

Conflict Studies Research Centre



**NATO Enlargement:
A Russian Outlook**

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Key Points

Whilst Russian policy on NATO enlargement is 'calmly negative', various viewpoints will continue to shape future relationships of 'constructive' dialogue and 'widening of practical cooperation':

- * the opportunistic nationalism of Duma politics
- * continuing military doubts about NATO's threatening posture
- * among intellectuals, traditionalists, westerners and pragmatists

Future issues and themes include:

- * the adapted CFE Treaty
- * Russian military presence in Georgia and Moldova
- * Belarus
- * competition in Asia and the Caucasus, priority areas for both NATO and Russia
- * peacekeeping cooperation

The ice breaking process is beginning, but Russia faces strategic geopolitical challenges for which NATO should make allowances.

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NATO Enlargement: A Russian Outlook

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On 29 March 2004 the world witnessed the fifth wave of NATO enlargement. This stage of enlargement was one of the largest-scale steps in the history of the Alliance and demonstrated not only the quantitative growth of this military-political organization, but also confirmed its qualitative shifts.

Perhaps the most heated arguments about seven new members joining NATO was expressed in Russia. The reasons for this are more or less obvious. During the whole period since the Soviet Union's collapse, the process of NATO enlargement has been perceived by many Russian officials and ordinary citizens as a potential threat to the national security of this country. Indeed, relations between NATO and Russia since 1991 have gone through periods of slump and vivacity. Nevertheless, the last several years demonstrated a significant improvement in the cooperation process in many different areas, which confirms the repudiation of old Cold War stereotypes in foreign policy. Meanwhile, considerable changes occurred within NATO, especially in evaluation of contemporary security threats, ways and means of combating them and determination of NATO's role and place in the system of international security. Obviously, the criteria used by Russia and NATO in recognition of potential threats during the Cold War now belongs to history. However, Russia looks very carefully and, at times, very suspiciously at the process of NATO enlargement and its advance towards Russian borders.

Thus, some very important questions appear. What kind of policy will be the most rational for Russia in dialogue with the Alliance? More importantly, what kind of modifications should be made in the Russian concept of national strategic development in compliance with changes that have been made within NATO? Debates and disputes on these questions do not seem to be calming among the Russian political, military and intellectual elite. On the contrary, in some respects the arguments are just heating up.

It is possible to assert with reasonable certainty that all major points of view on the problem of NATO enlargement and NATO-Russian relationships are already shaped in the minds of the Russian elite. And a circle of major problems which raise mutual concern in Brussels and in Moscow are already determined too. On one hand, we can see a relatively stable development of practical cooperation and closer connections between Russia and NATO. On the other hand, some sure-footed circumspection and distrust of NATO's policy in Eurasia remains in the minds of great numbers of Russian citizens. Such a situation, we might add, creates a condition of both instability and stasis in relations between Russia and NATO. This ambivalence might lead to increasing tension in the region.

Political Responses

Perhaps the visit of the NATO Secretary General to Moscow as soon as seven new flags had been officially raised in front of NATO Headquarters was, in some degree, a monitoring of Russian reaction to the new wave of enlargement. Of course, the visit and meetings with the Russian President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs could not resolve all the problems connected to Russian perception of NATO enlargement. Vladimir Putin did not even repeat Russian's "calmly negative" position on this issue. But at the same time, he expressed a strong hope that cooperation would be strengthened and the work of the NATO-Russia Council would be closer. This should demonstrate with reasonable certainty the Russian government's will to keep a positive dynamic in relations between the two parties.

It was the Secretary General who tried to draw some kind of distinction between "Them", people in Russia who oppose the process of enlargement, and "Us", Russian and NATO leaders. The task for "Us" was made pretty clear: "to persuade 'Them' that NATO and the process of enlargement do not pose any threat to Russia".¹ But the question of the readiness of the Russian leaders to be a part of the "Us" camp remained open.

Generally, it is possible to establish that all meetings took place in the atmosphere created during Putin's presidency. This could be identified as a policy of smoothing things over in relations with NATO. The Kremlin is trying to stay within the frameworks of "constructive dialogue" and "widening of practical cooperation". Sometimes, however, official Moscow considers it necessary to remind their partners from NATO that some problems still exist. Putin's refusal to attend NATO's Istanbul Summit might be understood as one of these reminders.

A slightly different situation appears in the Russian State Duma, however. On 31 March 2004 the Duma passed a resolution "In Connection with NATO Enlargement", which openly declared that in spite of partnership and cooperation between Russia and NATO on a wide range of directions, Russian parliamentarians reckoned that "NATO's military doctrine has an offensive character" and "the Alliance continues to press towards a global presence in different regions of the world and influence there by forceful means, passing over the UN".² Such a serious statement requires, of course, a very serious argumentation, and the experience of NATO's campaign against former Yugoslavia, in their view, is clear evidence.

However, following the logic of resolution, we may conclude that the mechanics of enlargement did not raise any censure among the Duma officials. Russia cannot exert any influence on it, and this process should therefore better be taken as irreversible. The major concern, as it comes from the tone of resolution, could be formulated as a series of questions: Will NATO demonstrate a willingness to take into account Russian anxiety about strengthening NATO's military presence in the territories of new members, close to Russian borders, and follow the course of the adapted Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE)? Will NATO be willing to recognize that Russian national interests and interests of NATO countries sometimes lie in the same regions and within the same spheres and without *mutual* concessions it is impossible to be real partners? As one of the authors of the Duma's statement (Chair of the Committee on International Affairs) Konstantin Kosachev put it, "Times of confrontation passed away but Russians still associate the image of NATO with the image of the enemy. We realize that new military structures might be established in immediate proximity to the Russian borders but we appreciate the sovereignty of new NATO member-states".³ Michael Margelov,

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Chair of the International Committee of the Russian Federation Council, has expressed approximately the same thoughts. “We need to continue cooperation with NATO, defining new rules of the game. We remain partners but we need a strong guarantee that innovations won’t be directed against us.”⁴

In fact such a point of view could be considered as moderate, having in mind the very sharp attacks on NATO expressed by so-called “patriotic forces” in the Duma, usually represented by the Communist Party and the Rodina Block. Valentin Varennikov, one of the spokesmen from Rodina, for example, accused Kosachev of “naivety” and “ultra liberalism”. “Mr Kosachev! Why do we cringe before NATO? We should pass a more categorical statement and avow openly that NATO enlargement is a threat to Russia.”⁵

One of the most glaring examples of the negative attitude towards NATO can be found in the draft resolution on NATO enlargement prepared by the Communist group in the Duma. Here we can find “the NATO military structure moving eastward, and it has an objective completely different from strengthening international security ... All the Alliance’s activity during the last few years leaves no doubts that NATO’s offensive anti-Russian character remains the same ... Concurrently, a propaganda campaign for justification of NATO’s military invasion of Russia is being prepared. NATO expansion to the east is the most serious threat to Russia since the Great Patriotic War and the Russian Federation cannot be indifferent to the growth of potential military threat.”⁶ Of course, the Communists’ assessment of the potential threat cannot be accept without taking into account their political goals and objectives. The truth is that they have lost much of their position and influence within the Duma and are now passing through a drastic identity crisis. Anti-NATO rhetoric is just an attempt to get back some of their electors, playing on widespread anti-NATO public opinion within Russian society. Even so, in my view, it is hard to imagine that such a perception of the Alliance’s enlargement can remain strong in the minds of the Russian political elite, or, furthermore, in Russian national security strategy.

Statistics at the time of enlargement showed that 44% of Russian citizens believed that NATO enlargement towards Russian borders posed a threat to Russian national security. On the other hand, according to a survey by the respectable All-Russian Centre for Monitoring Public Opinion, 33% of respondents thought that the enlargement process did not contain any threat. 9% of this “positive” group supposed that it improved Russian security. 23% had no opinion. The calmest reaction to NATO enlargement was expressed by supporters of the Liberal-Democratic Party (41%) and “Yedinaya Rossiya” (38%) of those who were absolutely sure that NATO enlargement would not reflect badly on Russian security and might even be good for Russia. At the same time, 60% of communist voters had the most negative reaction to NATO enlargement. According to the survey, 34% of respondents believed that close cooperation with NATO lay at the core of Russian national interest. An absolute majority of these people consisted of young Russians and approximately one third of citizens above 60. Only 15% felt that Russia should oppose NATO by any means possible, including creation of its own military alliance and 7% supported the idea that Russia ought to join NATO.⁷

Nevertheless, it is clear that an absolute majority of Russian parliamentarians were convinced that Russia needed to demonstrate some kind of *reaction* to the process of NATO enlargement, and that this reaction should be reinforced by making some alterations in the balance of power on the western direction. Even those who adhered closely to a moderate view on the enlargement process thought that Russia

might reconsider its nuclear strategy and strengthen its military presence close to the western border with new NATO members. Yet it seems, in my view, that the principle of realpolitik is not the best choice for Russia. In the current conditions, a quantitative strengthening of the North-Western Military District can hardly be a decisive instrument in a Russian dispute with NATO. On the contrary, such a policy could be an additional argument against Russia.

Reconsideration of Russian nuclear doctrine as a potential instrument in the present situation is also counterproductive. The least possible benefit for Russia may be obtained from reverting to the role of bugbear for the West, on the principle "If you want to occupy an important position – be scary!" It is worth remembering that some experts consider that the situation with the Russian nuclear arsenal is far from ideal because of lack of financing, and in the future it will be even worse. The tests of intercontinental ballistic missiles that took place in Russia on 17-18 February 2004 completely failed. Such an event should force Russia to rethink its military doctrine, where use of strategic nuclear weapons still occupies one of the most important positions.⁸

Military Policy

Obviously, it is very interesting for us to examine the perception of NATO enlargement among Russian military circles. Traditionally what we can see here is a conservative view, which can be defined as a legacy of the Cold War, when NATO was a major adversary for the Russian military. But today's situation does not allow us to view this perception as universal or generally accepted. The changes that have occurred in the Kremlin's policy during Putin's presidency have a special influence on the Russian Ministry of Defence and the General Staff. One of the most significant examples of this was a statement by Russian Minister of Defence Sergey Ivanov in March 2004. "NATO does not pose any threat to Russia but Moscow is really concerned about the plans for further enlargement of the Alliance. The fundamental point for both parties here is an understanding that the process of enlargement should not lead to new confrontation and dividing lines. Moreover, in Russia and in NATO people understand that security threats of the 21st Century have other sources and lie in other regions." The fact of enlargement, as we can see, still disturbs Russian MOD officials but there is nothing new in their position on this problem. All Russian concerns about this issue had been expressed repeatedly long before the seven new members joined NATO.

One of the clearest evidences is a document "Actual Tasks for Development of the Russian Military Forces", published by the Ministry of Defence in October 2003. There partnership between Russia and NATO is emphasized and at the same time some suspicions may be found in assessment of the contemporary policy of the Alliance. "Partnership between NATO and Russia remains despite some considerable discrepancies," the document says. In addition to this, it is unambiguously affirmed that the Alliance's current military doctrine is offensive in character and if NATO remains a military organization with such a doctrine, it will force Russia to "revise its military planning and rebuild military structure significantly, including changes in the nuclear strategy".⁹

At the same time there is no clear explanation in the document of what kind of changes the Alliance should undergo. It is possible to presume that freezing of the enlargement process and nondeployment of NATO's military structures on the territory of new member states would have been satisfactory to the Russian side.

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But since security of these countries is now the Alliance's responsibility, such a presumption could hardly come true because these conditions contradict the very nature of the organization. Hopefully, both Russian Ministry of Defence and the General Staff officials realize that.

Nevertheless, the attitude of the Russian military towards the NATO enlargement remains "calmly negative". There are several key questions that concern them. The first could be described in the words of Sergey Ivanov: "We can't see any connection between creating new military structures on the territories of new NATO member countries and the problems of combating international terrorism and nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, which is recognized by NATO and Russia as the highest priorities".¹⁰ In other words, for the Russian MOD the Alliance's policy and actions sometimes cannot be justified as a means of fighting the security threats the world faces today.

To such a perception we can adduce the flight of AWACS aircraft in the Latvian and Lithuanian airspace along the Baltic Sea coast and Russian borders. The Russian Baltic Navy Command understood this flight as a deep aerial reconnaissance of Russian territory and durable radar tracking of Russian military command points and air defence systems located in Smolensk and Leningrad Oblasts as well as in Belarus. The same anxiety was expressed about possible location of three-dimensional American radar stations on the Baltic States' territories. Some questions remain about NATO's refusal to allow monitoring of the new military structures by Russian experts. Finally, Russian military officials are concerned about the antiterrorist rhetoric used by NATO officials as a justification for such actions near the Russian border.

Another problem is the future of the adapted CFE Treaty, which is perceived in Russia as one of the most effective instruments for sustaining stability and balance of power in Europe. For a long time the most heated argument was about Russian maintenance of so-called flank restrictions proclaimed in the Treaty, especially in the North Caucasian and Leningrad Military Districts. After the last wave of enlargement, the Russian military are asking what will happen with flank restrictions for NATO (4,700 tanks, 5,900 armoured vehicles, 6,000 artillery systems). According to General Yu Baluyevskiy, then Deputy Chief of the General Staff, "when two flank states, Bulgaria and Romania, join NATO, we can forget about any flank restrictions for NATO because for tanks they will exceed it by 2,200, for armoured vehicles – 3,300, for artillery systems – more than 2,000. Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia didn't even sign the Treaty, so theoretically you can place there whatever you want."¹¹ Of course, one could say that quantitative lists of conventional weapons are not so useful in present conditions when they are gradually being replaced by smart bombs and space technologies. There was a time when the Russian side suggested abolishing the flank restrictions but for some western partners these restrictions are an essential part of the Treaty. "Our partners are keeping a vigilant and hard-edged watch on the Russian index for flank restrictions," Baluyevskiy said. "It is no secret that during the last few years the maintenance of the whole CFE Treaty has been reduced to one parameter: observation of Russian obligations in the flank regions," he added.¹²

However, ratification of the CFE Treaty by the East European states would not resolve the problem of balance of power in the region because CFE does not regulate sea shipping, navy and marginal levels for allocation of air forces, which is the Alliance's major striking power. Additionally the question of ratification of CFE has merged with the other issue: Russian obligations to withdraw military

contingents from Georgia and Transnistria, according to the Istanbul Agreements. Most of the Russian military are absolutely sure that the artificial linkage between the Istanbul Agreements and ratification of the CFE Treaty is illegal. According to Sergey Ivanov, ratification of CFE has no connection to those parts of the Istanbul Agreements.¹³

There is one principal difference between the Russian and Western approach towards the military presence in Georgia and Moldova. Russian officials stress that peacekeeping contingents are the only factor which is preventing armed conflict in the regions. On the contrary, western military experts as well as some NATO officials define the Russian presence as a destabilizing factor in the region. Moscow, in their view, had enough time to influence the resolution of frozen conflicts in Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan but did not do very much to make it succeed because Russia is not very interested in such a scenario. Russian military bases provide a presence in the regions where Russian politicians and businessmen have their interests. Thus, the efforts of some former Soviet republics to join NATO can be understood as attempts to reduce Russian influence there. At the same time, the strategic importance of the Southern Caucasus for transporting energy resources from the Caspian Sea makes these efforts very interesting for NATO countries. Possible NATO membership for Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Georgia will resolve the problem of stabilization and will help to secure the transfer of oil and gas from the Caspian basin to Turkey and on to Western Europe and the United States.

Meanwhile, most Russian military officers prefer to use geopolitical categories in characterizing the process of NATO enlargement. The major thesis used here is pretty simple: Russia is gradually losing its influence and power within the CIS and the process of NATO enlargement is promoting the further isolation of the Russian Federation on the Eurasian continent. Location of radar stations and early warning systems on territories close to Russia's western borders does not add any optimism to those Russians who support the geopolitical view on the issue. Some concerns have also been expressed about relocation of some NATO and US military bases from Germany to Poland and Romania. Hence, the convention of military "geopolitical" strategists that gradual NATO enlargement to the east makes the Russian position very weak in case of possible conflicts in the future. At the same time, the problem of Kaliningrad Oblast and the military infrastructure located there remains unsolved. The question of military transit has been repeatedly discussed in different bilateral meetings. Russians are afraid that possible disputes and complications in relations with the Baltic States and NATO may create a situation whereby the Russian Navy will be locked in the Kaliningrad Bay and railway traffic through Lithuania will be stopped.

Those who represent the "geopolitical" group interpreted all the Kremlin's assurances that NATO posed no threat to Russia as a lie or, at least, as shortsightedness. In the words of one of the most famous critics of NATO and the brightest representative of the "geopolitical" camp, General L Ivashov: "In fact, what we can see is not an absence of threat, it is absence of sensible geopolitical doctrine for Russia and a strategy for guaranteeing our security".¹⁴

Strengthening of military cooperation between Russia and Belarus is another specific reaction to the process of NATO enlargement. Belarus has repeatedly stressed an interest in strategic partnership with Russia. According to Belarusian strategists, military cooperation with Russia is a key element in the system of national security. Despite temporary disputes between Moscow and Minsk on the

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problem of export of Russian energy resources, Moscow is trying to calm the international arguments against Belarus. While Western European countries and the United States constantly express their concerns about human rights and democracy in Belarus, Moscow prefers to connive at these problems. The Kremlin is trying to keep Belarus as the most reliable ally in the post-soviet space and expects to play this card in any probable dispute with NATO.

Sergey Ivanov in his opening statement at a joint session of Russian and Belarusian Ministries of Defence stressed “the contemporary international situation, including the NATO enlargement process, confirmed the necessity of coordination of common measures in the political and military spheres. In such conditions, unification of Russian and Belarusian defence potentials will no doubt be one of the key factors which could affect the situation in the world.”¹⁵ Several documents which organize the technical side of cooperation have been worked out during the last few months. One of the most noticeable is the draft “Basis for functioning of the military organization of the Allied State”, a result of joint work by the Russian General Staff and the Military–Scientific Department of the Belarusian Army. The main goal is to coordinate all efforts in the development and functioning of Russian and Belarusian armed forces from one centre.

Nonetheless, according to General Baluyevskiy, “the brains of the army are voting for cooperation with NATO”. There are, of course, some impressive results achieved in this cooperation. For example, in NATO-Russian negotiations on Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) collaboration, dialogue continues on the problem of mutual status of forces, which leads to deepening of teamwork in joint exercises in Russia and NATO countries. It shows that Russian officials in the General Staff are trying to use civilized moves in their policy and the times of abrupt measures and strategic mistakes have passed away. As Sergey Ivanov said, “Russia sees its future relations with NATO as cooperation of professionals, strategic cooperation in the framework of a professional 'coalition of the winning', the members of which are able to overcome the 'cold war' thinking inertia and to jointly confront the titanic global challenge to modern civilization”.¹⁶

The Intellectuals

We can find very diverging opinions about the process of NATO enlargement among the Russian intellectual elite. On one hand, it is possible to state that perception of this process remains pretty tranquil and, in some cases, even positive. On the other hand, some experts' prognosis shows that consequences of the enlargement may seriously affect Russian and European security and may disrupt international stability on the Eurasian continent.

These different approaches fall into several groups. The first group we may call “traditional”. The logic of the “traditional” point of view on the process of NATO enlargement goes completely by the formula that NATO is a relic of the Cold War, which is somehow or other keeping a hostile position towards the Russian Federation. Supporters of the “traditional” view justify their opinion by stressing that “during the Cold War when USSR was trying to persuade western adversaries that Russians had only peaceful intentions, the western answer was that intentions should be judged by measuring military potential. Today, when NATO is persuading us of its peacefulness, we ask why is NATO's military structure still enlarging and moving towards the Russian borders?”¹⁷ Advocates of the “traditional” point of view stress that some problems which NATO faces today (eg

absence of unanimity about the long-term goals of the organization, problems with NATO's identity on the contemporary international security arena, indeterminate motion in the process of transforming the military and political structure of the Alliance, and arguments on peacekeeping operations). In other words, NATO represents an archaic structure, which does not answer to contemporary international security needs. In the "traditionalistic" view, NATO should give way to another organization that could be a more effective instrument for strengthening international security.

Another group, holding the opposite views, we may call "westerners". Within this camp NATO is a key element for securing stability and protecting the values of liberal democracy. The main thesis for this group of intellectuals is that NATO is threatening Russia only insofar as Russia wants to stay in opposition to the West. In their opinion, one of the most important strategic interests for Russia should be close partnership with NATO. The Russian political and military elite should find ways for cooperation on the basis of mutually accepted principles and goals. According to such an approach, to be a part of international democratic society as well as international security structures is the only choice for Russia because of the current international situation, which dictates dialogue with the West to assure common security in future.

Besides the need for close cooperation between NATO and Russia, there is a fair understanding among "westerners" that some Russian politicians prefer to make their careers on the so-called "field of confrontation". This can be seen as one of the most serious obstacles to true cooperation. Interestingly, some "pro-western" oriented intellectuals believe that, to some extent, the process of NATO enlargement has a harmful effect on Russia because it stimulates the activity of Russian nationalists, aimed at gradual partition from the West. NATO's move towards the Russian borders also places some obstacles in the way of military reforms because of a widespread opinion among the Russian military that this process is a threat to Russian security.

Another perception of the process of NATO enlargement we can schematically define as "pragmatic". This is a combination and assessment of several different factors: the short-term goals of the Alliance, how enlargement affects the Russian strategic environment and the future role of NATO in the Eurasian continent. "Pragmatists" represent NATO as an organization where the strongest position is occupied by the United States of America. In their view, therefore, NATO can be classified as one of the instruments for assuring US national interests and security (we may find confirmation of this thesis from time to time in the US press and publications).¹⁸

Contradictions between American and European allies, in spite of the Iraqi question, are not so serious as they might first appear. Today NATO remains the strongest political and military organization, which has appropriate global and strategic goals. Defining the character of these goals and a possible place for Russia, "pragmatically" oriented scholars focus their attention on the fact that NATO slowly but surely is gaining more and more influence in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and South Asia. This influence can be understood here as a national priority for the United States. From this point of view, the process of enlarging NATO by several new members, most of whom had a bad experience in relations with the former USSR and have strong pro-American positions, may be characterized as an injection of "fresh blood" and a step towards the achievement of the strategic goals of the Alliance and the United States. It is true that some new

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NATO members are very suspicious of Russia and expect NATO to be the guarantor of their sovereignty.

From the “pragmatic” point of view, the major trend in contemporary NATO policy is a steady process of widening the Alliance’s zone of responsibility in the key regions of Eurasia and the most important role in this is played by the United States. What we can see today is an ongoing silent process of creating NATO’s zones of responsibility in South Asia and, possibly, the Caucasus and even the Middle East, embracing countries that possess a significant amount of natural resources or may provide their territories for pipelines or transport corridors. The Asianization of NATO, according to Russian “pragmatic” experts, is one of the United States’ new strategic priorities and this may be advantageous for Russia, because it will force the United States to take the Russian factor more seriously.¹⁹

Emerging Cooperation

Further events after the May 2004 enlargement dropped new colours on the palette of bilateral relations between Russia and NATO. One of the most significant was the NATO Istanbul Summit. The presidents of Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, countries that embody some kind of “coalition of the indisposed”, were absent from the summit. As for Putin’s refusal to attend the summit, German political scientist Alexander Rahr commented: “In alphabetical order, the president of Russia would have found himself sitting at the summit between the representatives of Romania and Slovakia ... As far as Moscow is concerned, equality in the Russia-NATO Council with novices of the Alliance is difficult to swallow. Half a century ago, Russia made decisions for all these countries, and even now it considers itself a world power.”²⁰ It is hard to believe that a symbolic place between former “smaller brothers” could be the main reason why Putin missed the summit. Today’s Russian foreign policy is characterized more by using the terms of “national interest” rather than imperial power. More obvious here was the diplomatic reminder that there are unsolved disputes and disagreements on a wide range of issues, including Russia’s unenthusiastic position about NATO enlargement itself.

However, several results of the summit could shape the future dynamics of relations. It has become obvious that the enlargement process will continue and NATO defines activity in the region of the Caucasus and Central Asia as one of its highest priorities: Russia has to take that into account. A useful indication was Foreign Minister Lavrov’s reaction to the statement of Georgian president Saakashvili during the summit that his country might become a NATO member in four years; only the words “we should view this decision as a reality”.²¹ So it is possible to expect that Russian reaction on the same demarches from Ukraine or Azerbaijan would be the same.

This region, previously a traditional zone of active Russian influence and policy, now becomes and, apparently, will remain an arena for vigorous involvement of European and American allies. The recent appointment of Robert Simmons as the Special Representative of the NATO Secretary General in the Caucasus and Central Asia is the best confirmation of the seriousness of this involvement. In his interview to the Russian newspaper *Izvestia*, Simmons stressed that the region has a special status in NATO’s agenda and the Alliance will develop relations with all countries of the region based on the new form of cooperation: individual plans.²² According to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Moscow still considers this

zone as a sector of Russian strategic interest and hopes that NATO will use the experience of the UN, OSCE and the CIS in planning its policy and apply the principle of multilateralism.²³ But some Russian experts suspect that the scenarios for the Caucasus and Central Asia will look like those for the Baltic States. That's why Minister Lavrov noted during the summit: "NATO is still relying on internal instructions on planning its policy rather than on common evaluation of the security environment in one region or another".²⁴ At the same time, it is hard to imagine to what the extent experience of the UN or OSCE will be useful for military reform in the states of the region, or in bilateral efforts for developing military operational compatibility.

But there should be no misunderstanding that Russian sensitivity about NATO enlargement causes difficulties in the process of cooperation. The Russian delegation in Istanbul suggested forming a Russian peacekeeping brigade that would be fully compatible with NATO military standards. Moscow is also prepared to send its naval vessels to the Mediterranean to take part in NATO's Active Endeavour operation as part of the joint effort to combat international terrorism. And finally, Russia is proposing closer relations between NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). At the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council at the level of foreign ministers the NATO Secretary General stressed that substantial progress has been made in cooperation between two parties. Besides sharing common views on combating terrorist threats, nonproliferation, etc, great strides have been made in achieving interoperable capabilities that will allow them increasingly to act together against common threats. "Co-operation among our military forces has expanded dramatically. We have made progress toward interoperable theatre missile defence systems, and will mark another milestone in this area today. And we have enhanced our capability to co-operate in managing the consequences of terrorist attacks and natural disasters as highlighted in the successful Kaliningrad 2004 exercise," the Secretary General added.²⁵

In reality, the unsolved problems of the CFE treaty (ratified by the Russian State Duma just before the Istanbul Summit), disputes on withdrawal of Russian forces from Georgia and Moldova as well as Russian concerns about enlargement are not causing any serious NATO-Russian estrangement. In July 2004 Minister of Defence Sergey Ivanov, during his visit to England and meetings with his colleague Geoff Hoon, and later in his speech to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, highlighted that the agenda for the NATO-Russia Council in 2004 included more than 100 events and 2005 promised to be even more fruitful. And the central part of his visit was to underline those positive steps that have been made by Russia and NATO towards combating common threats, especially as anti-terrorist allies. But he also mentioned that Russian perception of enlargement remains unchanged, and in his comments that Russia still views its nuclear potential as a very important deterrence instrument we may see a hint of warning for NATO.

A few weeks later discussion on NATO enlargement and NATO-Russian relations was continued during the visit of US Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld to Russia. Besides the demonstration of the practical dimension of cooperation between the two parties, once again this meeting confirmed Russian reaction to NATO's expansion to the east as calmly negative. Answering the question whether the visit had influenced his perception of enlargement, Ivanov doubted whether the NATO alliance was going to increase its security from accepting the Baltic States as new members. After all, these are countries that "consume" rather than "produce" security, he clarified.²⁶

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The most recent splash in political and military relations was connected to the Russian visit of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe General James Jones in September 2004. The results of his meetings with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Defence and especially with now Chief of General Staff General Yuriy Baluyevskiy received extremely high evaluation from both sides. Discussions were focused mostly on practical aspects of military cooperation, particularly in combating terrorism (the visit coincided with the terrorist attack in Beslan). It was agreed to develop operational compatibility, and an exchange of intelligence information. According to General Baluyevskiy, who announced Russian intentions to strike preemptively against terrorists all over the world, Russia needs strong NATO moral support for its efforts to combat terrorism. The problem of NATO enlargement, however, was raised during the press conference and General Jones stressed that "as Supreme Allied Commander in Europe he assured (Russia) that neither NATO nor the US has any plans for building new military bases in the east".²⁷

Thus, we may say that the Russian stereotype of relations with NATO consists of several paradoxical things: on the one hand official Moscow understands that NATO influence will increase in the regions that Russia sees as vital to its national security and this situation does not fill it with any enthusiasm. Russia is ready to demonstrate its will to continue unilateral activity to sustain its power on the post-soviet space. On the other hand, the necessity of cooperation with NATO as the most powerful military-political alliance is obvious to the Kremlin. Moscow is ready to develop military capability as well as political interaction with NATO. But even here we can see some kind of ambivalent policy. For example in the field of counter-terrorism (where the views of the Alliance and Russia are almost congruent), using the words of Paul Fritch, Head of the Russia and Ukraine Relations Section in NATO's Political Affairs and Security Policy Division, "Russia says that it is international terrorism when anything happens in Chechnya, but when we are trying to discuss Chechen question from this point of view, Russia declares that this is just an internal problem but not an issue for international discussion".²⁸ Such a situation creates, of course, a certain distrust and additional concerns.

The Future

As we can see, divergent opinions about the process of NATO enlargement represent a very complicated picture of the Russian political, military and intellectual landscape. So it is possible to say that we are just at the beginning of the ice-breaking process. Russia's unchanged policy on NATO enlargement itself leads us to a conclusion that for Russia this process means more than just a quantitative extension of the Alliance towards the Russian border. Russian reaction, in my view, is a combination of two different things: on one hand it is clear for Russian officials that NATO is sustaining its influence and global presence, which bothers them as a potential threat to the national interest. On the other hand, every wave of enlargement demonstrates another triumph of NATO's ideology of collective security that is really unpleasant for Russian leaders. Nevertheless, it is possible to emphasize several factors, which will have or should have more or less constant influence on Russia's strategic path in relations with NATO for the next several years.

Impartially speaking, today's process of NATO enlargement is occurring in difficult strategic conditions for Russia. During the last several years, Russia has lost its

position within the CIS region. Firstly, Ukraine has unambiguously expressed an intention to join NATO. Of course, the Russian vector in Ukraine's foreign policy still exists but in course of time it will gradually fade away. Some western experts and NATO officers already unofficially discuss Ukraine's possibly joining NATO in the next 3-4 years.

We can see a similar situation in Georgia. The Georgian government has repeatedly confirmed their plans for integration into Euro-Atlantic security structure. These plans have met with evident approval from NATO countries, especially the United States. It is worth noting significant progress in reforming the Georgian army. G Bezhuashvili, Georgian Minister of Defence, on the eve of his recent visit to the NATO HQ, reported that he has a plan which outlines all Georgian obligations before NATO, specific terms of implementation and a detailed programme for the reform and development of the Georgian Armed Forces.²⁹ Total military personnel will be reduced from 14,000 to 10,000 and then switched to a contract basis. The Ministry of Defence will be 85% civilian, in harmony with the NATO standard, and there will be a clear line between the responsibilities of the Ministry of Defence and the military Joint Staff. Taking into account the dynamics demonstrated by Georgia in 2003, it is possible to expect that the military reform process will start in the immediate future. At the same time, the Georgian government will pursue the resolution of frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Osetia. A continuation of the Russian military presence in Georgia will cause growing tensions between the two countries and if Russia prolongs the process of withdrawing troops, it may have a serious reaction from some NATO countries.

The question of possibly joining NATO is discussed in Azerbaijan in real earnest as well. Here we are witness of constant strengthening of dissatisfaction about the Russian position on the question of another frozen conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. These plans to become a part of NATO may be identified as an Azerbaijani reaction on Russia's longstanding diplomatic inaction concerning this serious issue. Reform of the Azerbaijani armed forces, of course, is hampered by ongoing tensions with Armenia and occasional border clashes but positive dynamics may be achieved with the support of Turkey and the United States.

Uzbekistan is trying to occupy a dominating position in post-soviet Asia. This increases Uzbek contradictions with traditionally Russia-oriented Tajikistan. Militant Islamic and terrorist groups are using all available ways and means to deepen their influence in South Asia and Caucasus. Russia also faces a very difficult situation in the Far East where some border regions had become dependent on Chinese labour. Russian experts expect the quiet process of Chinese population movement to East Siberia to be intensified. Japan is gradually expanding its economic interests in the Russian Far East as well.

In such conditions, the question is not whether Russian influence can be rolled back in the years ahead, or even where – it is by how much. Hence, it is easy to explain Putin's message to the nation that the very survival of Russia as a strong state depends on economic as well as military power. And the problem here is not the imperialistic ambitions of a former superpower, as it seems from recent reports of western mass media, it is in the miserable strategic situation. Apparently, Russian efforts will be aimed at finding an appropriate niche within the system of international security by strengthening its military potential. This process will not necessarily lead to open competition with NATO or strict opposition to the enlargement process. But these pains may be understood in NATO as Russian attempts to revise the present status quo. That is why a fair dialogue with NATO is

needed. Perhaps strategic goals should not be hidden within the Kremlin's corridors or within NATO HQ, but should become a theme for discussion. This process undoubtedly requires goodwill and mutual respect from both sides.

ENDNOTES

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NATO/Russia Council, <http://www.nato.int/issues/nato-russia/>

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