



NATO After the Russian Invasion

The military confrontation between Russia and Georgia in 2008 once again highlighted the deep divisions that have opened within NATO since the end of the Cold War. Although browbeaten into temporary solidarity in the face of the crisis, NATO is increasingly divided about its future role and missions. Much of this has to do with disagreements inside the alliance about how to best deal with a resurgent Russia.

Following the end of the Cold War, NATO made a concerted effort to adapt its role and missions to the new geopolitical realities. As a result of these reflections, for much of the last decade, NATO efforts have focused on three priority areas: the continuation of the Article 5 assurance to its members; NATO enlargement and partnerships to promote democratization; and more recently, the fight against terrorism. However, the alliance has faced some considerable problems and disagreements within each of these areas.

While Article 5 contingencies have become less likely since the end of the Cold War, and fewer resources are now focused on this kind of contingency, NATO expansion has also cast some doubt about the validity of these reassurances. Would NATO have gone to war with Russia over Georgia, if the latter had been a member? Similarly, deep divisions about NATO's enlargement and democratization agenda have existed for some time. Western European countries have been especially anxious about antagonizing Russia and extending security guarantees to faraway countries. Finally, the alliance has struggled to find a consensus on how to fight terrorism.

This briefing paper will focus in its core on NATO's problematic relationship with Russia in the aftermath of the Georgia-Russia War of 2008 (NATO's war on terror in Afghanistan is the topic of [another briefing paper](#)). It will outline the existing divisions amongst NATO allies and the policy options for the new US administration.

NATO Enlargement: From the Atlantic to the Urals?

For much of the early 1990s, most NATO member states regarded enlargement as something of a golden bullet. It was thought that enlarging the alliance could only contribute to the security and stability of the wider Euro-Atlantic area, and support a process of democratization and marketization amongst former Warsaw bloc members. Concerns voiced by some over the impact of NATO enlargement on its relationship with Russia were quickly waived aside¹. Most NATO members argued that they had a historical responsibility, as well as clearly defined interest to extend NATO eastwards. Moreover, understanding itself as a defensive alliance with a focus on establishing stability and democracy, NATO did not see how enlargement could be threatening to

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anyone. Russia, feeble and engulfed in internal divisions, voiced only few objections to enlargement in this period.

As a result of Russian weakness, NATO quickly moved to expand its membership. First, in 1999, by admitting Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, and once more in 2004 with the accession of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. However, by that time, enlargement had become considerably more controversial. This was the case for three specific reasons. First, many of the new members had been admitted without fulfilling some of the military and economic criteria previously established by the alliance. Moreover, with some exceptions, they added little in military terms, while further complicating NATO's existing ties with Russia.² Second, Russia had for long objected to another round of enlargement, arguing that it would feel threatened by having NATO forces stationed on its direct border. Seeing its previous objections ignored, a resurgent Russia under Vladimir Putin has been determined to prevent any further "encirclement" of Russia by NATO. Finally, the US invasion of Iraq and the Bush administration's unilateral approach to foreign affairs have led to deep division in the alliance and increased tension between "old" and "new" European member states.

All of this has meant that there is now increasing disagreement about the purpose and direction of future enlargements. At a NATO summit meeting in Bucharest in April 2008, NATO members considered applications for membership from five new candidates: Albania, Croatia, FYROM, Ukraine and Georgia. Croatia's and Albania's applications were relatively uncontroversial, due to their size and geographical location, and both were invited to join the alliance in 2009. FYROM's application was blocked by Greece, based on a dispute between them about the naming of the country. The bulk of the debate, however, was focused on the issue of membership for Ukraine and Georgia. While the Bush administration together with some new NATO member states pushed hard for their admittance, they faced the determined opposition of France and Germany which were supported by some of the older NATO members.

As Russia considers both countries a crucial part of its mental and physical landscape – having previously been part of the Soviet Union – both France and Germany feared a dramatic deterioration of relations with Russia. Moreover, they argued that Ukraine remained politically divided on the issue, while Georgia continued to be engaged in "frozen conflicts" with the break-away republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Admitting Georgia under these conditions, they argued, might further destabilize the Caucasus and risked drawing NATO into a dangerous quagmire. As a major recipient of Russian oil and gas, Germany for its part had also less benign reasons for opposing their membership. Nevertheless, the summit closed with a compromise of sorts. While neither Georgia nor Ukraine was granted a membership action plan (MAP) – the necessary first step to become a member – they received assurances of future membership³.

Georgian and Ukrainian membership was once more considered at the December 2008 NATO summit that followed the military conflict between Georgia and Russia in August. Unable to reach any consensus on the topic, NATO members agreed to maximize their

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efforts to ready both countries for membership, but refrained from any clear commitment.⁴ Further movement on the issue will depend upon the next NATO summit in April – the first one under the new US administration.

NATO-Russia Relations: Blowing Hot and Cold

NATO's evolving relationship with Russia has been prickly from the start. Over the years, NATO has sought to draw Russia in its embrace, but often offered little, while demanding much. Time and again, promises were made, only to be broken later. The result has been a deep-seated mutual mistrust between the two partners, and the list of grievances runs long, especially on the Russian side.

Russia and NATO formalized their relationship in May 1997 with the creation of the Permanent Joint Council (PJC), which would allow both sides to exchange information about security issues. This was seen as both necessary and pragmatic at the time. In return, Boris Yeltsin consented to the first NATO enlargement in 1997. Russia further demanded that NATO would station neither nuclear forces nor ground troops in the territory of the new NATO members. Although NATO accepted this condition at the time, it decided to violate it only a year later, moving one of its bases from Germany to the Polish Rendsburg. Relations deteriorated further, when NATO overruled Russian objections to the launching of Operation Allied Force in Kosovo in 1999, directly leading to the first suspension of official relations by Russia.⁵

Realizing that they needed each other to bring peace to the Balkans, relations resumed after only four months, and Russia played an important role in helping NATO stabilize the region. Indeed, Vladimir Putin, upon being elected Russian President in 2000, promised to rebuild relations with NATO in the “spirit of pragmatism”. The following two years witnessed a thawing of relations, with unequivocal Russian support for the US following 9/11 and the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. Particularly, Russia's willingness to allow coalition forces the use of military bases in Central Asia for re-supplying the Afghanistan mission was seen as encouraging. NATO acknowledged the importance of the mutual relationship with the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2002, which sought to integrate Russia further into alliance decision-making structures⁶.

However, relations deteriorated once more, following NATO's decision at Prague the same year to admit a further seven Central and Eastern European countries. Western governments and the media also became increasingly critical of Russian domestic developments, demanding greater support for democratic reforms, an end to the War in Chechnya, a stop to human rights violations and a more conciliatory approach to Central and Eastern Europe. Western support for the “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine further frustrated Russian policy-makers and reinforced an already common siege mentality. Finally, a number of US decisions, from the 2003 invasion of Iraq to the decision to station a ballistic missile defense system in Central and Eastern Europe, further poisoned the climate. On the other hand, NATO countries, especially from Central and Eastern Europe, felt increasingly threatened by Russian saber-rattling, and what they regarded as “divide and rule” policies in the region.

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In 2008, NATO-Russia relations hit rock-bottom once again. Following Kosovo's declaration of independence in February, Russia sent a strong warning that this would open a Pandora's Box, setting "a precedent for other breakaway regions", not only in Europe, but in "several [areas] in or near Russia."⁷ This warning seemed to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy in August, when war broke out between Russia and Georgia, and Russia recognized the break-away republic of South-Ossetia and Abkhazia. NATO sided with Georgia and quickly moved to suspend official relations with Russia. Since then, relations have been somewhat on the mend. Official relations between the two sides have been reopened, and the new Obama administration seems markedly less keen on stationing an anti-ballistic missile system in Central and Eastern Europe⁸. However, there are deep fissures within NATO over the future relationship with Russia that will be difficult to heal in the short-term, even by a more conciliatory new US administration.

Emerging Divisions: Still New Europe vs. Old Europe?

Ever since the Iraq War, the division within NATO can be seen as a coalescence of two sides, mostly pitting a coalition of "new" European members states under the leadership of the US and the UK against a coalition of "old" European member states, led by France and Germany. While this division extends over a number of different policy areas, the most pronounced discord lies with the issue of Russia.

Western European countries – and above all Germany and France – tend to advocate a more conciliatory approach towards Russia. According to their point of view, Russia is an important geopolitical player whose cooperation is indispensable in order to tackle a number of contemporary security issues, from Afghanistan to Iran. Moreover, they argue that any common European security structure that fails to associate Russia will remain flawed and fundamentally unstable. As a result, they have been open to recent suggestions by Russian President Medvedev that advocate a new and more inclusive European security system⁹. Finally, as has often been pointed out, many Western European countries are dependent on Russia for a large part of their energy supply.

Due to these different reasons, many Western European countries have argued for greater engagement with Russia and a temporary halt to further NATO enlargement – with the exception of less controversial Balkan countries. Indeed, during the Iraq crisis, the world witnessed a brief period during which France, Germany and Russia found themselves on the same side and in opposition to the United States and its supporters around the world. The symbolism of this has not been forgotten, especially amongst Central and Eastern European countries, which felt reminded of earlier historical precedents. While Russian authoritarianism and disregard for human rights has received much attention from Western European politicians and the media, there is a general feeling that pressuring Russia on these issues will not lead to more openness, but could worsen the situation.

Central and Eastern European countries on the whole have adopted a different position when it comes to Russia. Having experienced Soviet occupation for many years, they feel threatened by a resurgent Russia that is quick to throw its weight around and eager to

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reclaim its former role as a superpower. They argue that Russian claims cannot be taken at face-value, and that the West cannot afford to ignore Russian power-plays from Eastern Europe to the Caucasus and Central Asia. For them, further NATO enlargement is seen as a way of guaranteeing the stability of their neighbors, and creating a buffer between themselves and Russia. Suspicious about the extent to which NATO would value its article 5 guarantee in case of a contingency, they also encourage the stationing of NATO troops in their countries as an additional security guarantee. Ostracizing France and Germany to cooperate with Russia over their heads, they argue that conciliation and engagement amount to an appeasement of Russian aims, which will jeopardize European security. This point of view in general has also been adopted by the US, which has been the main proponent of Georgian and Ukrainian membership.

The Choices: Appeasement or Isolation?

As a result of these divisions, NATO has been stalemated on the issue of enlargement and relations with Russia on the whole. And despite a slight mending of relations with Russia in recent months, it remains to be seen whether the new US administration will be able to force a compromise on the issue. What is clear is that the US will be faced with some stark choices at the upcoming NATO summit in April 2009. Will it continue to press for NATO enlargement and a tough position on Russia, or seek a more conciliatory approach? Both options are loaded with risks and uncertainties.

1. **Push Enlargement:** Opting for continuity, the new administration could try to cash in on wide-spread European good-will and admiration and seek to convince the more skeptical European countries to provide MAPs for Georgia and Ukraine. Secretary of State Clinton, having nominated President Saakashvili of Georgia and President Yushchenko of Ukraine for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, might be especially inclined to follow this line. However, this decision could potentially have damaging implications for US policies in Afghanistan and Iran, which depend much on Russian cooperation and have been declared policy priorities by President Obama. Moreover, it is uncertain how Russia would react if it were internationally isolated. It seems unlikely that a resurgent Russia – even if economically weakened – would just stand by and accept NATO’s decision. In the meantime, it remains uncertain whether even the new Obama administration would be able to push Germany and France sufficiently enough to obtain their consent to enlargement.
2. **Delay Enlargement:** In an effort to gain the good-will of Russia and in order to push further its policy agenda on Iran and Afghanistan, the new administration could decide to drop the issue of enlargement for the time being. This could lead to a thaw in relations with Russia and a return to pragmatic engagement. It would also buy further goodwill with Western European countries, and perhaps greater financial and military support and US engagement in Afghanistan. The downside of this would be that it would open the administration to accusations of fudging the issue and backtracking on previous commitments. Moreover, while delaying the issue of enlargement might buy some time, it would also mean that the question has to be revisited at a later stage. In the view of some, it would also provide Russia with a

“carte blanche” to continue its policy of divide and rule in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Finally, it would raise doubts amongst many NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe about the real value of security guarantees provided by NATO.

Conclusion

On the whole, there seem to be no easy solutions to the issue of enlargement and NATO relations with Russia. As one commentator pointed out, “once hopeful that they could find common ground and possibly construct a new European security framework, NATO and Russia now view one another with deep-rooted mistrust and suspicion, with few prospects for reconciliation or even dialogue.”¹⁰ Moreover, current disagreements over relations with Russia risk dividing the alliance for years to come. Pushing enlargement will lead to an inevitable worsening of relations at a time when the US administration is reliant on Russian support; delaying or even backtracking on enlargement would open the administration to accusations of weakness and antagonize many Central and Eastern European countries that have been staunch supporters of the US in the past. While it seems that US strategic interests would be better served by pursuing a cooperative relationship with Russia, it is uncertain whether pragmatism will prevail. And still, in the long-run, NATO (and the US) will likely have to accept that its unipolar moment has passed, and that overruling the objections of other geopolitical important players such as Russia can carry a steep price.

¹ George Kennan, author of the “Long Telegram”, was one of the few who warned of the risks associated with NATO enlargement.

² One particular problem was the issue of large Russian minorities living in some of the Baltic states.

³ The Membership Action Plan (MAP) is a NATO programme of advice, assistance and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join the Alliance. While it does not prejudge eventual membership it is considered as being a first necessary step for membership.

⁴ Once more unable to agree to the provision of MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia, NATO deepened cooperation through the Ukraine-NATO and Georgia-NATO Commission. This raised concern amongst some that both countries might enter the alliance through a backdoor.

⁵ Operation Allied Force was the name for the 1999 NATO air operations in Serbia and Kosovo with the aim of expelling Serbian troops from Kosovo and putting an end to ethnic cleansing. Russia insisted on UN Security Council approval for the mission and interrupted relations with NATO when it initiated operations without obtaining that approval.

⁶ The NRC allows Russia and NATO members to meet as equals “at 27” and expands the number of issues they consider jointly.

⁷ Sam Cage, “Russia issues new warning over Kosovo independence”, Reuters, February 12, 2008

⁸ US President Obama did not provide a clear commitment to the anti-ballistic missile shield that had been planned by its predecessor during his electoral campaign. As a sign of goodwill, Russian President Medvedev stopped the deployment of short-range nuclear missiles to Kaliningrad in January.

⁹ During a speech, made in Berlin on June 5, 2008, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev proposed a new security treaty for Europe. While short on details, the idea was strongly endorsed by French President Nicholas Sarkozy.

¹⁰ Julianne Smith (2008), “The NATO-Russia Relationship: Defining Moment or Déjà vu?”, CSIS, November 2008.