

NATO'S NEW STRATEGIC CONCEPT – A FEW THOUGHTS RELATED TO RUSSIA

Dmitri Trenin's Remarks at the Conference at NATO HQ
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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was built to protect the security of its member states, and has evolved, alongside the European Union, into a premier pillar of European security. Twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, there is one major piece of unfinished post-Cold War business: fitting the former Soviet lands into a pan-European security framework. Essentially, the heart of the issue is Russia's non-inclusion into the European and Euro-Atlantic security structures. (The OSCE is seen more as a platform than a structure.) This, in turn, affects Russia's neighbors, such as Ukraine and Georgia. The brief war in the Caucasus last August, and the tension it produced in Crimea, point to the reality and potential severity of the problem.

There is no simple way to resolve it. Russia's membership in the Alliance, sought in the 1990s and again explored in the early 2000s, is not a realistic proposition for the foreseeable future, if ever. Among other things, Russia's hypothetical accession to NATO would needlessly exacerbate Russia's own, and the West's, relations with China. Rather, one has to embark on a long way toward creating a **security community which would include both NATO members and non-members**. President Medvedev's idea is useful not so much because he calls for a new European security treaty, but because it is a de facto invitation to an ongoing dialog. NATO needs to seize this opportunity and come up with ideas of its own.

In the 12 years since the NATO-Russia Founding Act and 7 years since the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), the relationship between the Alliance and its biggest neighbor has not lived up to the expectations of 1997 or 2002. Instead of becoming the instrument of Western-Russian security interaction, the NATO-Russia Council has turned itself into a technical workshop, useful, but extremely narrow in scope. The major contentious issues in European security, such as Kosovo, the Caucasus, "frozen conflicts" in general, ballistic missile defenses, have not been discussed and dealt with in the NRC context. This needs to change.

At minimum, the NRC is the place to engage the Russians in serious discussions, both formal and informal, on the issues of common concern. It needs to be an all-weather operation. Hearing out each side is essential, but the key task is to establish elements of confidence in the badly, and even dangerously frayed relationship.

NATO's current focus is very much on Afghanistan, and a decade ago it was on the Balkans. Yet, east of Berlin the Alliance continues to be perceived as "being about Russia". This is the view shared in Moscow and Minsk, Tallinn and Tbilisi. Managing that situation will be crucial for the security of Europe's east. Georgia and Ukraine are the cases in point.

The real problem with Ukraine's NATO membership bid is not Russia's opposition – and of course it is not NATO's spurious threat to Russia's security. The actual issue is Ukraine itself. If that nation of 46 million were overwhelmingly pro-NATO, no force in the world, and certainly not Russia, would be able to prevent it from acceding to the Alliance, provided it meets the relevant criteria. Since NATO is largely "about Russia" in Ukraine, too, the Ukrainian population faces a dilemma it cannot resolve. Perhaps a quarter to one-third, like most Poles, Balts and Romanians, believe NATO is needed as a security hedge against Russia, but just over one-half view Russia as part of the extended family. To force a stark choice on a nation so split on the issue is courting disaster. In particular, this would re-ignite Crimean separatism and make

Russian interference virtually unavoidable. Fortunately, this is unlikely to be happening in the next few months, or perhaps years.

Since a near-totality of Ukrainians do not want to be a part of Russia, but also do not want to part with Russia, the best way to handle the Ukrainian security issue is along the lines of progressive integration with, and ultimately, into Europe. The European Union's Eastern Partnership Program is a useful, albeit small, step in that direction. In any event, NATO would be wise to take up the membership issue only when there is a comfortable majority in the country, including in Crimea, favoring such a step.

Georgia's problem is different. Most Georgians want NATO precisely because of the perceived threat from Russia. However, admission of Georgia in its internationally recognized borders would put NATO in danger of a direct conflict with Russia, which no longer recognizes those borders. It also needs to be remembered that Abkhazia did not secede from Georgia in 2008, but a decade and a half before; South Ossetia, by contrast, was probably finally lost by Georgia as a result of the reckless 2008 attack. As is evidenced by Russia's military deployments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the reaction to the May 2009 PfP exercise in Georgia, this is a sore point in NATO-Russia relations.

In that situation, NATO needs to support **conflict prevention** in the area. Military disengagement in the zones of conflict; confidence- and security-building measures; protection of minorities and general support for human rights in the region need to be constantly discussed within the NATO-Russia Council, even though the final resolution of the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is years away. Ways could and should be found around the apparently incompatible legal positions of the West and Russia on the status of the two territories. Lack of attention to conflict prevention in the Caucasus might lead to new violence, perhaps even hostilities.

The NRC's agenda needs to be expanded to include **ballistic missile defense** issues, which is both an issue in U.S.-Russian relations and a potential area of their strategic collaboration. For some time, NATO and Russia have been successfully cooperating on theater missile defenses. It is in the interests of the Alliance, as well as Western-Russian relations, that the two missile defense issues be brought together under the auspices of the NRC. **Depending on progress in the U.S.-Russian dialogue, missile defense can become the flagship project of NATO-Russian cooperation. If successful, this cooperation would start the long trek away from nuclear deterrence and mutual assured destruction as the foundation of Russian-Western security relations, and toward something which could become a security community in the Euro-Atlantic area.**

Another issue to come under NRC review is **conventional arms control** in Europe, now that the adapted CFE treaty is not ratified by NATO countries, and the original 1990 document suspended by Russia. No one benefits from the deadlock in which non-ratification is being countered by suspension. The eventual accession to the Treaty by the Baltic States would be a useful step in confidence building.

A modicum of mutual confidence between the Alliance and Russia would facilitate Western-Russian **cooperation beyond Europe**. Thus, cooperative missile defenses would look at the Greater Middle East. On **Afghanistan**, no Russian troops would of course be forthcoming. However, further expansion of transit across the Russian territory is a distinct possibility. Anti-drugs cooperation is an area of genuine mutual interest. Russia could provide training and equipment to the Afghan forces. Moscow maintains an ongoing dialogue with Kabul and Islamabad, Delhi and Tehran, and is an ally of several countries in Central Asia, where it keeps

some military presence. At a strategic level, Russia, alongside China, India, and Iran constitute a group of major powers key to establishment of regional stability in the area. NATO would be right to engage in a structured dialogue with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which has risen to become a useful platform for security discussions.

Russia, of course, cannot “deliver” **Iran**, but it would be a significant part of any international effort seeking diplomatic resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue. By contrast, Russia’s absence from such efforts is likely to undermine their effectiveness and contribute to military confrontation with Iran.

NATO countries’ cooperation with Russia is highly desirable on a number of other issues, from achieving an Israeli-Palestinian settlement to fighting piracy off the coasts of Somalia.

To sum it up: As NATO sets out to draft its new Strategic Concept, it faces an important question: does the Alliance foresee building Europe’s security together with Russia, or with an eye to Russia. Much will depend on what the implicit answer to that question will be. If the answer will tend to be the latter, this will mean that Europe as a whole slides back to the future. If the Alliance goes for the former, the challenges will be very serious. Managing, not to speak of radically improving relations with Russia will remain exceedingly difficult. However, moving ahead with Russian-Western relations would bolster pan-European security and stability. A reinvigorated NRC, entrusted with the more salient issues, could become the fulcrum of the effort. Maintaining a direct, frank and constant dialogue with the Russian leadership would help bring the message across and avoid collisions resulting from misguided policies or their misinterpretations.