO, lack of a consolidated strategy on how to develop its relations with this “strategic partner”. Opinions on how to deal with Russia differ widely. The spectrum ranges from those who wish to restrict contact to a minimum, and see the Kremlin as an enemy, to those who would tend to grant Russia a privileged role or even support a “Russia first” approach;
- finally, the observation that bureaucratic routine can actually prove useful in one respect. Thanks to the institutionalised bureaucratic processes within NATO, military cooperation with Russia has never actually been discontinued in response to political tensions. Military cooperation in six areas (logistics, combatting terrorism, search and rescue, counter-piracy, military academic exchanges, and theatre missile defence) has kept going despite political turbulence.

So Far, So Bad?

Could the selective NATO-Russia military cooperation, which has achieved a certain independence from the political scene, afford an opportunity for hibernation until such time as NATO and Russia might achieve greater political convergence? Should both sides be satisfied with the status quo? Two developments should be taken into account, and both raise doubts:

1. deteriorating bilateral relations of important NATO countries with Russia make an improvement in the Alliance’s relations with Russia unlikely. US-Russia relations, in particular, cast a shadow over NATO-Russia relations. Among European NATO members, for example Germany seems to have shifted its Russia-friendly perspective to a more sober footing. If fewer influential nations within NATO are generating momentum to engage with Russia, those who are traditionally critical of Russia will dictate the agenda and it will be difficult even to ensure that relations do not deteriorate further from their current level;

2. NATO's profoundly changing partnership policy will set increasingly clear criteria for relations with non-member nations. In the early years, the Alliance's approach retained a strong political basis. NATO saw its partnerships primarily as a political tool to overcome the East-West conflict and sought military cooperation with countries that seemed politically relevant. At the time, having only limited military cooperation was not an obstacle to becoming an important "strategic partner" of the Alliance. This political approach has now moved into the background. Today, joint military operations are at the heart of NATO's cooperation with partners.

This operational approach to partners is bad news for a "mainly or purely political" partner such as Russia. NATO's demand-driven partnership policy puts proactive partners at the centre, the emphasis being on their contribution to a common security perspective and readiness to share risks with the Alliance.

Does Russia have a deeper interest in operational cooperation with NATO? Since 2003, when it ended its operational collaboration with NATO in the Balkans, it has barely participated directly in a NATO-led mission. This is no coincidence: on the one hand, Moscow does not have many interoperable units; more importantly, on the other hand, it does not (fully) support NATO missions. ISAF in Afghanistan is a good example: its failure would not be in Russia's interest, yet success is an equally unpalatable option. The schizophrenic Russian domestic discussion about the NATO transit hub in the Russian city of Ulyanovsk illustrate this dilemma.

Finally, the cool relationship might even turn into a hostile one, with regard to certain long-standing grievances for Russia: (1) NATO's enlargement and "open door" policy; (2) NATO installations, exercises and training close to Russian territory; and (3) further development of missile defence.

The Russian Armed Forces: Neither a Threat Nor a Partner

The current state of Russia's armed forces also raises doubts about the future potential of military cooperation. Many years of continual reform, underfunding, and the devastating effects of demographic trends have led the Russian armed forces to a situation where even senior military personnel raise doubts about the ability to provide national defence without tactical nuclear weapons. The transition from a mass mobilisation footing to a more expeditionary focus did not put an end to endemic problems such as corruption and the poor resourcing of regular units (in terms of both manpower and equipment). While power projection remains significant enough to play a role in the post-Soviet space, the ability to "plug and play" with NATO nations is not on the menu.

Several aspects such as the lack of reliable statistics makes it extremely difficult to quantify personnel shortages precisely and is a key obstacle to professional military force planning and further reforms. The announced goal of having one million troops under arms is little more than wishful thinking. Reintroducing traditional Soviet practices like "snapshot" inspections will keep the system busy and project an image of high-level political involvement, but without actually improving the current status. All of this makes Russia's military capabilities less efficient and hardly interoperable. The "creeping" move from a conscript system to a professional army will be extremely difficult to manage under such circumstances.

The modest prospects of future collaboration with the Russian armed forces have also brought a shift of attention to the possible development of joint operations with the Russian military in areas other than defence. What NATO calls "Emerging Security Challenges" could offer some potential for successful col-

laboration, helping build trust and enhancing the shared NATO-Russia agenda. During the NATO-Russia Council meeting in October 2013, Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu, who served for more than 20 years as Minister of Emergency Situations, emphasized Russia's interest in following up projects in this area. This approach is not entirely new, but should be supported, although it will not be sufficient to close the increasing gap between (high) political expectations and (low or non-existent) operational contributions.

Russia's Asia

For some time, Russian elites have lost no opportunity to remind the West that the Russian eagle is double-headed, looking not only west but also east. Moscow could also turn away from Europe and play its "Asian card".

However, the rhetorical ploy fails to take into account the power base for Russia's role in Asia. There, Russia is not perceived as a rising power, but as a declining one. Any signs of Russia ushering in a US-style "pivot" to Asia are hardly noticeable. Russian trade has increased almost explosively with Asian countries, but remains limited to raw material supplies and fossil fuels. This is true, also, of the Russian performance on international markets. With few exceptions (arms and raw materials), Russia has not managed to develop any globally competitive products. This disconnect, between the increase in energy exports and overall economic development, remains a clear sign of economic weakness. In 2013, Russia achieved the second highest revenues in recent years for its oil and gas exports, while at the same time suffering its second worst year for the economy as a whole.

On the other hand, Russia does not have to pivot to Asia: it is already in Asia from a geographical perspective, and perceives itself as an Asian power. This is apparent from its attempts to restore relations with Japan, and its participation in the so-called six party talks on North Korea, where its influence seems of limited value. Concerning China, Russia's relations remain ambivalent.

A closer partnership with China would seem, theoretically, to be a strategic move, but Russia's great concern is to avoid being seen as a competitor or as a junior partner. Any kind of "junior" status would hardly be compatible with the Russian self-image.

Several issues indicate that Moscow's expectations for a strategic partnership with Beijing are illusory and should be kept on a realistic footing. Despite common positions on such principles as "interference in internal issues" and the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P), Beijing did not follow Moscow in recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Cosmetic steps, such as first visits after taking office, can also be interpreted as disequilibrium: while Beijing was Putin's sole destination when he visited his counterpart, Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow as Chinese president could be interpreted as a stopover on his way to Africa.

The real problem for Russia vis-à-vis its largest Asian neighbour is its own "Far East": having a relatively deserted Siberia bordering on booming Chinese provinces is a strategic headache. Moscow has failed to come up with anything resembling a solution to this problem, and has shown neither the resources nor the strategic vision to do so. Furthermore, as a direct neighbour to Central Asia, Russia finds itself in an awkward position, since it is directly affected by instability there. For NATO, by contrast, the relevance of the various Central Asian States might be considerably reduced once troops have been withdrawn from Afghanistan.

Not Against, but Without Each Other

Cooperation between NATO and Russia will linger on, despite all the differences and difficulties. Both sides need to develop greater tolerance and a sense of reality in order to achieve progress or even maintain today's limited level of cooperation. NATO should understand that Russia sees itself as an independent centre of power, and does not seek any closer rapprochement, let alone integration with Euro-Atlantic structures. At the same time, Moscow will try to enhance its position in Asia by leveraging its status as an Asian country. In contrast to the Euro-Atlantic powers, it will increasingly seek to establish itself as a Euro-Pacific power. If this leads not only to passive cooperation with NATO, but also to a more relaxed position vis-à-vis the Alliance concerning the above-mentioned grievances, new chances for collaboration might even emerge.

On the other hand, Moscow has to accept that it will remain outside the Alliance's decision-making processes, even on questions where Russian interests might be concerned. Its relative inactivity as a partner of the Alliance will relegate Russia to a lower status in Brussels. This could mean a politically painful downgrading as a partner, especially when compared to the Alliance's important operational partners. NATO will include Moscow "where possible", and where it can add value. Otherwise, "Russia fatigue" might prove even stronger than the "Russia factor" of the early post-Cold War years.

The possible motto "not against, but without each other" is not desirable for either side, but might work better for NATO than for Russia. Russia should not underestimate its own interest in collaborating with NATO, and also in proving relevant to NATO nations. Self-isolation and missed opportunities for building interoperability will become more visible as the political façade continues to crumble.

So, does Russia matter? Yes, but much less than before. However, NATO should not take anything for granted and should continue to reach out to Moscow, irrespective of whether a "breakthrough" seems a realistic prospect or a mere illusion. Downscaling of Alliance rhetoric and management of expectations require action. Doing nothing about these issues is a sure recipe for frustration.