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The State of the NATO-Russia Reset

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THE STATE OF THE NATO-RUSSIA RESET

Key Points

- An improved atmosphere in relations between Russia and NATO does not alter long-standing Russian concerns over the nature of the Alliance, and the Russian desire to attenuate NATO's role in the security of Europe.
- Achieving meaningful dialogue between Russia and NATO is made more challenging by differing interpretations of commitments made at the Lisbon summit, which hamper implementation of cooperation agreements.
- Russian alarm over military intervention in Libya, together with Russia's perceived vulnerability to foreign interference, have given a fresh dimension to Russia's perception of NATO as a problem.
- Russian proposals for participation in European missile defence have not proved realistic; at the same time, neither have Russian promises of adverse consequences if their objections to current plans are not taken into account.
- Nevertheless, missile defence is one of several challenges to the relationship caused by the two sides' conflicting priorities which are not being adequately addressed.
- NATO can take steps to avoid repeating the cycle of a thaw with Russia followed by a new confrontation; but if there is an opportunity to do so, it may be brief.

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Introduction

Relations between Russia and NATO develop according to a familiar and predictable cycle. High hopes and ambitious declarations are followed by a plateau of expectations; a period of stagnation follows, as cooperation founders on incompatible strategic priorities; Russia becomes increasingly frustrated and alarmed at NATO behaviour; a crisis emerges, the relationship is set back; and then after a decent interval a “reset” takes place, partnership is declared anew, and the cycle begins again.

This circular nature of the relationship has been likened to the changing of the seasons by Konstantin Eggert in an official NATO publication,¹ and more pithily compared to the film *Groundhog Day* by a senior official speaking privately. A report by Russia’s influential INSOR think-tank, which caused considerable excitement when published because of its appraisal of the advantages of Russia joining NATO, describes the Russia-NATO relationship as a “difficult partnership”, which “has developed in waves over the past 20 years, through peaks and troughs”.²

The most recent “trough” involved arguably the most dramatic crisis to date: armed conflict in Georgia in 2008. At the time of writing (early September 2011) NATO is maintaining high hopes for renewed partnership following the most recent “peak”, the optimistic Lisbon Summit in November 2010, but Russia is already entering the “frustration and alarm” phase – frustration over inability to influence plans for missile defence in Europe, and alarm at NATO’s readiness to intervene in internal conflict in Libya. This post-Lisbon adjustment mirrors the situation after earlier high points in the relationship, for example May 1997 when the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council was established, and May 2002 when the NATO-Russia Council was formed. The founding documents for both of these institutions spoke of “equality” and “partnership”, yet relations deteriorated drastically not long afterwards.

This paper considers the nature of the relationship between Russia and NATO with particular reference to the view from Moscow, and assesses key areas where the two sides have failed to establish meaningful dialogue on significant challenges – in particular, plans for European missile defence, and NATO operations in Libya. Its aim is to assist in comprehension of the Russian view of NATO and its relationship with Russia, with the ultimate hope that the familiar cycle might at some point be broken.

Does Moscow Really See NATO as a Threat?

As with the relationship as a whole, the level of perception of NATO as a threat to Russia passes through a familiar cycle. At the time of writing, this perception has reached a relative peak after a period of comparative relaxation; this comes as a result of the NATO-led air campaign in Libya, tied to the pervasive Russian argument that political instability in North Africa and the Middle East results from the plotting of the West led by the USA.

A battery of colourful accusations on this topic from Russia’s more hawkish senior commentators was to be expected, but even President Medvedev echoed the view that

¹ See “One step forward...”, in NATO Review 2011/5: “NATO-Russia relations: 20 years after the USSR”. http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2011/NATO_Russia/EN/index.htm (Accessed 01 August 2011)

² I. Yu. Yurgens and S. A. Kulik (eds.), «*O perspektivakh razvitiya otnosheniy Rossii i NATO*» (On prospects for development of relations between Russia and NATO), *Institut sovremennogo razvitiya* (INSOR), October 2010, p. 1. Hereafter cited as INSOR, “Prospects”.

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Russia was vulnerable to the same kind of interference. Speaking in February 2011, he said:

Look at the situation that has unfolded in the Middle East and the Arab world. It is extremely bad. There are major difficulties ahead... We need to look the truth in the eyes. This is the kind of scenario that they were preparing for us, and now they will be trying even harder to bring it about.³

This setback has arisen relatively quickly. One year earlier, in February 2010, the Russian security establishment felt sufficiently confident to allow a carefully-nuanced assessment of NATO as a “danger” which constituted only a *potential* threat in the new Military Doctrine.⁴ The difference, which appears subtle in English, is significant in Russian doctrinal lexicon. This provides a nice counterpoint to NATO’s insistence that the Russian Federation is not seen as a military threat, while at the same time drawing up long-overdue contingency plans for defence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. But on the Russian side, the collective failure by Western journalists and commentators to grasp this careful assessment of NATO as a “not-yet-threat”⁵ causes frustration that the message has not got across - as witness the testy response by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to a press conference question:

I did not say that NATO is a threat to Russia. This is both widespread and deeply misleading. Despite our explanations, which for a year and a half/two years we have been giving to our partners, they periodically ask the question of why Russia considers NATO a threat, citing the new Russian Military Doctrine in the process. It has nothing like that; this document does not contain a list of threats, but of dangers for Russia. This list mentions NATO twice, but not as an organization creating a danger for Russia. We do not see the alliance as a threat.⁶

None of NATO’s military activities in Libya fulfilled the conditions set for this potential to be turned into an *actual* threat; but there is no doubt that they strengthen the arguments of those within Russia who point to vulnerabilities to foreign intervention, facilitated by NATO’s power projection capabilities. According to Belarusian Chief of General Staff Petr Tsikhanovskiy, the joint Russian-Belarusian “Union Shield 2011” exercises scheduled for late September are to practise manoeuvrist defence and exercise new air defence systems in response to “events in North Africa and Afghanistan”.⁷

There is a lively public debate within Russia over the problem posed by NATO. In her 2010 book “Lonely Power: Why Russia has failed to become the West and the West is

³ Speaking at a meeting of the National Anti-Terrorist Committee. “*Dmitriy Medvedev provel vo Vladikavkaze zasedaniye Natsionalnogo antiterroristicheskogo komiteta*”, Russian presidential website, 22 February 2011, available at <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/10408> (Accessed 24 April 2011).

⁴ See K Giles, “The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2010”, NATO Defense College, February 2010.

⁵ As, for instance, “Russia’s military doctrine lists NATO as a primary threat. Why would NATO even want to share security responsibility with a partner that considers it a threat?” Peter Topychkanov, “Missile Defense: Not Joint, but Cooperative”, *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, 24 June 2011. <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2011/06/24/missile-defense-not-joint-but-cooperative/8uk> (Accessed 15 July 2011)

⁶ “Transcript of Remarks and Response to Media Questions by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at Joint Press Conference with NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen after the Meeting of the Participants of the Visiting Session of the RNC with President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev, Sochi, July 4, 2011”, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/50F547E9E1EB8FA7C32578C4005BCAE3 (Accessed 15 July 2011)

⁷ Interfax, 29 August 2011

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wary of Russia”, academic Lilia Shevtsova cites a number of Russian commentators noting that NATO is not a military threat.⁸ Maj-Gen (rtd) Pavel Zolotarev, Deputy Director of the Institute for U.S. and Canada Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and a Professor of the Academy of Military Sciences, wrote that “the actions of Western countries [including NATO expansion] cannot pose any real threat.” Shevtsova also cites Sergey Karaganov, Deputy Director of the Institute of Europe at the Russian Academy of Sciences, who wrote in February 2008 that “I don’t think that the possible NATO expansion will lead to a qualitative increase in the military threat to Russia. From the West it is microscopic.”

Even some of those who consider it possible that NATO might have aggressive designs on Russia are persuaded that the inevitable consequences mean these designs would never be brought to fruition. According to leading expert on missiles, nuclear weapons and disarmament Maj-Gen (rtd) Vladimir Dvorkin⁹:

Russia in any case – with parity or not in the potential of nuclear restraint with the United States, with any architecture of American ABM and NATO and all potential of conventional high-accuracy weapons – will retain a potential of response that will keep every madman from considering not only a military confrontation with us but even threatening Russia with an attack.¹⁰

Paradoxically, the progress of actual operations in Libya provided a degree of reassurance for those Russian observers who fear NATO’s military capability. Some commentaries betrayed palpable incredulity at the lack of capacity of the USA’s NATO allies. For example, when reporting the Norwegian announcement of withdrawal from operations in Libya due to inability to maintain sustained operations, one leading Russian publication writing on military affairs felt the need to clarify that it was not making it up: “this is not the author’s irony; it is the official explanation offered by the Norwegian minister of defence”.¹¹ The notion that NATO lacks the capability as well as the intention to mount a military campaign against Russia seems well-established among liberal media in particular. According to the opposition-leaning Grani.ru website,

NATO’s potential should not be overestimated. In the jingoists’ eyes the Alliance looks like an invincible war machine capable of crushing all resistance in a matter of days. But in practice we see an entirely different picture... In view of the economic difficulties facing the United States and Europe, NATO is hardly likely to be capable of conducting a serious military campaign anywhere at all over the next 10-15 years. And it is all the more stupid to expect any kind of aggression against a country possessing nuclear weapons.¹²

Andrei Zagorskiy of Moscow’s Centre for Policy Studies wrote before operations in Libya commenced that “talk of increasing NATO’s military power near Russian borders has no basis in fact. NATO enlargement has not led to an increase of its military power, but on the contrary, was accompanied by a reduction of joint military potential of its members in the alliance’s zone of activity.”¹³ His comment was borne out by events, as with the Danish Air Force revealing that the pressure of sending six F-16s to Sigonella

⁸ Liliya Shevtsova, “Lonely Power”, Washington DC, CEIP, 2010, pp.144-145.

⁹ A biography for Dvorkin is available in Russian and English at <http://www.pircenter.org/index.php?id=1242> (Accessed 20 September 2011)

¹⁰ Liliya Shevtsova, “Lonely Power”, Washington DC, CEIP, 2010, pp.144-145.

¹¹ Aleksandr Khramchikhin, “Russian-NATO Mantras”, *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, 8 July 2011. http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2011-07-08/1_mantry.html (Accessed 15 July 2011)

¹² Ilya Yashin, “Надо ли бояться НАТО?” (Should we be afraid of NATO?), Grani.ru, 06 September 2011. Available at <http://www.grani.ru/opinion/m.191217.html> (Accessed 10 September 2011)

¹³ Quoted in Liliya Shevtsova, “Lonely Power”, Washington DC, CEIP, 2010, pp.144-145.



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