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# Policy Paper 5/2013

Destined to Cooperate?

NATO and Russia between Power, Identity and Institutions

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December 2013

## Destined to Cooperate? NATO and Russia between Power, Identity and Institutions

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## Summary and Recommendations

- Shifts in the global distribution of power provide a window of opportunity for strengthening NATO-Russia cooperation. Both sides can expect to end up on the losing side in the ‘Asia century’, and weakening their global position with mutual conflict seems unwise and unproductive.
- Unfortunately, during the post-Cold War years, both Russia and Europe (including NATO) have often continued painting each other as an antagonist. For Putin, the construction of a new, anti-Western national identity has become an important component of the legitimization of his regime. In Europe, political leaders have conveniently forgotten how complex and difficult the process of transformation is, especially in Russia with its troubled history. Calm insistence on core values and norms along with strategic patience is thus the best advice for Europe, represented both by the EU and NATO.
- Established institutional ties between NATO and Russia may function, but they do not hold enough transformational promise. In order to finally and irrevocably depart from the post-Cold War mentality, NATO should seriously consider offering Russia full membership. Such a step, implemented in a serious, politically binding manner, could deliver numerous benefits for the Alliance, including the possibility to resolve conflicts in the shared neighbourhood and boost its global standing.



## Structural Approach to NATO-Russia Relationship

Lovers of metaphors could compare the NATO-Russia relationship to a roller coaster: its cyclical oscillation between ups and downs has become folklore of sorts in European and international politics. From the Western perspective, Russia – unlike its former communist satellites in Central and Eastern Europe – has never lived up to the liberalizing promise aroused by Gorbachev and Yeltsin in their early days. For the Russians, the Alliance has never surpassed the menacing shadow of an anti-Soviet, pro-American, and increasingly expansionist bloc which threatens the interests and influence of their country, pictured in popular imagination as one of the global great powers.

The relationship is often analyzed through the prism of policies of individual national leaders, reactions to specific events or by following procedures developed throughout the years of post-Cold War interactions. This paper takes a different perspective, casting the NATO-Russia relations against the matrices of power, identity and institutions, reflecting the three dominant streams of international relations theory: realism, liberalism and constructivism. The objectives of the paper are not theoretical, though. It uses the concepts' basic tenets to provide a synthetic structural explanation of the relationship. The aim is to find proverbial windows of opportunity in the three structures and use these insights to formulate practical, long-term recommendations which could make the NATO-Russia relationship less conflict-prone and more sustainable.

## Where Global Trends Clash with Local Power Politics

Global trends of late have not been kind to the Euro-Atlantic community or Russia. The discourse of 'rising Asia' or even 'Asia-Pacific century' may well be overblown, but the underlying reality is clear: especially Europe (Russia included) has been and will be on the losing side of the shift of global balance of power. While the continuing slide in international standing and its implications should not to be exaggerated, they inevitably mean, if the trends hold, that within a decade or two, the Euro-Atlantic, European or Russian voices and influence in the international community will count for substantially less than they do today.

While this is no cause for alarmism, NATO and Russia need to take the developments into account. For the West, the freewheeling 1990s, ripe with dreams of liberal democracy's final victory or Europe as the next superpower, are most likely over. The U.S. is still unassailable in its military might and has acted more dynamically to counter the impacts of the 2008 financial crisis. But it has become apparent that the will of both the American elite and its citizens to indulge in a proactive, transformational global policy has expired, as the latest edition of Pew Research Center's and CFR's *America's Place in the World* convincingly illustrates. And while the 'big three' European NATO members still figure among the top



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international defence spenders, Europe as a whole has not been able to overcome or even narrow the capabilities gap which separates it from the U.S., despite repeated commitments both through NATO and the EU.

Russia has seen its fortunes rise at least economically in the past several years, giving its leaders confidence to present the country as a dynamic antidote against the anaemic levels of growth in the rest of Europe. However, the image of a strong, resolute great power belies cracks which hide just below the surface. Despite all effort, the country's current leadership has not been able to wean Russia off its dependence on the export of oil and natural gas, once again proving that being rich in resources stifles true resourcefulness. Russian armed forces may still belong to the world's most numerous, but various indicators, from their performance in the war with Georgia to the pitiful situation of recruits, cast a doubt on their efficiency. Russia has perfected the art of projecting its military image through occasional spectacular actions like sending nuclear-armed bombers to Iceland, but even in military domain it counts for less and less in global comparison. Coupled with grisly figures on the state of public health, life expectancy and demographic forecasts, Russia clearly faces more troubles than its carefully cultivated strongman image allows.

Based on this sketchy assessment, Russia and NATO have more reasons to cooperate than compete. From a pure balance-of-power point of view, it does not make much sense for Russia to balance against Europe and the transatlantic alliance with a steadily strengthening China in its back. China already spends more than twice as much as Russia on defence, and for its bustling economy the Russian counterpart is no serious match. Moreover, the PRC has assertively gained access to Central Asia, in a way that is no less disruptive to traditional Russian interests than the European Union's and NATO's inroads into the eastern neighbourhood.

Where do these trends leave the NATO-Russia relationship? At first sight, both sides should be motivated to cooperate, since the 'rise of Asia' comes at their shared expense. While not being a direct cause of concern to NATO as an organization, the global power shift clearly matters to the West as a whole, and it seems unnecessary and unconstructive to deal with the challenge presented by new Asian powers while simultaneously prolonging 'cold peace' with Russia. As for Russia, while it may be tempted to utilize the U.S.-China antagonism as a cloak behind which it continues its *reconquista* of the 'lost' parts of former Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, a policy which antagonizes Europe and NATO while relying on Chinese benevolence seems strangely miscalculating in its reading of both actors.

Russia should be aware that Europe, NATO included, wants nothing more than a sustainable, complex, lasting deal which would finally overcome the Cold War divide. Such an understanding would secure the two sides' mutual support and help in a world which may keep on turning increasingly hostile to its interests and goals. Unfortunately, both sides have



effectively closed the doors to strengthening mutual cooperation by putting themselves in the position of the antagonist ‘Other’.

## Who We Are: Overcoming the Identity-Expectations Gap

In a different, more idealistic world, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and other countries within the shared neighbourhood might find themselves at a lucky intersection of amicably competing economic interests, using their traditional business links created during the Soviet times while profiting from the transfer of legal and administrative practices and new opportunities presented by the European Union, as well as integration in a NATO-centred and Russia-endorsed security system. Current events in Ukraine remind us all too painfully of the contrast between this rosy picture and harsh reality. After an initial period of warming up to each other during the beginning of 1990s, Europe (featuring both the EU and NATO) and Russia have effectively reverted to treating each other as negative role models, intruders in each other’s sphere of influence and representatives of unwelcome, at times hostile values.

In the case of Russia, the abuses of NATO’s and EU’s image are easier to portray. Putin’s regime has gradually adopted a position which paints the Alliance and the Union as challenges to Russia’s interests in the ‘near abroad’ and threats to the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. New Russian identity, coined by the proponents of the regime, from Putin at the top to the hapless new pioneers of the *Nashi* youth movement at the bottom, sticks to the ‘modernist’ mindset which equals security to strength, secrecy and suspiciousness. In reality, of course, the rhetoric of tough, patriotic Russia has become a key element in the propaganda aimed at upholding the security not of the state but of the regime which, in every meaning of the term, owns it. From this perspective, NATO’s and EU’s expansion into the former Soviet satellites and even component parts of USSR are interpreted as a zero-sum game, with Russia on the losing side – hence the recent ‘counteroffensive’ in connection with EU’s Eastern Partnership summit.

Europe, be it through NATO or the EU, is not completely blameless for the current state of affairs. Not because it keeps on insisting on the importance of the rule of law and human rights, or because it publicly opposes the imprisonment of the Pussy Riot or other excesses. Not even for its effort to perpetuate its ‘eastern drive’ through various association processes. Europe’s main fault stems largely from a typical Hayekian good intention which has inadvertently led to depressing results. Towards post-Soviet Russia (and the post-Soviet space in general), Europe has exhibited surprisingly little patience with its transformation processes. NATO and the EU have exhibited seemingly bottomless largesse when dealing with openly authoritarian or dictatorial regimes in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf or North Africa; and yet, when it came to Russia, the expectations bar has been set unreasonably high.



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Too quickly did European leaders forget that Russian identity has for centuries been formed (and disfigured) by waves of external invaders, culminating in the brutality of World War II. While the Czech or the Polish were able to cast away communism as imported evil, for many, perhaps most Russians the Soviet days represent a period of national pride when the country competed on par with the greatest power in history. Putin's *equipe* is certainly using the whole array of dirty tricks and brutal moves to remain in power, but it is not a dictatorial regime and it still does enjoy support of large sections of the population. The Russian identity it has coined may be twisted, but it is not totally out of sync with the feelings of ordinary citizens. Put simply, Europe cannot reasonably expect the Russians to become more European by fiat.

NATO's (and, naturally, the European Union's) approach to Russia should therefore be characterized by strategic patience. Russia is too big a nation to be susceptible to regime change induced from the outside. Europe should hence adopt a double strategy which simultaneously seeks to improve the lot of ordinary Russians while making it clear to the regime it does not attempt to overthrow it. This is a tough choice, difficult to sell both to key domestic audiences and to the Russian representatives. Moreover, such a policy would need to involve a difficult balancing act of providing assurances to partners like Georgia while not proceeding with their accession if it threatens the relations with Russia. Patience is in very short supply in contemporary electoral politics, but vis-a-vis Russia with its deep-seated self-understanding as a unique, proud nation, it is the only strategy which can breed success.

## **Beyond the NATO-Russia Council, towards Russian Accession**

If power defines the boundaries of the playing field, and identity helps uncover the core motives of the players, institutions can be understood as a mechanism through which the game operates. So, is the existing institutional infrastructure of the NATO-Russia relationship sufficient? The existence of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) seems to provide a firm basis for a positive reply, and indeed, the Alliance officially praises the institution for its "unprecedented intensity of contacts and informal consultation in many different fields, conducted in a friendly and workmanlike atmosphere." It is true that cooperation on various topics such as the fight against terrorism and narcotics, joint exercises or the logistics of the campaign in Afghanistan have managed to help overcoming the heritage of previous enmity.

Nevertheless, NRC misses two important features which can be considered crucial from the point of view which emphasize the role of institutions in international relations. Firstly, an 'associated institution', such as the NATO-Russia Council, can only offer partial socialization. If the goal is to overcome historically strained relations between the Alliance and its Russian partner, then a dense web of working groups or joint exercises simply do not



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suffice. What is needed is permanent participation in the internal workings of the organization which has a much higher potential to influence and gradually reshape the foundation of the participants' interests, goals and ideas.

Secondly, the NATO-Russia Council still formally smacks of a joint stewardship of a divided house, akin to the role of the original Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe. What NATO and Russia truly need is a symbolic gesture which would signify that the era of Cold War is finally over. Despite overt pragmatism on Russia's side and suspicion of Russian motives within NATO (at least among some of its members), such a symbolic move could generate positive externalities far behind its limited formal meaning. Paradoxically, the Cold War has not achieved a notable, universally recognized 'closure', and a move towards more intense NATO-Russia cooperation could serve this goal rather well.

The only step with enough weight to bring about the two aforementioned positive effects is Russia's accession to the Alliance. Given the current state of mutual relations, such a proposition might seem odd, impractical, or even immoral from the Western perspective, given the contours of Putin's regime. On the other hand, the idea carries one major advantage over alternative approaches which envision some sort of muddling through the current institutional framework: It has not been seriously tested yet. NATO has never unequivocally, seriously and with adequate political and institutional commitment signalled to Russia that it is welcome and that its future membership is on the Alliance's agenda.

What makes this option alluring are its potential positive spinoffs at various levels. First of all, a committed NATO policy supporting Russian membership would substantially and irreversibly undercut the political value of anti-NATO, anti-American and anti-European voices in Russian politics. That the Alliance can still be painted as an enemy in Russia owes not only to the fact that its image, goals and activities are being cynically manipulated, but also to its own ambiguity towards the former enemy. In its own reading, NATO has done all it could, including the invitation to participate in the Partnership for Peace or EAPC and the establishment of NRC itself. Nevertheless, given the particularities of Russian identity, as discussed above, this simply might not have been enough for the Russians to accept the cooperative mode of interactions without losing face. Full membership provides the ultimate 'carrot', and NATO should seriously consider waving it. For the Russian elite and population, becoming a member of the world's strongest political-military bloc might be a lure too tasty to resist.

Secondly, Russia's accession, or even the start of the negotiations, can be expected to have a major positive impact on the shared neighbourhood. Countries like Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia, which feel trapped between the two sides, would see a clear path towards resolving their international status; countries like Belarus would be hard-pressed to reconsider their



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positions. Also the European Union would benefit – its own enlargement process may never get a chance to reach so far to the east but the geopolitical opposition to its activities from Russia would inevitably diminish.

Thirdly, NATO with Russia as a member would suddenly be catapulted to a new level of global prominence. Geographically, it would gain land access to the regions of Central or Northeast Asia. Of course, some of the new borders would be fraught with dangers and challenges, and indeed the position of the new NATO neighbours (with China being the most important one) would have to be taken into account. However, NATO has been struggling to find a new meaning ever since the end of Cold War – with Russia in, it would get a chance to become a truly global, trans-Eurasian organization with a global reach, effectively connecting the security space of the Euro-Atlantic region with the Pacific area. Amid fears of decreasing relevance of NATO for the United States, this would provide a powerful positive antidote.

By absorbing Russia, NATO would also become an unassailable military (and, of course, nuclear) bloc, alleviating fears of the implications of China's rise. U.S. policy towards China has long exhibited a strong undercurrent of fear – fear of one day realizing that China has become the stronger actor in the dyad. With Russia firmly in the Euro-Atlantic camp, the policy towards the PRC might become more relaxed, thus opening space for China's full integration into the global system.

Finally, alignment with Russia would open the Alliance new leverage over conflict zones and problematic actors. Naturally, different opinions would persist between Russia and other NATO members, but the manner of resolving disputes within the Alliance, among its members, tends to be qualitatively different. The possibility of bringing current NATO members and Russia closer on issues like the Middle East conflict, Iran or the Arab Spring could bring about radical transformation of international politics in these hotspots.

Naturally, all these outputs would only come gradually, and are apparently dependent on deep transformation of Russia. What the argument aims at is outlining a future worth creating and fighting for. No matter how eccentric the vision seems, the first step towards its realization – i.e., the decision to formally and unequivocally invite Russia to join NATO – could become a real game changer in the relationship between the two partners.

## Conclusion: NATO-Russia Partnership Reinvigorated

NATO and Russia are not a perfect match. Due to historical resentments and continuing differences in interests, the two parties often seem eager to relive the 'glory days' of Cold War, rather than uphold the new modus vivendi. But despite aggressive moves by Putin's





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regime, aimed at re-establishing Russian control in the ‘near abroad’, and Europe’s impatient search for the signs of further democratization in Russia, shifts in the global distribution of power and the established tradition of institutionalized cooperation will most likely keep bringing the two sides to cooperative solutions of their disputes.

However, this is not good enough. If NATO and Russia truly want to overcome the past enmity of the Cold War era, they should level the playing field. In order to do that, NATO should consider offering Russia full membership in the organization. This may seem a step too far, too soon, but its implementation could provide a new basis on which to build the future NATO-Russia partnership. Perhaps, when small, measured steps do not bring about expected outcomes, the time has come to make a bold move instead.



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