



Asociace
pro mezinárodní
otázky
Association
for International
Affairs

Conference Report 2/2014

NATO and Russia: Geopolitical Competition or Pragmatic Partnership?

—

March 2014

NATO and Russia: Geopolitical Competition or Pragmatic Partnership?

—

Šimon Presser

March 2014



The International Conference “NATO and Russia: Geopolitical Competition or Pragmatic Partnership?” was held in Prague, Czech Republic on December 17, 2013. The conference was supported by the NATO Public Diplomacy Division.

© 2013 Association for International Affairs. All rights reserved. Views expressed in the paper are not necessarily the official attitude of the publisher.



Conference Report 2/2014

NATO and Russia: Geopolitical Competition or Pragmatic Partnership?

–
March 2014

NATO and Russia belong among the key international geopolitical powers. However, their relationship can be compared to a roller-coaster with ups and downs, fast and slow stages and exaggerated feelings of joy and fear. That is why the Association for International Affairs (AMO) decided to organize an international conference dedicated to the topic of NATO-Russia relations and invited a number of distinguished guests to Prague to discuss this complicated relationship. The crisis in Ukraine was only just unfolding, which influenced the general focus of the conference on possible areas of cooperation – hardly imaginable in the present context.

The conference entitled „[NATO and Russia: Geopolitical Competition or Pragmatic Partnership?](#)“ was held under the auspices of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Jan Kohout, on 17th December 2013 in the Černín Palace. AMO co-operated on the conference with **NATO Public Diplomacy Division** and the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic** and would like to once again express gratitude to both these partners who enabled the interesting conference to take place.

Ahead of the conference, the Association had published a policy paper written by the Chief Analyst of the AMO Research Center, Tomáš Karásek. The paper [Destined to Cooperate? NATO and Russia between Power, Identity and Institutions](#) emphasized the shift in geopolitical balance of powers to side of Asia and makes clear that NATO and Russia might find themselves on the losing side in the “Asian century” if they do not overcome mutual competition. Tomáš Karásek argued that only one measure was strong enough to overcome years of mutual distrust - an offer of full NATO membership to Russia, under strictly set conditions. To find the supporting arguments to this bold claim, read the whole [paper](#).

The conference was divided into three panel debates complemented by opening remarks by **Eliška Žigová**, Director of Northern and Eastern Europe Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, and a key-note speech delivered by **Daniel Koštoval**, First Deputy Minister of Defence of the Czech Republic. The conference was held under the Chatham House rules, so the quotations and opinions presented below will not be attributed to a particular guest.

The conference aimed to kick off the topic in (at least) the Czech discourse and aimed to analyze the relationship of NATO and Russia from three different perspectives. : the future of the relationship, the possibilities of joining forces the issue of shared neighbourhood.



Conference Report 2/2014

NATO and Russia: Geopolitical Competition or Pragmatic Partnership?

–
March 2014

Panel #1: Future of NATO-Russia Partnership + Opening Remarks

Konstantin von Eggert, Former Editor-in-Chief, BBC Russian Service Moscow Bureau & Kommersant FM radio in Moscow

Jakub Kulhánek, Advisor to the Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic; Member of Supervisory Board, Association for International Affairs (AMO)

Petr Luňák, Deputy Head of the Engagement Section, NATO Public Diplomacy Division

Marcel Peško, Director of the Office of the Secretary General, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

Eliška Žigová, Director of Northern and Eastern Europe Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

In the first panel it was noted that there has been a clear **historical pattern** repeating over and over again. It begins with a period of hope, followed by designs of common projects and ends with a crisis and a subsequent reset. To support this statement we can look at the end of 1990s. In 1997 NATO-Russia permanent joint council was established followed by the enhancement of relations. Two years later, however, the crisis in Kosovo divided the newly designated partners and the whole process had to start from the beginning. Needless to say, currently we find ourselves in the „down phase” as the speakers agreed on.

Secondly, the separation of **practical and political level of cooperation** was mentioned. At the practical level, we find several examples of fruitful cooperation – including the fight against illicit drug trade, STANDEX project of detecting explosives or joint exercises. On the other hand, NATO and Russia have experienced many stumbling blocks at the political level, be it the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 or NATO’s enlargement which the Kremlin regards as an inroad into its sphere of influence.

As another guest pointed out, the question of **identity** is also crucial. Identity cannot be changed overnight and although it was easy for former USSR members to drop the idea quickly, for the Russians it is much harder and the identity of Soviets, leaders of the empire, still prevails in a large part of the population. It is the Soviet heritage that is pushing Russian elites to remain a world superpower at all costs, despite the fact that with the tensions in the Russian society and economic instability it is harder than has ever been.

For Russia, NATO was always important as a tool of **propaganda** spread across the country, a bogeyman created by Russian leaders to legitimize their steps to defend the motherland against the EU and the US. Over the years the rhetoric became so omnipresent that many actually started to believe it. However, if we want to overcome the old days of cold war, both NATO and Russia have to stop picturing the other as a foe. That is a point all the speakers agreed on in their contributions and it is supported in the policy paper by Tomáš Karásek. Another issue that all speakers of the first panel tackled was the **co-operation in Afghanistan**. That is an example that NATO and Russia share some values or at least some



Conference Report 2/2014

NATO and Russia: Geopolitical Competition or Pragmatic Partnership?

–
March 2014

interests and there are cases where co-operation is possible. However the withdrawal of NATO forces by 2014 may be perceived by the Russians as a wrong step. Since Russians traditionally identify power with military strength, the withdrawal from an unfinished fight may be seen as weakness, thus diminishing the authority of the Alliance. This idea was mentioned throughout all the conference panels.

The last, but certainly not least, point of the first panel was the need for **strategic patience and building of mutual trust**. Contrary to the policy paper, the speakers promoted rather smaller steps to build the relationship upon. Bearing in mind the examples of already functioning co-operation, NATO should seek new ways to promote trust and try to get rid of the bogeyman image pictured by the propaganda. However, as was pointed out in the end – it takes two, or rather 29 in this case - to tango, and without Russian willingness no progress can be achieved.

Some of the questions raised by the panel:

- Where will Russia seek allies when real threats arise instead of those created by Kremlin's rhetoric – such as the challenge from China?
- How to build mutual trust between NATO and Russia?
- What are the most important impediments which block further improvement of NATO-Russia relations?
- Which steps could and should the actors undertake to improve the relationship?

Panel #2: Joining Forces – NATO and Russia as Partners in Action + The Keynote Speech

Jacek Durkalec, Analyst, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)

John Lough, Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Statecraft, Oxford; Associate Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House; Former NATO Representative in Russia

Daniel Koštoval, First Deputy Minister of Defence of the Czech Republic

In the second panel it was noted that Russian **assessment of threats** is based mostly on strength and military capabilities. However that perception is too narrow and it is important to take into consideration not only capabilities but also intentions. In case of capabilities, NATO is one of the biggest players but when intentions are included into the process, it is clear that the Alliance is not a threat because nobody wishes for a clash with Russia. As one of the guests suggested, NATO countries would have much bigger armies if they were preparing for a conflict – but they do not because they are not.

It is clear that Russia needs **safeguards** to secure its position. After the Kosovo crisis they realized that the chair in the Security Council does not fully guarantee them to have the last



Conference Report 2/2014

NATO and Russia: Geopolitical Competition or Pragmatic Partnership?

–
March 2014

word and confidence building measures are needed. As one of the speakers noted, while NATO seeks to build trust and cooperation, Russia seeks equality and the right to manage - which means to have stronger voice than provided by the NATO-Russia Council. From this perspective, only the veto provided by a full membership in the Alliance would provide such a safeguard.

On the other hand, another guests agreed with the speakers of the first in saying that the way forward consists of **smaller steps** and trust-building rather than big gestures. **Real-life practical cooperation** such as sea rescue programmes, airspace control, or the fight against drug trafficking are the right tools to build the trust upon and root the cooperation in.

It was also mentioned that the current situation and the lack of predictability and trust could become a routine, **status quo, which is ever harder to escape**. If NATO lets Russia believe it is a foe and vice-versa, we can find ourselves in a new era of “cold peace” and that is why each, even a small step, matters. Large projects such as defence integration could of course be very powerful tools to boost the cooperation but there never was a chance to proceed with them. However, it is a viable option to prepare scenarios concerning arms control or defence integration in case a political window opens.

And also such bold moves are limited by the fact that **Russia has never been fully committed to deepening cooperation** as it has no motivation to strengthen NATO's place in European security. Russia wanted Eastern Europe to remain a gray zone dividing the west and Russia and such a large support from the Russian side might encourage eastern countries to pursue NATO membership as well. That is something Russia wants to avoid and that is why the cooperation is limited.

But although there are limitations, the **opportunities are huge** as one of the panellists clearly and briefly stated.

Some of the questions raised by the panel:

- Is it possible for Russia to join NATO?
- Why are the possibilities not being fully used? Is there a way to do so?
- Which are the core issues causing the mistrust?
- What are the most important elements in NATO-Russia practical cooperation?



Panel #3: Shared Neighbourhood, Common Problems? From the Post-Soviet Space to the Middle East

Tomáš Karásek, Chief Analyst of the Research Center, Association for International Affairs (AMO)

Frank Umbach, Associate Director of the European Centre for Energy and Resource Security, King's College, London; Senior Associate and Head of the Programme 'International Energy Security', Centre for European Security Strategies; Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council

Taşansu Türker, Associate Professor, Ankara University

The third panel tackled the **economic problems** of the relationship which are connected mainly with other regional players and gas and oil prices. Russian economic outlook is not particularly rosy. Although president Putin promised to diversify the Russian economy, he did not keep up to the promise as dependence of the state budget on energy revenues increased to current 50%. It is therefore clear that oil and gas issue play a crucial role in the Russian policy towards countries in the shared neighbourhood, especially Turkmenistan or Ukraine.

But although the share of **energy revenues** in Russian budget is rising, the share of Russian energy on the European energy market is decreasing. Last year, after a long time, Russia was not even the main importer of gas into the European Union (it was replaced by Norway). In the last decade, its share fell from 40% to 25% today. This development makes the Kremlin uneasy, especially more when they realize the potential of shale gas or other providers such as Turkmenistan which has the fourth largest gas reserves in the whole world. The competition on gas market will become more intense in the upcoming years than it was anytime in the past

The status of **Iran** is very interesting in this regard. Although Russia as well as the West have common interest in preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities, Russians are more than comfortable with the current, rather hostile, status quo and definitely don't want to solve the Iranian issue in future years. Why so? Iran has gas reserves of almost the same size as Russia and it could be sold in Europe for much lower price, relieving the necessity of buying overpriced gas from Russia. Moreover, in case of agreements between Iran and Europe, the gas from Turkmenistan could be transported through Iran and thus the European market will be even **less dependent on Russia**. That scenario is a horror story for Moscow. It was also noted that Russian security policy lacks attempts to **build trust with neighbours**. Instead, Russia is creating and financing a net of organizations in the surrounding eastern countries to promote its own interests and to lobby for inclination to the Russian side and not the EU and NATO respectively.



Conference Report 2/2014

NATO and Russia: Geopolitical Competition or Pragmatic Partnership?

–
March 2014

Another important topic of the third panel was the planned **Eurasian Union**. According to the speakers, such union is not perceived by Kremlin only as an economic coalition but more as a complex Alliance comparable to the EU. However, it is a question whether Kazakhstan or Belarus will be willing to lose some of their power to new Russian influence; most likely they will not.

But just as Russia is planning to strengthen its ties to the Eastern Europe, the EU is planning the same through the **Eastern Partnership**. And just as the EU may see the Eurasian Union as a threat and spreading of Russian influence, Russia regards the Eastern Partnership in exactly the same negative way.

A very interesting point was raised towards, touching on the **basis of a civilisation**. What are the western values? Social state? Market economy? Secularization? Democracy? What if a fully functional civilization of Eurasian Union emerges on the basis of all of these except for democracy? Will that be enough for the West to establish cooperation? That is a question that will be of great importance in the future years.

It is also important to realize that Russian domestic policy is rather authoritarian, but Putin **regime brought stability** to the Russian people and stability is security. Moreover, especially the middle class in Russian society is currently living a western way of life in prosperity. With security and prosperity, the lack of some democratic procedures may actually bother the Russians much less than it bothers the western world.

Last but not least, the issue of **Ukraine** was tackled. Ukraine has always been a crucial country for policy of president Putin. Furthermore, we should realize that Russia with its atomized society is an **imperial state, not a nation state**. And that is why it will never let Ukraine to leave its sphere of influence. Now, two months after the conference we can see that these predictions were right.

Some of the questions raised by the panel:

- What is the real purpose of the Eurasian Union?
- How big is the role of gas in the EU-Russia relation?
- Should we still perceive Russia as an empire?
- Is Russia going to pursue its dreams about being an empire? By what means?



Conference Report 2/2014

NATO and Russia: Geopolitical Competition or Pragmatic Partnership?

–
March 2014

Final Conclusions

- There is a huge discrepancy in identities as NATO and Russia are based on different ideas.
- Former parts of the USSR or the Soviet empire could easily get rid of the Soviet idea as it was imported to them, but the Russians still have hard time shedding it.
- Russia is a strongman getting weaker every year.
- Security of the regime and security of the people are two different concepts and current rulers of Russia likely put their own power before the prosperity of the nation.
- Small steps of practical cooperation are the key according to most speakers; however, bold move such as offering Russia full NATO membership may also be an option.
- Both sides, NATO and Russia, should end the seditious rhetoric against each other.
- It takes strategic patience to build mutual trust.
- Russia should once again consider whether NATO really is an enemy.
- The opportunities are huge and it is up to both actors to realize that working together might be the way to succeed in the “Asian century”.
- Economic issues, namely gas and oil revenues, must be taken into consideration when making political decisions.
- Eurasian Union and Eastern Partnership may be perceived as threats by each other.
- Russia still remains an imperial state and until NATO accepts this idea, its efforts will come in vain, because it takes much longer time to change the identity of people and current Russian identity is still connected to the era of Cold War and to the age of Soviet empire.



Asociace
pro mezinárodní
otázky
Association
for International
Affairs

Conference Report 2/2014

NATO and Russia: Geopolitical Competition or Pragmatic Partnership?

–
March 2014

ASSOCIATION FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (AMO)

Association for International Affairs (AMO) is a preeminent independent think-tank in the Czech Republic in the field of foreign policy. Since 1997, the mission of AMO has been to contribute to a deeper understanding of international affairs through a broad range of educational and research activities. Today, AMO represents a unique and transparent platform in which academics, business people, policy makers, diplomats, the media and NGO's can interact in an open and impartial environment.

In order to achieve its goals AMO strives to:

- formulate and publish briefings, research and policy papers;
- arrange international conferences, expert seminars, roundtables, public debates;
- organize educational projects;
- present critical assessment and comments on current events for local and international press;
- create vital conditions for growth of a new expert generation;
- support the interest in international relations among broad public;
- cooperate with like-minded local and international institutions.

RESEARCH CENTER

Founded in October 2003, the AMO's Research Center has been dedicated to pursuing research and raising public awareness of international affairs, security and foreign policy. The Research Center strives to identify and analyze issues crucial to Czech foreign policy and the country's position in the world. To this end, the Research Center produces independent analyses; encourages expert and public debate on international affairs; and suggests solutions to tackle problems in today's world. The Center's activities can be divided into two main areas: first, it undertakes [research and analysis](#) of foreign policy issues and comments on [AMO blog](#); and second, it fosters dialogue with the policy-makers, expert community, and broad public.

FOLLOW US!

