

NATO-Russia Relations 2010- 16: from Cooperation to Deterrence

Academic Essay

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Abstract: This essay explores the development in the NATO-Russia relations between the two NATO Summit in Lisbon 2010 and NATO Warsaw Summit 2016 and analyses how the relations changed in context of the recent events in Ukraine. Finally, it contrasts the implications and outcomes of the two NATO summits for the NATO-Russia relations. While doing so, the paper describes the complexity of NATO-Russia relations from the historical perspective, analyses the outcomes of the Lisbon, Wales and Warsaw summits of the North Atlantic Alliance and outlines the current prospects for the partnership between NATO and the Russian Federation.

Keywords: NATO, Russian Federation, 2010 NATO Lisbon Summit, 2014 NATO Wales Summit, 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit, NATO-Russia Council, 2010 NATO Strategic Concept, Readiness Action Plan

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Introduction

This essay is going to explore the development in the NATO-Russia relations between the two very different moments in the history of bilateral relations represented by the NATO Summit in Lisbon 2010 and NATO Warsaw Summit 2016, analyse how the relations changed in context of the recent events in Ukraine and finally contrast the implications and outcomes of the two NATO summits for the NATO-Russia relations. During the last 25 years, the NATO-Russia relations made a dynamic progress that was recently seriously harmed by the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea and the Russian (still ongoing) support for the so-called pro-Russian separatists in the East of Ukraine. In March 2014, the NATO-Russia relations entered “*the deepest crisis since the end of the Cold War*” (Sputnik 2014), when NATO suspended all “*practical cooperation*”, while it “*kept channels for communication with Russia open*” (NATO 2016b). On the other hand, the relations between the Russian Federation and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation looked completely differently six years ago. Even if the NATO-Russia relations always faced their own challenges – at that time particularly cyber security or the territorial integrity of Georgia – thanks to the so-called ‘Reset Policy’ of the Obama Administration,¹ the NATO-Russia focused on commonalities and practical issues rather than the differences. This fact was also reflected in the Lisbon Summit Declaration and the latest NATO Strategic Concept from 2010 respectively (NATO 2010a, NATO 2010b).

The following lines are first going to briefly describe the history of the NATO-Russia relations and their crucial moments before 2010. Secondly, the paper is going to elaborate on the NATO Lisbon Summit and its most important outcomes for the NATO-Russia agenda. Finally, the last section is going to be devoted to the latest NATO Summit in Warsaw, its implications for the partnership between NATO and Russia and the current problems and challenges of the bilateral relations. While describing and analysing the development of mutual relations, the essay has in mind the following questions: “*How did the annexation of Crimea and the Russian aggressive foreign policy in its neighbourhood affect the NATO-Russia relations?*”, “*What were the key differences between the NATO Summits in 2010 and 2016?*” and “*What are the possible prospects of the NATO-Russia relations based on the past development?*”.

¹ In February 2009, the US Vice-President Joe Biden claimed that the US-Russia relations require a “Reset Button“ (Whitlock 2009).

Brief history of the NATO-Russia relations

First partner contacts between the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the Russian Federation were established during the 1990 London Summit, when NATO and the then Soviet Union (in fact the Warsaw Pact) signed the declaration stating: “*We are no longer adversaries and reaffirm our intention to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.*” (NATO 2016b). After dissolution of the USSR, the relations between West and the Russian Federation quickly developed and in 1994 Russia became the first country to be included in the ‘Partnership for Peace’ (PfP) cooperation program of NATO. Another breakthrough was achieved in 1997, when the Russian President Boris Yeltsin and the NATO leaders signed the ‘NATO-Russia Founding Act’. The Founding Act constituted a framework of cooperation founded on the provisions of peace, democracy and security in the EuroAtlantic area. Most importantly, both sides pledged to get rid of violence as a means of solving conflicts and committed to building partnership based on principles of human rights and civil liberties (Russel 2016).

However, a real milestone in the NATO-Russia partnership came in 2002, when both parties established a privileged partnership symbolised by the newly created ‘NATO-Russia Council’ (NRC), a consensus-based body with consulting function. From that moment, NATO and Russia were supposed to “*work together in the areas of common interest and stand together against common threats and risks to our security*” (NATO 2016b). The partnership materialised in numerous areas, such as the counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics trainings and support for the ISAF Mission in Afghanistan or peace-keeping missions in the Balkans and many other issues over the years (Russel 2016). This type of mutually beneficial partnership was pushed by the USA under the leadership of George W. Bush, who pursued the cooperation with Russia especially on the War on Terror announced by the USA after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Nevertheless, the privileged cooperation between NATO and the Russian Federation was seriously affected by the US invasion of Iraq already in 2003 and later even more significantly by the Russian revisionism following the speech of Vladimir Putin at the Munich Security Conference 2007. Then, Russia embarked on the path of assertive foreign policy actions that could be first detected in Estonia hit by the Russian cyber-attack in 2007. In 2008, Russia continued with the aggression in its neighbourhood, when it disproportionally reacted to the Georgian-Ossetian in August 2008. In both cases, Russia acted against the basic principles of the NATO-Russia partnership enshrined in the Paris and Rome Declarations of 1997 and 2002.² Despite these facts on the ground, the US

² Kadri Liik and Merle Maigre (2016) are much more sceptical towards the NATO-Russia privileged relations and claim that dialogue between NATO and Russia in the NRC “*never*

Administration of the newly elected president Barack Obama still wished to promote cooperation with the Russian regime and pushed for the so-called ‘Reset-Policy’ starting a new page of the US-Russia relations in 2009.³

NATO Lisbon Summit

The previous section strived to illustrate the context in which the NATO Lisbon Summit in November 2010 attended by the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev took place. Happening in rather optimistic period of the US-Russia and NATO-Russia relations, the Lisbon Summit Declaration brought some important implications for the relations with the Russian Federation (NATO 2010b). Among them, it is essential to underline the initiative of NATO to invite Russia to cooperate on the issues of common interests, namely the ballistic missile defence system in Europe, a long-term bone of contention between the USA and Russia (Art. 2 and 38). Moreover, the Declaration proposed to build “*a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia*” (Art. 23). Even if, NATO called on Russia “*to meet its commitments with respect to Georgia*” having in mind above all the territorial integrity of Georgia, it also welcomed the progress made by the cooperation, specifically the ‘Joint Review of 21st Century Common Security Challenges’. The Joint Review identified concrete examples of potential areas for cooperation, such as support for withdrawal of the Allied troops from Afghanistan and struggle against drug-trafficking, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction and many others (Art. 23).⁴ Furthermore, NATO proposed to cooperate under the framework of the OSCE in regards to information-sharing, transparency measures or arms-control regime. Therefore, it can be concluded that NATO attempted to overcome the mutual disagreements and focus on “*dialog and cooperation (...) by building trust, mutual confidence, transparency, predictability and mutual understanding*” (Art. 23). In general, the agenda connected to the Russian Federation constituted rather small portion of the Lisbon Declaration.

Similarly, the NATO Strategic Concept adopted at the 2010 Lisbon Summit included only few direct references to Russia. Russia was mentioned only in association with the missile defence system in Europe (Art. 19), weapons of mass destruction and their reduction (Art. 26), the NRC and its importance for maintaining peace, stability and security in the EuroAtlantic area (Art. 33),

materialised as intended”. They claim that both sides expected the NRC to be something else and their visions never really matched.

³The NRC stopped working after the Georgian-Russian August War, but it resumed cooperation in March 2009.

⁴The New START between the USA and the Russian Federation was concluded in April 2010 and the agreement proposed to reduce the number of strategic nuclear missile launchers by half.

and practical cooperation based on the previous legal documents from Paris and Rome (Art. 34). However, in all these areas, the collaboration with Russia was stressed as essential for achieving the goal. Therefore, it may be assumed that the NATO-Russia relations in 2010 went through dynamic development focused on the short-term gains, while trying to overcome the long-term structural problems, such as the different understanding of the NRC or security situation in Europe, including the ballistic missile system (even if there NATO tried to make concessions in effort to accommodate Russian objections).

NATO Warsaw Summit

In contrast to the “dialogue and cooperation” of the NATO Lisbon Summit, the situation after 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea and the Russian aggression in Donbas dramatically changed. Over the span of two years, NATO adopted a new strategy on Russia that could be labelled as “deterrence and dialogue” announced during the Munich Security Forum in February 2016 by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (Liik and Maigre 2016).⁵ No matter how new the strategy might sound, it is actually a Cold War concept adopted in 1967 by the NATO Harmel Report that then institutionalised the dual-track approach towards the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block united under the Warsaw Pact (Francois 2016).⁶ The dual-track policy on Russia represents a compromise between two different stances on Russia within the Alliance, including the CEE’s tough and uncompromising position and the rather more accommodating “open for dialogue” opinion shared by some members of the Alliance located further from the Russian borders. Therefore, the outcome of the discussion is both to “*suspend practical civilian and military cooperation with Russia*” and “*channels for communication remain open*” (NATO 2016b).

In practice, both approaches had their own implications for the NATO-Russia relations. First line was reflected in the ‘Readiness Action Plan’ (RAP) adopted by the Alliance at the NATO Summit in Wales that was reviewed in Warsaw after two years (NATO 2016c). The RAP included two sets of tools: ‘Assurance Measures’ and the ‘Adaptation Measures’. While the first set of measures concentrated on the short- and mid-term actions to *assure* the population of the NATO Eastern flank and Turkey about the Alliance’s commitments (namely Art. 5 of the Washington Treaty) to

⁵ “Deterrence and dialogue” strategy on Russia was at the NATO Warsaw Summit replaced the older concept of “Deterrence from distance” typical for its lack of NATO capabilities in the states of the Eastern flank (Gressel 2016).

⁶ Some authors call the strategy also “defence and dialogue” (Liik and Maigre 2016, Francois 2016).

deter any potential aggression against them,⁷ the second focused on the long-term adaptation of the Alliance to the Russian aggressive foreign policy (NATO 2016c). The Adaptation Measures proposed numerous reforms of the NATO's forces, command structure and improvement of the NATO's ability to react swiftly to the military threats from the East and South. Specifically, the measures comprised of enlargement and improvement of the 'NATO Response Forces' (NRF), creation of the so-called "Spearhead Force" ('Very High Readiness Joint Task Force' – VJTF) and establishment of the small multilateral NATO headquarters in the NATO member countries of the Eastern flank (the Baltic states, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia).⁸ In addition to that, Alliance proposed to enhance the 'Multinational Corps Northeast Headquarters' in the Polish city of Szczecin, establish similar headquarters in Romania and also set up a new 'Joint Logistics Support Group Headquarters', among others.

The second line was represented by the NATO-Russia Council that met after two years on April 20, 2016 and discussed three crucial questions: Ukraine and Minsk II Agreement, transparency and risk-assessment and issues connected to Afghanistan (Recknagel 2016). Even if the mutual disagreements and mistrust was not overcome, the meeting constituted an important step forward re-establishing basic lines of communication. Since April 2016, the NRC met three more times and the discussions between the Secretary General (respectively the Deputy Secretary General) and the Russian leaders were held on regular basis.

Except for that, the 2016 Warsaw Communiqué delivered several more important implications for the NATO-Russia relations (NATO 2016a). Among them, it is essential to mention the 'Initial Operational Capability of the NATO's Ballistic Missile Defence' and even more importantly the 'Enhanced Forward Presence'. The Enhance Forward Presence is considered the most important outcome of the Warsaw Summit enhancing the deterrence and defence of the Alliance and increasing the strategic presence of NATO in its Eastern flank. Built on the rotational basis and led firstly by the USA, Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom, the four battalion-sized multinational battlegroups present in the Baltic countries and Poland represent an act of solidarity with the Eastern members of the Alliance.

⁷ These measures include for example the air-policing patrols, ground troops on rotational basis and deployed for trainings, maritime patrols or military exercises in the NATO's Eastern flank dealing with crisis management and collective defence (NATO 2016c).

⁸ The Readiness Action Plan has been a major drive for the 'Deterrence and Defence posture' reviewed by the Alliance in 2012 and further strengthened in 2016 (NATO 2016d).

Current problems and challenges

Thanks to the above-described complex of measures, the NATO Warsaw Summit is generally assessed as a success on the way to the next NATO Brussels Summit in 2017. As expected, the Russian reaction was not positive, rather the opposite. The NATO-Russia relations were seriously affected by NATO's relations with Ukraine and Georgia that were both confirmed as strong during the Summit.⁹ What is more, Russia was openly discussed much more frequently than during the NATO Summit in Newport (Hujerova 2016).

Among the challenges for the NATO-Russia relations, there is the “deterrence and dialogue” strategy of NATO on Russia standing at the first place. The fact that the NATO strategy is rather vague means that it can be interpreted by each member of the Alliance on its own terms and therefore misused by the Russian Federation while playing its traditional “divide-and-rule” games (Hujerova 2016). Moreover, there are no clear guidelines for deterrence either and each of the NATO member-state must determine its own approach to it. This is going to be a concern for the Alliance. Another major challenge for NATO when dealing with Russia is the scope of the threat and limited capacities of the Alliance that now must allocate its resources in the NATO Southern flank, including Turkey, as well.¹⁰ Nevertheless, to keep the strategic presence of NATO in the Baltics relevant, the ratio between Russian and Allied capacities must be at the 1:6 threshold to make a difference (Kufcak 2016). There are numerous questions regarding the Enhanced Forward Presence that the Alliance must answer in future.

Finally, the Russian Federation is not only passively observing all the changes in NATO, but is rather actively enhancing its own capacities and military capabilities in the area as well.¹¹ Concurrently, the Russian Federation is strengthening its positions in both Crimea and Kaliningrad exclaves, increasing its capability for high intensity operations and pursuing the strategy of the ‘A2/AD’ (Anti-access / Area denial) towards the Baltic region this way raising the stakes of the NATO strategic presence in the region (Yurgens 2016). Moreover, Moscow has been skilfully making use of its nuclear capacities to threaten its neighbours and changing the military

⁹ Ukraine was even given the Comprehensive Assistance Package to reform its army capacities and align its military standards with the NATO's one.

¹⁰ The decision of the NATO Warsaw Summit to send the ‘AWACS’ (Airborne Warning and Control System) to the fight against ‘ISIS’ might in fact mean a decrease of NATO capacities in the Eastern flank (The Baltic Times 2016).

¹¹ Igor Yurgens (2016) writes that Russia has already announced that it is enlarging its military contingent in the Western military district by three new divisions (twelve battalions) and also deploying the Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad.

environment between NATO and Russia (Durkalec 2016). This requires NATO to work on the issue intensively with its Russian partner.

Last but not least, the problem of transparency, risk-assessment, mutual understanding and trust in the relations between NATO and Russia will not disappear in the near future as well. Many scholars (Monaghan 2016, Francoise 2016, Liik and Maigre 2016, McColl 2016) stress the importance of genuine discussion between NATO and Russia, for example under the NATO-Russia Council that should go beyond the “NATO+1” format that would only serve NATO to inform Russia about its decisions (Monaghan 2016). Both sides should return to the principles of the Paris and Rome Declarations from 1997 and 2002 and work on the areas of common interests while respecting each other as well. If not, the risk of military incidents causing more serious escalations is going to remain high (McColl 2016). That is why, the team of Łukasz Kulesa (2016) from the European Leadership Network proposed a set of measures how to decrease the chances of hazardous incidents in the EuroAtlantic area through employing ‘A New Plan of Actions’. Among the Plan’s recommendations they underline: 1) ensuring the existing agreements (e.g. ‘Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents on and over the High Seas’, ‘Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities’) 2) zero tolerance for reckless behaviour by military commanders, 3) expert-level dialogue on the safety, 4) work on bilateral and potentially also regional agreements focused on the safety of the EuroAtlantic space and finally 5) reactivation of the Cooperative Airspace Initiative (CAI) as possible measures to decrease the chances of NATO-Russia escalation.

Conclusion

The essay discussed the NATO-Russia relations from the 2010 NATO Lisbon Summit, when the relations seemed to be developing quite dynamically (“cooperation and dialogue”), to the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw discussing Russia in terms of “deterrence and dialogue”. Over the span of six years, Russia changed from the true strategic partner to the strategic problems of the Alliance. The NATO-Russia relations reached its turning point in March 2014, when NATO suspended all practical cooperation with Russia under the NATO-Russia Council. The NRC meetings were only resumed in April 2016 and even after that did not progress much. The business-as-usual relations, as Russia would like to see them, are simply not possible for now.

At the same time, the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales followed by NATO Warsaw Summit in 2016 strengthened the Alliance in its Eastern flank, which seriously affected the NATO-Russia relations. Even if NATO managed to implement a complex response to the Russian aggressive measure in its neighbourhood, the bilateral relations continue to be challenged by numerous issues. Among

them, the paper identified and analysed: 1) nuclear weapons and related ballistic missile defence in Europe, 2) NATO strategy of “deterrence and dialogue”, 3) limited resources of the Alliance and rising stakes by the Russian Federation and finally 4) the problem of trust, transparency and mutual understanding posed by the NATO-Russia confrontation.

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