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### Russia and NATO: From Windows of Opportunities to Closed Doors

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# Russia and NATO: From Windows of Opportunities to Closed Doors

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**ABSTRACT** *The Ukrainian crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea marks a new low in Russia–NATO relations. When we examine the relationship between NATO and Russia through the post-Cold War era, we can ask: was the deterioration in relations determined by geopolitical, historical, cultural and identity factors, or could sustainable partnership might have been possible had alternative decisions been taken? We argue that different reasons account for each of the four instances of deterioration in the relationship. Throughout the period some constants can be identified: cooperative rhetoric rarely mirrored reality; a mismatch in expectations, commitments and perceptions torpedoed the prospect of a more stable cooperative partnership; and, a surprising persistence in low-key but significant cooperation can be noted. The article concludes with the observation that dissonance at the heart of NATO–Russia relations is best understood as the consequence of Russia's attempt to navigate its way through a strategic trilemma and divorce signals Russia's failure to square the circle.*

**KEY WORDS:** NATO, Russia, European security, transatlantic relations, missile defence, Ukraine

## Doomed to Fail?

NATO always proved the hard case for Russia's relations with the West. Periods of cooperation have followed by a series of conflicts that have turned into well-charted flashpoints or systemic shocks—from the Kosovo crisis of 1999 to the Georgia Crisis of 2008 and, most recently, the Ukrainian crisis. Russia–NATO relations are at a nadir following Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, its military involvement in Eastern Ukraine as well as the announced intent of Ukraine to join NATO. As NATO's Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow (2014a) stated: 'Clearly the Russians have declared NATO as an adversary, so we have to begin to view Russia no longer as a partner but as more of an adversary than a partner.' Russia, in turn, elevated NATO's military buildup near its border, its expansion and use of force against international law in its 2014 military doctrine as the main military threat (Voennaya doktrina 2014).

Nonetheless, to acknowledge difficulties in the Russia–NATO relationship prior to the 2014 Ukrainian crisis is not to conclude that the break-up of the institutional partnership between Russia and NATO was inevitable and bound to happen. According to such an

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overly deterministic understanding, fundamental incompatibilities—ideational, material, structural and systemic—have ruled out a working and mutually beneficial Russia–NATO relationship. Over the last 25 years, NATO member states have failed to reach a consensus on how to build relations with Russia as some member states perceived Russia as a genuine ‘strategic partner’, others as an undeclared ‘strategic adversary’; this division being not simply a function of new vs. old NATO member state preferences. In addition, domestic politics in Russia centred on authoritarian modernization have not facilitated Russia’s closer integration with an alliance based on democratic principles and shared values, and Russian identity politics and worldview understands Russia as a global power and regional hegemony, unconstrained by a consensus-based alliance system within which it would be a junior partner.

However, a close reading of Russia–NATO relationships reveals a different reality—the relationship between NATO and Russia oscillated and evolved in a zig–zag manner. The relationship itself can be understood as existing in two related dimensions which did not always coincide: the pessimistic and optimistic tone and rhetoric of cooperation and the actuality as measured in practical and concrete terms. We can identify four attempts after the end of the Cold War to build the relationship between Russia and NATO into a partnership but on each and every occasion the process lost momentum. In each case, as we will discuss in this article, we can account for the optimism and in particular the renewed confrontation, but the reasons differ. Needless to say, a large number of complex inter-related variables have shaped how the Russia–NATO relationship has evolved (Kriendler 2013; Ratti 2013; Tsygankov 2012; Conrad 2011; Pouliot 2010; Smith 2008; Ponsard 2007; Blank 2006; Smith 2006; Forsberg 2005; MacFarlane 2001).

In parallel with other articles in this special issue we construct the detailed descriptive narrative of the post-Cold War NATO–Russia partnership in chronological manner in hindsight of the present situation and then analyse how the crisis in Ukraine affected the relationship and discuss its implications for the future. We conclude by arguing that NATO–Russian relations act as a symbolic rhetorical marker and have instrumental value as a safety-valve function that is key to Russia’s ability to wrestle with the strategic trilemma it finds itself facing. As the relationship deteriorated, publically suspending formal relations allowed ‘something to be done’ without in fact doing very much. After Crimea the possibility of unintended conflict between Russia and NATO member states due to miscalculation and rapid escalation has risen dramatically, and in response aggressive rhetoric from both Russia and NATO around the state of the relationship has now be curtailed.

This article advances the proposition that dissonance at the heart of NATO–Russia relations is best understood as the consequence of Russia’s attempt to navigate its way through a strategic trilemma and current divorce signals Russia’s failure to square the circle. A trilemma occurs when policy-makers are faced with three desirable objectives but find that only two of the three can be combined but not all three; one has to give. In financial terms, for example, a monetary policy trilemma suggests a stark tradeoff among exchange stability, monetary independence, and capital market openness. Rodrik Dani (2011), author of *The Globalization Paradox*, identifies a ‘fundamental political trilemma’ of the global economy which shapes contemporary security and stability, namely the notion that although democracy, self-determination and globalization are key contemporary dynamics, only two can exist in conjunction and harmony: if democratic governance is the goal, then a state can embrace either national sovereignty or democracy, but not both; fuller globalization demands sacrificing the democratic political process of the state. Lorenzo Zambernardi

(2010) has highlighted ‘counterinsurgencies impossible trilemma’, in which it is impossible to simultaneously achieve: ‘(1) force protection, (2) distinction between enemy combatants and non-combatants, and (3) the physical elimination of insurgents.’

When turning to the study of Russia–NATO relations, we can discern a strategic trilemma that haunts Russia’s evolving foreign policy philosophy. First, as President Vladimir Putin (2014) noted in his October 2014 Valdai Club address, Russia needs to replace the US’s ‘power vertical’ with a ‘democratic multi-polarity’ and ‘a new version of interdependence’:

A unilateral diktat and imposing one’s own models produces the opposite result. Instead of settling conflicts it leads to their escalation, instead of sovereign and stable states we see the growing spread of chaos, and instead of democracy there is support for a very dubious public ranging from open neo-fascists to Islamic radicals.

Second, Russia is on ‘the right side of history’, and is emerging as an independent pole in this post-Western global order. This trend is exemplified by an integrated, Russian-led, globally relevant Eurasian Economic Union, with Ukraine the jewel in the crown of Russia’s great power revival. Third, Russia seeks to achieve these two objectives—a new global order and exercise its traditional historical order producing and managerial role in the *Russkiy Mir* (the Russian World)—while avoiding a great power war and so maintaining a great power peace. Hence the deployment of tools fit for purpose—Russian-directed *maskirovka* (hybrid warfare) and a *Novorossiya* (Russian eighteenth-century imperial territories) state-building project in eastern Ukraine—and the consequent deterioration in Russia–NATO relations. Russia–NATO relations can be understood most clearly within this foreign policy philosophical framework which has evolved and come into sharper focus through the post-Soviet period.

### **The First Attempt: The Romantic Period and the Establishment of the Partnership**

The initial post-Cold War relationship was characterized by shared optimism based on both sides’ willingness to step beyond Cold War divisions. NATO wanted to reach out eastwards in the spirit of partnership to help consolidate market-democratic polities through support for democratic security building efforts. A stable, prosperous, united Euro-Atlantic area could not be built in opposition to Moscow. Russia’s immediate priority was in addressing a very complex domestic agenda, and stable cooperative international relations were a necessary prerequisite. Nonetheless, Moscow’s size, great power complex, importance on the international stage (UNSC P5 status), immense energy resources and nuclear triad did not preclude partnership—it merely suggested that the Russia–NATO partnership would exhibit certain unique characteristics.

The basic narrative of this ‘romantic period’ in Russia’s relationship with the West is well known, but it is useful to revisit some of the positions that underlined the post-Cold War optimism. As early as July 1990, NATO’s General Secretary Manfred Wörner (1990) visited Moscow and declared that the time of confrontation was over and the hostility and mistrust of the past must be buried. Russia’s importance for NATO was further underscored by the US Secretary of State James Baker III’s proposal that Russia should become a NATO member state, otherwise, he suggested, the most successful alliance in history would disappear into the dustbin of history (for a renewed argument see Baker

2002). Russia's positive view of NATO, in turn, was highlighted by Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev's (1993) article published in the *NATO Review* in 1993. Kozyrev advocated a cooperative partnership strategy with NATO as an effective mechanism for overcoming divisions in Europe: 'we see NATO nations as our natural friends and in future as allies'. He also noted that Russia would look with interest to NATO's experience in the observance of human rights and political consultation on a wide range of problems.

Rapprochement through positive political declarations aside, there was still inbuilt bureaucratic resistance and outright scepticism to deepening relationships which slowed institutional adaptation and proved difficult to surmount. Kozyrev's opinions in particular could not be understood as representative of a general Russian elite or public attitude towards NATO. For most Russians, NATO continued to be a Cold War institution and 'aggressive bloc', which should be subordinated to the OSCE, an organization based on the consensus principle, or better yet abolished. Russia's general disappointment with the West was most visible in the relationship with a NATO that sought to reap a 'peace dividend', but without fundamental institutional change. In addition, NATO identified residual 'risks and threats' in the uncertain post-Cold War strategic context, with Moscow's very apparent weakness an unpredictable factor. Prudence (a post-Cold War analogue for 'trust but verify') supported stasis.

The initial 'honeymoon period' between NATO and Russia came to an end in late 1993, when Russian foreign policy orientated away from a discourse centred on market-democratic consolidation towards a more pragmatic nationalist course. Students of Russian foreign policy still disagree over the sources of the change, but the deterioration of Russia's relationship with NATO appeared to be both a cause and a consequence of the overall change in Russian foreign policy. The clearest example of the mounting problems was that Russia first signed the framework document of the Partnership for Peace Programme (PfP) in summer 1994, but then Kozyrev unexpectedly refused to sign the individual partnership document half a year later, perhaps reflecting the changing status of the PfP itself—from an end in itself in its first iteration to a potential stepping stone to NATO membership. The Russian Federation did eventually join the PfP in May 1995, signing at the same time another document establishing the NATO–Russia dialogue, after President Yeltsin was assured by President Clinton that he would not trumpet NATO enlargement before the Russian Duma elections in December 1995 and presidential elections in 1996. Nevertheless, Russia's engagement with the PfP remained half-hearted for a number of reasons. The PfP concept did not grant Russia a specific privileged status in its relationships with NATO—Minsk and Moscow were in theory equal partners. Russia had little interest, or indeed capacity (fighting and losing as it was an insurgency campaign in Chechnya), in undertaking defence reform in accordance with NATO norms, or developing interoperability with NATO forces. As a result, Russia did not participate in various PfP exercises and Russian representatives, in particular those of its armed forces, criticized other countries participation.

NATO announced its willingness to enlarge the Alliance for the first time at the Brussels summit in January 1994, when the North Atlantic Council decided to conduct a study on enlargement. This decision certainly reinforced Russia's negative view of NATO, though President Yeltsin's initial comments regarding the possibility of Poland's NATO membership were positive. Soon, however, NATO's willingness to 'expand' into central and eastern Europe and even countenance the membership of former Soviet republics became a major irritant for Russia, viewed as it was through the lens of NATO of

encirclement and betrayal (Sergounin 1997). Russia exercised and exhausted all diplomatic tools in an attempt to convince NATO that enlargement would undermine stability in Europe, arguing—when we view events with 20 years hindsight presciently—that NATO enlargement would entail negative domestic repercussions in the shape of a nationalist, militaristic, anti-Western and pro-Chinese regime in Moscow. Russia's stance has been interpreted as one of principle but also tactical—designed to elicit concessions. In 1996 the Russian foreign policy establishment was united in opposition to NATO enlargement and appeared to believe that it could halt or at least postpone the process.

### **The Second Attempt: NATO's Enlargement and Permanent Joint Council**

Russia's concerns about NATO enlargement played an important part in the internal NATO debates. Not all European governments were convinced that enlarging NATO would be desirable in particular because it was seen as damaging relationships with Russia. Even in the United States opinions varied, but the Clinton administration was convinced that the positives outweighed the negatives. After the Russian presidential elections of 1996 Washington pushed enlargement forward. When Russia realized that the enlargement was bound to happen, it sought damage limitation and demanded a legally binding treaty.

Russia sought a legally binding treaty that would have limited NATO's presence in the territory of the new members and a tacit agreement that the former Soviet republics could not be brought into the alliance. Clinton and Yeltsin met in Helsinki in March 1997 and signed the Founding Act, and the Permanent Joint Council (PJC) was established to promote partnership to mitigate fundamental disagreements over enlargement. The Founding Act signified 'an enduring political commitment undertaken at the highest political level . . . [to] build together a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and co-operative security' (see Carr and Flenley 1999). In the spirit of the new partnership, the ties between NATO and Russia were to be expanded. The compromise included Clinton's (2004, 750) assurance that NATO has 'no plan, no intention, no reason' to deploy significant forces or nuclear weapons on the territory of the new members, which reconfirmed a pledge given already by the NATO ministers in December (Asmus 2002: 195–203). Russia did not, however, receive any legal guarantees that NATO would not reassess its policies, since the declaration was only politically binding.

Indeed, the compromise achieved at Helsinki did not change the fact that Russia still vehemently objected to enlargement and was not fully reassured by the institutional improvements in its relationship with NATO. Neither Yeltsin nor Foreign Minister Primakov travelled to NATO's 1997 summit in Madrid, where the decision to enlarge NATO to include Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 1999 was announced. Russian–NATO relations were also damaged by NATO's new strategic doctrine, adopted at the March 1999 Washington summit. Moscow had hoped to help shape the formulation of the doctrine through discussions within the PJC, but it received the documents only shortly before the Washington summit, when the strategy was fixed. The most problematic aspect of the strategy, in the view of Russia, was not collective defence but NATO's new collective security remit which in principle sanctioned NATO deployment without a UN or OSCE mandate, thereby 'obstructing the peace-making potential of these organizations'. In Russia's view, NATO's aim was 'to maintain military superiority in Europe' and it had 'an obvious bias to use force' (Kazantsev 1999).



NATO put its collective security doctrine into immediate practice in April 1999 when it initiated a non-UNSC mandated air campaign on Yugoslavia which NATO argued was a humanitarian intervention to protect the Albanian minority in Kosovo. In response, Russia immediately froze all relations with NATO. Yeltsin (2000, 258) argued that the bombing was ‘essentially an attempt by NATO to enter the twenty-first century in the uniform of a world policeman. Russia will never agree to this’. If Russia were to accept NATO’s role in Yugoslavia, Russians believed that there would be no guarantee why NATO could not in the future also intervene in Russia’s internal affairs, or that it could indirectly destabilize Russia. In Yeltsin’s (2000, 259) view, NATO’s operation would only exacerbate the crisis in the world: ‘Wars have always provoked revolutions. That was what irritated me most. Did the NATO leaders really not understand?’

Russia’s frustration culminated in the seizure by the Russian forces of the Pristina airport after NATO’s air campaign was over. In practical military terms the seizure was not significant—the troops lacked support and maintenance and ultimately Russia cooperated with KFOR and SFOR peacekeeping in Bosnia—but politically it highlighted a serious trust deficit and emphasized unpredictability, and escalation threats were a feature of the relations (Clark 2001). As a result, the Kosovo campaign highlighted Russia’s weakness and its inability to influence strategic matters in Europe—either the political decision-making which initiated the war or its military conduct (Norris 2005).

The Kosovo crisis demonstrated that political cooperation between NATO and Russia in the framework of the PJC had failed. From a Russian perspective the PJC appeared to function as a forum where Russia was informed about NATO’s decisions rather than an arena in which Russia could influence NATO decision-making. In hindsight, also NATO representatives have often acknowledged that it was unwise to pre-agree NATO positions without giving Russia a chance to influence them. Russia did not fully engage with NATO, refusing permission for NATO to open its office in Moscow and not establishing a proper mission at NATO headquarters in Brussels but having its representatives at NATO working as an adjunct to its embassy in Belgium. Unofficial daily contacts were kept to a minimum, and no culture of trust on the personal level was able to develop. Working group progress was constantly handicapped by orders from above. Officers who served in NATO peacekeeping operations had difficulty in securing promotion within the Russian military, although cooperation as such had been working rather well (Wilhelm 1997; Cross 2002). Indeed, for Russia, the PJC and participation in the PfP served mainly the instrumental value that it could demonstrate its dissatisfaction with NATO by leaving these forms of cooperation.

### **The Third Attempt: War on Terror and NATO–Russia Council**

The two main impetus for the improvement in the relationship between NATO and Russia after the Kosovo War was Putin’s readjustment of Russia’s strategic interests after becoming President in 2000 and the terrorist attacks in the USA in September 2001 (Matser 2001). It is important to bear in mind, however, that the relations started to improve already much before 9/11 as Secretary General George Robertson visited Moscow already in February 2000 and NATO’s information office in Moscow was inaugurated the following year. Also practical cooperation in the field in the framework of the KFOR operation in Kosovo was established after the agreement was reached.

The core of Putin’s initial foreign policy programme was to improve relationships with the West as a means to strengthen the Russian state. NATO enlargement was no longer



deemed a strategic threat by Russia. President Putin, with the support of the majority of his foreign policy elite, searched for rapprochement between Russia and NATO, a process which 9/11 only helped consolidate (Bukkvoll 2003). In an interview with the *New York Times* Putin (2003) stated that ‘my firm conviction [that Russia is a reliable partner] is based on the fact that I see the national interests of Russia and the United States coincide to large extent.’ The terrorist attacks demonstrated that the security environment had radically changed. Transnational terrorism with a global reach that targeted states and societies was a shared threat both Russia and NATO member states could cooperate against. A first sign of this renewed partnership was the PJC meeting held on 13 September 2001 that released a statement condemning the attacks and called for a joint fight against terrorism.

Russia’s willingness to renew partnership and cooperation and shelve confrontation facilitated a fundamental institutional readjustment in the shape of a NATO–Russia Council (NRC) as the successor to the PJC. Moscow’s terms for the renewed co-operation—‘unconditional compliance with international law and UN Charter and the Helsinki final Act’—and the aims of the Council—‘coordination of joint approaches and decision-making’—reflected a deep-seated Russian desire to base its NATO relationship on the principle of ‘equality’, ‘reciprocity’ and ‘parity’, in which Russia’s status as a great power was acknowledged. Ideally, such a forum could include a mechanism that enabled Russia to have voting rights in certain issue areas that concerned common interests. The NRC also offered partial compensation for the second round of enlargement. Attitudes in NATO varied: Canada and Italy were more willing to embrace Russia, while the new members were less supportive. In the USA an internal bureaucratic struggle pitted Pentagon hawks, suspicious of Russia’s sincerity and reliability as a partner, against the State Department’s Russia-‘firsters’. The latter, with the support of President George W. Bush, who had formed a personal friendship with Putin at their first meeting, prevailed.

The NRC was agreed in April 2002 at the Reykjavik NATO and Russia foreign ministers meeting and subsequently signed at the NATO–Russia summit in Rome in May 2002 in the presence of the heads of state. At the same time, NATO established its Military Liaison Mission in Moscow to support contacts between NATO and Russian military. President Bush declared that the accord ‘will make the world more peaceful and put behind us the Cold War once and for all’, while President Putin (2002) believed that the meeting opened ‘an entirely new chapter in relations between Russia and the North Atlantic bloc’. In January 2005 Putin (2005) noted that the NRC had helped bring a new quality to relations between Russia and the entire Western community:

the choice made in favour of dialogue and co-operation with NATO was the right one and has proved fruitful . . . In just a very short time we have taken a gigantic step from past confrontation to working together and from mutual accusations and stereotypes to creating modern instruments for co-operation such as the NRC.

Russian representatives at that time regarded that the NRC could serve as a model for security relations between the EU and Russia (Bugajski 2008, 12).

There were concrete signs of cooperation in NATO–Russia relations, not just positive rhetoric. In December 2004 the parties approved a comprehensive action plan on terrorism and Russia joined the NATO anti-terrorist operation ‘Active Endeavour’ in the Mediterranean. Military-to-military co-operation had a more intense training and exercise

programme than previously, Russia indicated interest in creating a NATO-compatible Russian peacekeeping brigade and NATO and Russia conducted a study of their joint crisis-management operations to identify the lessons to be learned. The possibility of a joint missile defence system was also discussed. The renewed relationship withstood strategic differences engendered by the war in Iraq of 2003 and the Rose and then Orange Revolutions of 2003 and 2004 in Georgia and Ukraine respectively.

The NRC was designed to hold meetings at least once a month at the ambassadorial level under the chairmanship of the Secretary General. As with the PJC, it covered a wide area of co-operation ranging from anti-terrorism, military interoperability, civil emergencies, countering proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, promoting military reform and search and rescue, but it differed procedurally. NATO countries agreed not to agree on a common position before the NRC meetings—decisions would not be ‘pre-cooked’ between the 19 NATO members, thereby allowing Russia to participate in the discussions on an equal basis: the format was to be ‘20’ rather than ‘19 + 1’. In reality, however, the difference between the PJC and the NRC was more symbolic and atmospheric, ‘more to do with chemistry than arithmetic’ in the words of Lord Robertson. Russia did not have a veto on NATO’s decisions since if NRC meetings failed to reach a consensus, NATO could always return to the format of ‘19’.

Moscow continued to oppose NATO’s enlargement, arguing that the Baltic States should join the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty that delimits troop presence in European flanks. Putin’s foreign policy envoy Sergei Yastrzhembsky, for example, noted that it would be ‘very negative’ if the Alliance had ‘any footprint regardless of the size’ in Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania (Dempsey 2004). However, NATO began patrolling the air space over the Baltic States and ignored Russia’s protests, proposing the Baltic States would join the CFE treaty only when Russia has fulfilled its own commitments. NATO constantly criticized Russia for its unwillingness to withdraw troops from Georgia and Moldova as it pledged to do when the CFE treaty was modified. NATO Secretary General Jaan de Hoop Scheffer visited Moscow much less frequently than his predecessor Lord Robertson.

Within the military, attitudes towards NATO in Russia remained largely unchanged. The senior leadership of the Russian MoD continued to articulate NATO in terms of a threatening anti-Russian military bloc. A Russian defence ministry document released in October 2003, for example, indicated that Moscow would rethink its nuclear strategy if NATO continues to exist in its present form, fails to remove its ‘anti-Russian’ components and maintains its current ‘offensive’ doctrine. At the Munich security conference in 2004, Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov (2004a) demanded Russia monitoring facilities at NATO bases to verify that they posed no threat to Russia. In March, just before the enlargement of the Alliance to the Baltic States, Ivanov warned that NATO’s offensive doctrine and anti-Russian outlook and attitudes would force Russia to adopt tougher defence measures. Other representatives of the Russian armed forces left no doubt that the eastward expansion of NATO was regarded as a threat to which Russia should respond. Ivanov highlighted contradictions in Russian attitudes towards NATO at this time. In a *New York Times* article in 2004 he asked why ‘an organization that was designed to oppose the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe is still necessary in today’s world’, expressed scepticism about NATO’s ability to stabilize international conflicts, and praised the current level of co-operation (Ivanov 2004b).

Moscow’s reassessment of partnership mirrored Washington’s rising concerns about deficiencies in Russian democracy and violations of human rights norms in Chechnya, with

neo-conservative Cold War warriors and liberal internationalists questioning President Bush's public friendship with Putin and the usefulness of the partnership. At the Munich security conference in 2004, Senator McCain strongly criticized Putin's 'creeping coup' against democracy within Russia and his policy of new assertiveness which challenged the democratic and territorial integrity of Russia's sovereign neighbours (Safire 2004).

### **One More Attempt: From the War in Georgia to the 'Reset'**

The negative trend in the NATO–Russia relationships became visible at the Munich security conference in February 2007. In his watershed speech Putin (2007) criticized the USA for attempting to become a global hegemon and for its neglect of international law. He argued that 'we have reached that decisive moment when we must seriously think about the architecture of global security'. Specifically, Putin argued that NATO's enlargement 'represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust' as NATO reneged on past assurances.

NATO's summit in Bucharest in April 2008 was perhaps the last moment when something could have been done to repair the relations with Russia. The most controversial issue for Russia was consideration of further enlargement of the Alliance to Georgia and Ukraine, two states seeking admission into the preparatory Membership Action Plan (MAP) programme. After deliberation they were not accepted into the programme because Germany and France, in particular, resisted the idea. As a consolation prize, the final declaration still indicated that the two countries 'will be members of NATO'. For Russia, the wording of the declaration turned out to be more important than the fact that they were not accepted to MAP. A NATO–Russia summit, at which Putin attended, was held in conjunction of the NATO summit. Putin's (2008) speech was again a balance between confrontation and reassurance. He called the extension of the alliance a 'direct threat' to Russia. He recognized that Russia did not have the right of veto, but that states should be able to discuss concerns without recourse to veto. If Georgia and Ukraine were integrated into NATO, Moscow would take 'necessary measures'. In June 2008, Russia's newly elected President Dmitry Medvedev told President Mikheil Saakashvili that his quest for NATO membership would not help resolve the simmering tensions in the separatist Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Kishkovsky 2008).

The August 2008 war in Georgia constituted the climax of this deteriorating trend in the relations between Russia and NATO. As a response to Russia's invasion to Georgia, NATO froze most military and political cooperation with Russia. In the NATO meeting in August, the foreign ministers declared that Russia's use of military force had been disproportionate and inconsistent with its alleged peacekeeping role and violated cooperation agreements with NATO. Russia suspended its military exercises and cooperation with NATO and Medvedev threatened to cut ties completely. NATO quickly deescalated tensions, with Germany and France in the lead. At an informal meeting in September NATO defence ministers expressed willingness to continue cooperation with Russia on subjects such as counterterrorism, Afghanistan, the CFE Treaty and nuclear weapons. As a consequence of the war in Georgia NATO also started to do defence planning for the Baltic States (de Haas 2009). In response Russia announced that it would stop participating in NATO's peacekeeping operations and suspend its participation in the PfP programme. Russia also decided to delay sending its representative to NATO. Russia did however continue to give logistical support to NATO related to the Afghanistan operation. Medvedev argued that NATO needed Russia more than

Russia needs NATO and, in hindsight, noted that the war in Georgia was necessary to halt NATO's expansion (Kriendler 2013).

After the Georgian war, there was one more serious attempt to improve the relations between Russia and NATO (Antonenko and Giegerich 2009). The major impetus for this came in the form of Barack Obama's 'Reset' policy. In December 2009 NATO approached Russia with a request to fly cargo (including possibly military materiel) over Russian territory to Afghanistan. Once again also the idea of including Russia into NATO was raised. In June of 2008 Medvedev had initiated the idea of a new legally binding security treaty for Europe—the European Security Treaty initiative. This initiative received a lukewarm hearing in NATO capitals, not least as it appeared to undermine the strategic centrality of NATO, and the attempt to supersede existing institutions by building new, vaguer ones, was seen as retrograde (Herd 2011). Antonenko and Yurgens (2010) noted that levels of mutual trust were lower than the 1990s and that the months leading to NATO's Lisbon summit would be crucial in defining the NATO–Russian relations for the next decade. President Medvedev attended the NRC meeting at the Lisbon summit in November 2010. The summit resulted in some positive outcomes related to missile defence and the Afghanistan operation. In June 2011 NATO and Russia participated in their first ever joint fighter jet exercise, dubbed 'Vigilant Skies 2011'. As Angela Stent (2014, 240) commented, 'the NATO–Russia relationship experienced a modest improvement under the reset policy'.

Despite cooperation in many areas and the efforts of NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to hone a common agenda, the key issues where NATO and Russia disagreed remained unresolved. Georgia's relationship with NATO, not least joint military exercises, caused friction in NATO–Russia relations. When Georgia was named as an aspirant country in the joint communique of the meeting of NATO foreign ministers, Sergey Lavrov (2011) strongly criticized NATO for doing so, because it would encourage Saakashvili to start new adventures. In Lavrov's view the NATO Declaration of the Bucharest Summit encouraged Saakashvili to attack on South Ossetia in 2008. In April 2012, Lavrov (2012) stated that NATO's characterization of Georgia as an aspirant country caused Moscow 'bewilderment', 'regret' and 'alertness'.

The other key problem that remained unresolved was missile defence. At the Lisbon summit, NATO and Russia had agreed on joint and continued dialogue, but missile defence remained a key issue of contestation in most NRC meetings. Working groups discussed cooperative solutions based on transparency, joint exercises and jointly manned data and operation centres. Medvedev's proposal was that Russia and NATO would develop an integrated missile defence system where Russia would be responsible for covering the area in south-east, Iran, for example, but NATO was not willing to delegate a part of its defence to a non-member. Russia also insisted on legal, binding guarantees that the NATO system could not be used against Russia but NATO or the United States could not agree on signing such a formal treaty (Gates 2014, 531). Though numerous attempts were made to develop these structures and to persuade the Russians that the missile defence was not a threat to Russia, cooperation ultimately failed because of lack of trust (Zadra 2014).

When Putin was re-elected to President of Russia in 2012, few expected any radical changes in NATO–Russia relationship. Through 2012 Russia did not nominate an ambassador to NATO. As well as signalling symbolically dissatisfaction, concrete delays undermined the development of the relationship. The 'reset' was clearly over and Putin did not participate in the NATO summit in Chicago in May 2012. However, some rationale for collaboration still existed (Ratti 2013). John Kriendler (2013), for example, concluded that

the importance of NATO–Russia cooperation will not diminish. Though trust deficits remained high and disagreements over many sensitive issues continued, this did not rule out the need for trying to improve the NATO–Russia cooperation. Similarly Heidi Reisinger (2014), in a report of NATO Defence College, concluded that cooperation with NATO and Russia will linger on despite all the differences and difficulties.

### **Ukrainian Crisis: The Sceptics were Always Right?**

The crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 came as a surprise to NATO, although the surprising aspect was rather the timing and the fast direct annexation of Crimea rather than Russia's willingness to use force against Ukraine and in particular on Crimea to defend its interests. NATO's response to this could be seen in terms of three policy categories: NATO condemned Russia's behaviour; it froze most of the existing cooperation with Russia and strengthened the military assurance to the NATO members bordering Russia. It also intensified its partnership with Ukraine, focusing particularly on supporting the defence and security sector reform process in the country. Responding to the crisis was a major issue at the NATO's summit in Wales September 2014 (Webber, Hallams, and Smith 2014).

NATO immediately condemned Russia's action, urged it to honour Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen (2014) stated before the formal annexation in March that 'NATO stands by Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and by the fundamental principles of international law'. This message was reconfirmed when Rasmussen visited Kiev in August 2014. He also accused Russia for spreading disinformation and propaganda. 'Russia is violating every principle and international commitment it has made, first and foremost the commitment not to invade other countries.' When visiting Washington in March, Rasmussen also stated that 'we have seen Russia rip up the international rulebook' (Stewart 2014). Deputy General Secretary Vershbow (2014b) also reminded that 'all these actions call into question fundamental principles that Russia subscribed to, and they put at risk the post-Cold War order that we have built with such effort together with Russia, not against it.' In a strongly worded Declaration following the Wales Summit of early September 2014, Russia was accused of crisis escalation. NATO condemned 'in the strongest terms' Russia's escalating and illegal military intervention in Ukraine and demanded that Russia stop and withdraw its forces from inside Ukraine and along the Ukrainian border. The violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity was seen as 'a serious breach of international law and a major challenge to Euro-Atlantic security' (NATO Declaration 2014). In his inaugural speech, Jens Stoltenberg (2014), the new NATO Secretary General, noted that NATO does not seek confrontation with Russia, and nobody wants a new Cold War, 'but we cannot and will not compromise on the principles on which our Alliance and the security of Europe and North America rest.'

NATO's reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea manifested also in the halt of cooperation. In April 2014, NATO decided to suspend all practical civilian and military cooperation with Russia as a response to Russia's annexation of Crimea. The foreign ministers decided that there could be 'no business as usual', but the dialogue in the NRC could continue, as necessary, at ambassadorial level. Working groups stopped meeting and the access rights of Russian representatives to NATO's premises was restricted. NATO kept its office in Moscow, because it existed mainly for information purposes.



NATO also adopted military measures as a response to Russia's behaviour in the Ukraine crisis. President Obama and NATO representatives made it clear that they would not intervene militarily in Ukraine. However, NATO's major concern was to reassure NATO members who felt vulnerable with regard to Russia's policy of destabilization and annexation. For that purpose, NATO increased AWAC flights over the Polish and Romanian borders, sent 12 F-16 fighters to Poland and 6 F-15's to Lithuania, and renewed its focus on contingency planning in that area. It also decided to create a 5,000-strong rapid reaction force and establish six new command centers in the eastern member states of the alliance. These were all highly symbolic markers within the limits of the NATO–Russia Founding Act. Moreover, NATO announced that it was watching developments in southern and eastern Ukraine closely and it released satellite pictures, for example, showing Russian troop positions near the Ukrainian border in April and Russian tanks entering the Ukrainian territory in June 2014. NATO officials were also considering whether the missile defence system should be directed against Russia, but this move was seen as unnecessarily provocative by the majority of NATO members.

Within NATO, there were different opinions whether the Founding Act should indeed be honoured. There were those who argued that NATO should not be like Russia, but should instead keep the pledges it has made. Others argued that the Founding Act was nil and void after Russia had so plainly violated it, and therefore permanent troops should be deployed in the new member states to deter Russia. The question of further NATO enlargement was also discussed. A quick NATO expansion to Ukraine, or to Georgia for that matter, was ruled out as a response to the crisis in the Ukraine; however, NATO did not want to abandon its open-door policy principle either. Also the invitation to join the alliance to Montenegro was postponed.

At the same time, NATO enhanced its partnerships with countries such as Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan and Sweden. In this context, the alternative of a northern expansion of NATO to Sweden and Finland was also raised. Public debate on the eventual membership intensified in both of these non-NATO Nordic countries, while some NATO representatives and pundits regarded this kind of enlargement as a proper countermeasure to Russia's behaviour in the Ukrainian crisis or, at least, they would welcome Sweden and Finland to the alliance quicker because they were seen as less sensitive candidates for Russia than Ukraine and Georgia. Despite Finland having a pro-NATO prime minister of the Conservative Party, the coalition government had agreed not to prepare Finland's NATO membership. In Sweden, the Social Democrats built a new coalition government with the Greens and it adopted a more reserved attitude towards NATO than the previous government of the centre-right parties. Moreover, although support for joining NATO has somewhat increased, public opinion in both counties has traditionally resisted NATO membership.

Russia maintained its diplomatic mission to NATO, but since working group meetings with Russian representatives were reduced to minimum, the Russian offices at the NATO Headquarters remained mainly empty. In its counter-rhetoric, Russia's Ambassador to NATO Alexander Grushko (2014) demanded the Ukrainian army stop its military actions and accused NATO of 'unprecedented activity close to the Russian borders'. Putin (RIA Novosti 2014) argued that the crisis in Ukraine 'was provoked and staged by some of our Western partners', was being used to resuscitate NATO. Moscow also issued warnings against further NATO expansion. In January 2015, Putin hardened his rhetoric by claiming that 'the Ukrainian army is essentially a "NATO legion" which doesn't pursue the national interests of Ukraine, but persists to restrict Russia' (RT 2015).

In sum, the occupation and annexation of Crimea by Russia and the ongoing destabilization of eastern Ukraine brought into sharp focus three key prior characteristic trends in European security order. First, Russia's portrayed self-perception of its standing, power and status, and historical and psychological justifications for its actions in Crimea radically differ from its neighbours in Euro-Atlantic space—Ukraine occupies a central place in Russia's political and geostrategic psyche. Second, that there is a contestation over what constitutes European norms, values and order, a virtual, rhetorical and now kinetic battle over the very nature of the European security order, and so over what it is to be European. Third, there is a fundamental lack of trust that has amounted due to the breach of the key norms, direct lies, disinformation and accusations. These are all issues that are at the root of the NATO–Russia relationship. Although neither NATO nor Russia has been willing to escalate their mutual relations and has shown restraint in the most provocative possible actions, the underlying tensions make the rapprochement after the Ukrainian crisis much more difficult than before as compromise is not possible without concessions in key principles (Klein and Kaim 2014).

### Conclusions

Over the past 25 years NATO–Russia relationships have been characterized by ebbs and flows, periods of optimism and pessimism, as Russia and NATO tried to build a partnership where Russia was more than a partner but less than a member. Against the background of the crisis in the Ukraine, Russia's annexation of Crimea and NATO's response to it, it is tempting to conclude that the pessimists were always right, and the optimism, so much part of political rhetoric on both sides, was not based on enduring realities: a difficult start burdened by the historical legacy, the impossibility of creating a role for Russia that would fit Russia's own self-conception of its status; and, moreover, divergent views of the fundamental values constituting the European security order.

Yet, it would be too easy to dismiss entirely the windows of opportunities that existed during the more positive periods in the NATO–Russia relationships. Two historical nodal points are worth revisiting: enlargement and the Kosovo War. If NATO had not enlarged in the 1990s, would it have been possible to develop a stable and cooperative partnership? It is clear that NATO enlargement irritated Russia despite the deal that was reached between Clinton and Yeltsin in 1997, simultaneously establishing the PJC and tacitly approving the enlargement. From NATO's perspective no permanent or formal commitment not to enlarge NATO was made—an 'open-door' policy was maintained—and had such a pledge been undertaken it would have meant rejecting the OSCE principle of the right of the sovereign states to be able to choose whether they are allied and with whom (Kramer 2009; Rühle 2014; Sarotte 2014). Furthermore, an alternative European order based on classical realist geopolitics—on territorial spheres of interest—would have been rejected by the former Warsaw Treaty states and the post-Soviet Baltic States. NATO could not have maintained legitimacy on the eyes of NATO publics were it to be party to such a neo-Brezhnevite doctrine of limited sovereignty. Former Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis, for example, criticizes the February 2015 Minsk Agreement-2 as 'worse than Munich' (*Delfi*, February 12, 2015) and an editorial in Estonia's *Eesti Päevaleht* condemns a 'triumph of power politics' (*Eesti Päevaleht*, February 13, 2015). Moreover, the key question also is, whether Russian domestic politics had continued on its pro-Western and



democratic course, had NATO not announced its enlargement policy in mid-1990s. Lastly, as NATO is the legitimizing framework that gives the USA a European power status and buttresses its global primacy, and as Russia's stated preference is for a multipolar order with Russia as one of its independent poles, we can conclude that limits to cooperation were hard-wired into Russia's foreign policy philosophy—the very organizing logic that governed the utility of the relationship.

The Kosovo crisis in 1999 clearly was not as detrimental to NATO–Russia relations as it first appeared. Putin was willing to reconstruct the partnership and both parties found a new purpose in the context of the 'global war on terror'—could NATO have reciprocated more fully and as a result would it have been possible to radically alter the relationship during the early years of Putin's first presidency? Though Russia and NATO could agree that they had a shared interest to address transnational threats, their approaches diverged, and Russia fundamentally privileged order and stability over justice. The Colour Revolutions and differences in understanding over the role of civil societies were one of the key points of disagreement. For Russia 'Colour Revolutions' were the result of hostile external actors rather than protest against authoritarian rule. After the mid-2000s it was obvious that the momentum for a strong cooperative partnership or even inclusion of Russia into NATO was gone. NATO's member states were not willing to renegotiate a new European security order on the basis of the 'Medvedev initiative', and Russia was rejected what it considered outdated principles and institutions that worked against it.

So was the collision course in NATO–Russia relations structurally determined or had there been ample political room to restore a stable cooperative relationship between the parties? Both NATO and Russia had a practical pragmatic outcomes-based approach and sufficient political will to establish a close cooperative relationship. 'Triumphalists' in NATO and 'NATO sceptics' in Russia never constituted an overwhelming political force able to block all cooperation. The normative framework to base partnership upon was that agreed in the OSCE Charter and reinforced in the Founding Act. Within those limits, practical cooperation was clearly possible to a large extent. Indeed, one lesson we can take from the current deterioration in relations is that restricted cooperation still continues between Russia and NATO member states, if not NATO itself.

At Valdai in 2014 President Putin (2014) noted 'common goals and acting based on the same criteria, together we achieved real success', citing chemical weapons in Syria, Iran's nuclear programme and the DPRK issue—all addressed through unilateralist groupings and the UNSC, rather than NATO–Russia related. While Russia seeks to avoid a great power war, it does not want to bolster a US-led institution that buttresses US primacy—rather the opposite—and needs to assert its primacy in a shared neighbourhood. Russia strategic trilemma provides an explanatory framework which accounts for the current state of Russian–NATO relations. For as long as this trilemma informs Russia's foreign policy philosophy and strategic thinking, NATO–Russia relations will remain hostage of which both will suffer.

When we look to the future, three destabilizing logics appear to be at work, serving to lock Russia and NATO into cycles of confrontation. First, the greater economic weakness in Russia, the more likely assertive anti-Western and in particular anti-NATO foreign and security policies emerge to compensate and distract. An escalation in 'nuclear diplomacy' and signalling as cash gets scarce and budgets are squeezed already occurs, as President Putin responds to internal pressure to justify the political utility of high nuclear expenditure. From a NATO perspective, Russia then becomes the new Soviet glue that holds the alliance

together to balance a threat. Russia is already NATO's self-declared 'strategic adversary' - and Ukraine and the 'Narva scenario' the crucible that reforges transatlantic solidarity. Second, Russian internal propaganda ensures that the lower levels of external trust translate into higher levels of internal, albeit negative, mobilization of the public against the spectre of external aggression and internal treason. NATO as a Cold War relic and 'aggressive bloc', now sporting a 'foreign legion' in Ukraine fulfils the function of 'enemy' to perfection - in effect, Russia fights NATO and is winning. From a NATO perspective, Russia's testing of NATO's operational effectiveness in the Baltic region and nuclear signaling focuses strategic thinking in the alliance on forward and extended deterrence. Third, the maxim the 'the worse the pain the greater the gain' holds. The logic here is that in order to undertake structural reform of the Russian economy, some current elite vested interests will be undermined and destabilized elites can put Putin under pressure. But a charismatic leader can bypass the elite to appeal directly to the public. Given the context of the 70th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941-45) in 2015, the ongoing Ukrainian crisis will increasingly be reified through the lens of endurance, suffering and sacrifice before final victory - helping consolidate a societal base around a wartime leader in a time of economic hardship. NATO will be portrayed as the mechanism through which a 'junta', 'fascists' and 'Banderites' are supported, giving the virtual illusion that Russia's struggle with NATO is akin to that of Nazi Germany and that Russia will emerge once again victorious. For NATO, the knock-on effect will be felt in defence budgets and the pressure to increase them in the face of this virtual confrontation.

Thus, when we look to 2015, rather than a 'charm offensive' within the NATO-Russia Council, North Atlantic Assembly or NATO capitals, Russia appears set to escalate conflict in Ukraine's east. President Putin's shrinking inner circle (Russia's securitocracy) have a vested interest in maintaining conflict - it secures or ring-fences funding for their corporate sectoral interests. NATO as an organization also seeks to increase solidarity, improve its operational readiness and pressure mounts on political elites to exercise political will to increase budgets to buy capabilities to address Russian behavior. It is difficult to see how NATO-Russian relations can break this confrontational cycle.

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