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**Does the ‘open door’ rhetoric of NATO’s approach to  
enlargement mean that Russia could and should be encouraged  
to join the Alliance?**

*Does the 'open door' rhetoric of NATO's approach to enlargement mean that Russia could and should be encouraged to join the Alliance?*

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## **Introduction**

NATO's 'open door' rhetoric towards enlargement means that any European state can join the Alliance if it is ready to comply with the principles of the North Atlantic Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area. This notion logically implies the possibility that Russia will eventually become a member of the Alliance. However, the history of the Cold War and the reason NATO was founded, makes Russia a special case, thus the NATO 'open door' rhetoric is not so straight forward.

Even if NATO does not exclude the possibility of Russian membership and states that the country is eligible to apply, Moscow does not show any desire to join the Alliance. Nevertheless, Moscow has on several occasions raised the possibility of membership; however it was more a case of diplomatic manoeuvring than a serious attempt to become a member. So, NATO's door is not closed, but neither side has made a genuine effort to open it.

Despite a lack of political will by Russia to become a NATO member, the debate continues. On the one hand scholars and policy makers argue that Russia should be encouraged to join the Alliance, because it is time to forget about the Cold

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War ghost and move on. Moreover, NATO has always been more than a military Alliance, thus it will spread democracy and increase transparency through conditionality. At the same time, NATO will benefit from having such a strategically important country within the Alliance. On the other hand, Russia through becoming a member of the Alliance, will improve its image in the West.

The other side of the debate lists a whole set of problems, which Russia may bring and cause in the case of eventual membership. The arguments against Russia joining range considerably; from stating that Russia is simply too big to become a member of NATO, to deeper concerns suggesting that the country may destroy the Alliance from within.

There is no straightforward answer as to whether Russia should be encouraged to join NATO or not. However, it is clear that the European security system cannot be built without two key elements – NATO and Russia. Hence it can be concluded that Moscow should be more engaged in European security framework whether as a partner or as a member of the Alliance.

The following essay will begin with a discussion about the possibility of Russia joining NATO. It will further analyse the different arguments for and against eventual Russian membership. Finally, the essay will look at future perspectives and Russia's role in the European security system.

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## **Could Russia join the Alliance?**

NATO's 'open door' policy is derived from Article 10 on the North Atlantic Treaty that states that; 'Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty' (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation 1949). This statement logically implies that Russia could join the Alliance. The same logic says that if Russia meets all the conditions required for the accession to the Alliance, there should not be any obstacles in the way. Furthermore, institutionalised NATO - Russia relations, such as the NATO – Russia Council, suggest that the next logical step would be Russian membership.

All countries wishing to join the Alliance must not only believe in what is expressed in the 1949 Washington Treaty, but also be willing to contribute to the Euro-Atlantic security area and meet certain military, political and economic criteria. According to Baker there are at least five explicit and two implicit criteria for the admission (2002:96). The main five goals are as follows:

- Functioning democracy based on a market economy;
- Respect of minorities;

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- Good relations with neighbour states;
- Military contribution to the Alliance;
- Commitment to democratic civil-military relations (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation 2005).

It is clear that at present Russia cannot meet all of the requirements, and it will not be able to do so in the near future. However, Baker states that Russia definitely meets two implicit criteria – it shares international security concerns and is a member of the Atlantic community (2002:96). Indeed, Russia constantly emphasizes its participation in combating terrorism and other threats, notably after the 9/11 attacks. The fact that President Putin was the first world leader to call President Bush on September 11<sup>th</sup>, shows at least contemporary concern and support for his former enemy (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation 2002). Furthermore, the US and Russia have a very similar understanding of what constitutes international terrorism and more importantly, they both agree on how best to counter it (Institute for Security Studies 2003:52). If we consider the 42<sup>nd</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy, it could be suggested that the same is true about the NATO-Russia approach towards international threats. For instance, Russian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Defence Ivanov stated that 'Russia and NATO have the same approach to estimation of transnational threats in the field of security' (2006). One of the practical examples could be Russia's participation in NATO's counter-terrorist operation in the Mediterranean Sea. However, in light of the most recent 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Conference a more complex picture is presented, in which the relationship between the US

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and Russia appears more antagonistic. More specifically the US representatives took President Putin's remarks regarding among other things, the United State's 'excessive' use of force, as open confrontation (Hemicker 2007).

The EU's position has never been straightforward. If the EU countries had showed solidarity after terrorist attacks in Moscow in 2002, they never agreed with Russia's position that 'there are no good Chechens – only terrorists' (Institute for Security Studies 2003:53). But again, the joined position of France, Germany and Russia over the crisis in Iraq showed that both Europeans and Russians can have a common position on international security concerns, even though it is not always the case. So, it can be stated that Russia's role within NATO and more broadly – the Atlantic community - is shifting from a political to more practical one, from diplomatic talks to action, which may be an incentive for future Russian NATO membership.

It could be argued that since 1991 Russia has been declaring its European identity and desire to be a part of the Atlantic community. However, Russia's somewhat erratic foreign policy is indicative of the interplay between evolving nationalist movements and the contradictory actions taken by the political elite. We do not need to look far - Russian support for authoritarian regime in Belarus raises a lot of questions about Russian identity and official policy; primarily does Russia really belong in the Atlantic community? Straus has expressed a different view and argues that Russia will accept Western states' identity only if it

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integrates with Euro-Atlantic institutions (2001:1). So, on the one hand the West fears that Russia will turn back from Western values and beliefs, with it consequently losing the opportunity to become part of the Atlantic community. On the other hand, it is clear, that only deep involvement in Euro-Atlantic institutions guarantees Russian transformation to a Western state. The question is what should Russia do in this closed circle? The answer is rather simple – Moscow should show more willingness for transformation towards better democracy, respect of human rights and free market economy. The same is true in the case of NATO membership – first of all Russia has to show the desire to join, and only then can NATO members start a real debate around the issue.

At the moment, the discussion about possible Russian membership in NATO coincides with the logical continuation of a developing relationship between Moscow and the Alliance. Starting with Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1994 – the main programme of defence and security cooperation between NATO and individual countries - NATO-Russia relations evolved to the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) established in 2002. The latter has extended relations to the degree of mutual cooperation among 26 Allies and Russia, where they work together as equal partners. Over the last four years NRC has achieved considerable progress in a number of areas, including the fight against international terrorism, the non-proliferation of WMD, crisis management, arms control, and military-to-military cooperation. In addition, Russia has offered its support to NATO's mission in Afghanistan and in the Mediterranean Sea, where the first Russian ship joined Operation Active Endeavour and was fully integrated

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into NATO's naval task group. Moreover, the NRC is an effective forum for political dialogue between NATO member states and Russia. For example, consultations on the Balkans and Afghanistan led to joint initiatives to improve border control and combat illegal trafficking in narcotics, through personnel training in the region (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation 2005a). However, the legacy of the past still causes obstacles for further NRC development. According to former US Ambassador to Russia Alexander Vershbow:

We are consulting on a wider set of topics and we are doing more together, but the NATO-Russia Council is only just beginning to hit its stride as an effective security partnership. It will grow in stature and influence as NATO and Russia eventually overcome remaining Cold War stereotypes and strengthen their military and political ties (Embassy of the United States of America to Russian Federation 2005).

Blank agrees that although NATO is pursuing Russian contribution in a number of projects, the atmosphere of mistrust from Russia's side remains evident (2006:8). As such Russia is not using all the opportunities available for furthering NATO – Russia relations (Blank 2006:8). However, perhaps the best way to look at NRC is as described:

In respects, one should consider current NRC activities as a form of preparatory work, which will enable, when the political will and need arise, Russia and NATO to develop cooperation in such essential projects as theatre missile defence, data exchange and interoperability in AWACS activities, joint peacekeeping operations, and the creation of joint military units and headquarters (Institute for Security Studies 2004:81).

Naturally, disputes still arise and there can be conflicting approaches, as with the ratification of the adapted Conventional Forces Europe Treaty. However, no one could have imagined this level of cooperation, 'including talks about having

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Russian air tankers refuelling NATO aircraft' just a few years ago (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation 2002). Nevertheless, it is argued that the PfP and NRC were only a concession by NATO to make Russia 'swallow' the latest two enlargements of the Alliance. Therefore, we can only guess what Russia might get in the case of for example, Ukrainian membership...

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## **Should Russia be encouraged to join NATO?**

If Russia could join the Alliance, the next question is whether it should be encouraged to seek eventual membership or not. Opinions differ, and both sides make strong arguments. Much though, depends on Russia itself.

Why do we ask about encouragement? The answer was given earlier - Russia has not shown any serious interest in becoming a NATO member. However, there were several attempts to raise this issue. Some authors argue that the former Soviet Union was first interested in joining NATO in 1954, just after Stalin's death (Davydof 2000:22, Forsberg 2005:15). There were indications that Russia might join NATO in 1990 by Gorbachev, in 1991 by Yeltsin, and by Putin in 2001. The so called 'honeymoon' period during the early years of Yeltsin and Kozyrev could be seen as the most serious attempt by Moscow to collaborate with former adversaries, and was defined by Russia's rapid integration with the West, and the beginning of a long-term policy aim to become a member of the Alliance (Kennedy-Pipe 2000:48). However, essentially it was 'vague political speculation on the issue' reinforced through the mass media and the public, rather than through the 'seriousness of the debate' (Forsberg 2005:346). For instance, a few months before signing the NRC the President of the Council of

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Foreign and Defence Policy Sergei Karaganov was criticising NATO's bureaucracy and launched the an idea to create a completely new security union comprised of G8 countries, China and possibly India (Andrusenko 2002). Gaddis also states that Russia has a choice; either to continue aligning itself with the US and Western Europe or to incline towards China (1998:148). However, at present Russia is economically and military too weak to comprise a counter-Alliance either within the Commonwealth of Independent States or with China, India, Iran, or any other country. According to Beeghner, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is seen by some as an emerging powerful anti-US organisation. However its' successful development has been challenged by the frictions between Russia and China (2006). Furthermore, this relatively young organisation operates more as a forum for discussing security and trade issues rather than a fully - established counter-Alliance to NATO (Beehgner 2006). All these ideas come from the Russian desire to be treated as a great country. For instance, Moscow quite often talks in favour of the UN Security Council, because it enjoys a veto right like every other 'well-respected' country. For Russia, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is still playing a significant role, but following the Kosovo conflict, in which NATO played a dominant role, the OSCE has become less important to Russia. Furthermore, the OSCE's criticism on Moscow's policies in Chechnya and the organisation's focus on the Balkans and former Soviet Union, have, for Russia, diminished its primary advantage, i.e. its pan-European role, and as a result of this process Russia no longer values its membership as highly as it once did (Lynch 2003:40). According

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to Danilov, the OSCE has experienced the most visible 'identity crisis' of all security organisations since 9/11 (Institute for Security Studies 2005:93). Indeed, other European institutions are taking on the primary functions of the OSCE more and more. For example, humanitarian issues and human rights are being shifted to the Council of Europe; economic cooperation is being coordinated by the enlarged European Union; and military-political actions are being managed by NATO, the ESDP, and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (Institute for Security Studies 2005:93). According to Karaganov, president of the Council of Foreign and Defence Policy, Russia does not want to stand in the queue for NATO membership like everyone else, because the Alliance, from a Russian point of view, is not a 'genuine international security organisation'; the organisation is too bureaucratic and Russia would rather choose 'genuine cooperation' (Andrusenko 2002). So, if Russia is not willing to apply for NATO membership, should it be encouraged?

There is no unambiguous position on whether Russia should be encouraged to join the Alliance or not. Despite Russian reluctance to join and NATO's passive position, the discussion exists and different opinions are evolving.

The opposing side with regards to Russian NATO membership states several reasons as to why Russia shouldn't join. First, the debate is around historical bias, i.e. that NATO was founded to counterbalance Soviet threat. So, Russia is seen as a natural enemy, and it is a matter of principle to accept any candidate

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but Russia. Moreover, the reaction of some Central and East European states to Russian membership would most likely be negative. For instance, Russian threat was the main reason given by the three Baltic States when they joined the Alliance. One of the most widely known arguments against Russian NATO membership was expressed by the Czech President Vaclav Havel, who stated that Russia is not part of the West, and if it were to join, the Alliance would lose its true meaning - therefore 'anything could extend anywhere' (Forsberg 2005:15). This position gives credence to a popular notion that NATO's 'raison d'être' is to counterbalance Russian power. Otherwise, NATO would be lost in a search for a new identity. However, NATO has always been more than an anti-Russian Alliance. Furthermore, Strauss argues that NATO can be defined as a mature society and as a consequence it does not need a fixed enemy for its cohesion (1996). Moreover, if NATO still sees Russia as a threat, then maybe it is time to forget the past and outgrow the enemy (Strauss 1996). At the same time, Strauss has drawn attention to the belief that it is better to have Russia as an external enemy than to experience Moscow's veto power (2001:1). In other words, a fear of Russian veto power is bigger than the fear of Russia remaining outside of NATO.

Second, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty makes things even more complicated. A joint agreement for the collective defence of any NATO member would mean an inescapable involvement in possible conflicts. Obviously, the Alliance does not want to be involved in Russian conflicts and use its armed

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forces to combat questionable threats, instead of staying focused on new global challenges. Moreover, Forsberg states that the Alliance is not only unwilling, but also unable to guarantee security against countries such as China (2005:16). However, Straus claims that the Chinese border should not be overestimated as an area of possible threat, because NATO involvement would be the same as it is with Mexico, i.e. NATO never needed to play a role in assisting the United States (1996). As Article 5 of the Washington Treaty causes so many problems, there is a suggestion to drop it and pave a way for Russian membership (Yesson 2001:203). However, it would transform the Alliance by broadening the security profile of the organisation.

Third, Russian foreign policy is very controversial. It seems that Moscow has two different approaches – one is designed for Western countries in order to keep good relations, and another is for its Eastern neighbours in order to demonstrate Russia's power. Moreover, Russia has too many unresolved issues with the former Soviet Union countries. For instance, Russian Duma deputy Viktor Alksnis states that 'Russia would have to touch upon the question of the legal status of the Crimean Peninsula as a part of Ukrainian territory, if Ukraine continues developing its relations with NATO' (2005). It is clear that the old story has not ended yet. The same was true during previous NATO enlargements when Moscow started to hold talks about Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina in 1998.

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Fourth, Russia is a regional hegemon and, thus, it is simply too big to join. But if we think about the US, we will see that America is global hegemonic power and it successfully leads the Alliance. Finally, many authors argue that Russia will paralyse decision-making, negotiations will be lengthy, and NATO will become an ineffective and weak organisation (Puskov 2001, La Porte 2004) As a result, 'Russia would explode NATO from within' (Forsberg 2005:16).

There are reasons within contemporary Russian thinking against NATO membership, which mostly refer to constrained freedom to act and loss of power. First, it is stated that the US will benefit more than Russia will, because Russia would be used as a shield against the Southern threat. Furthermore, Moscow is afraid to be ignored and forced to back up US decisions. Second, Russia argues that its hands will be tied in foreign policy beyond Europe. These fears were confirmed by President Putin, who said that Russian NATO membership is out of the question, because it would mean not only the loss of sovereignty but also restrictions in foreign policy (Pravda 2005a). So, Russia does not want to join the Alliance just for membership sake, but it wants some benefits; benefits which it does not see at present.

NATO officials have also touched on the question of Russian membership, whilst being neither pessimistic nor negative. Perhaps the most well known and favourable address to Russia was from the lips of NATO Secretary General George Robertson, who said that the possibility of Russian membership is

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definitely not ruled out; however he did not forget to add that membership was not on the agenda (Forsberg 2005:15, Pravda 2003). This question, thus, is not on NATO's agenda and there is no evidence that it will be in the near future either. Some member states also welcomed the idea of Russian NATO membership. For instance, Berlusconi and Schroder thought that the NRC is not the last step in the NATO-Russia relationship (Forsberg 2005:15). However, their successors – Prodi and Merkel – chose a strategic partnership over a more exclusive 'friendship' with President Putin, and that may cool down any outgivings on NATO membership. Poland is always emphasizing the importance of their good relations with Russia. It stressed that it did not seek to draw any dividing lines in Europe or isolate Russia. Moreover, former President Kwasniewski said that Russian membership would not be a surprise for him (Forsberg 2005:15).

According to Hunter and Rogov, the proponents of Russian membership in the West mostly see NATO like the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, whereas in Russia, people see NATO more as a political and security organisation instead of a military Alliance (2004:26). Both the West and those in Russia suggest forgetting old stereotypes of the Cold War and moving forward. Furthermore, Paul Fitch who worked in NATO's Political Affairs Division raises the question of whether Russia and the Alliance could 'afford' to postpone any longer significance of common interests and delay having a closer relationship (La Porte 2004). It is evident that the European security system can only be

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created with the coordination of two important elements - NATO and Russia, and only close relations between them can guarantee stability in the old Continent.

There are several reasons why Russia should join the Alliance. First, it is not a bad idea to keep past enemies as close as possible. It would help to increase transparency and diminish mutual distrust. In addition, NATO economic, political and military conditions would help Russia to implement military reform and increase democratisation. It could be suggested that political instability and developing market economy in Russia is just a question of time. Obviously, it might take years to meet those goals because Russian transition seems to be more problematic than, for instance, East European states', but it is not impossible. Besides, lack of democracy has never been a major issue in the Alliance in terms of membership. For example, neither Greece nor Turkey were democratic countries at the time of acceptance 'quite uncontroversially, way back in 1952' (Gaddis 1998:6). Furthermore, the Alliance was not afraid to accept Germany in 1955, and therefore, it can be said that member countries did not fight each other. It is a strong argument, if we are still suspicious about either Russian intentions or its political line. Straus states that international organisations such as NATO or EU have only negative effects on those countries that have lost their hope of joining (2001:15). Former US ambassador Dean notes that Russian exclusion brings a new dividing line in Europe and more political and military frictions (1998).

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Second, Russia is strategically important and its geopolitical position would give NATO additional room for manoeuvring. Moreover, NATO sees Russia as a significant partner in combating international terrorism and the non-proliferation of WMD. Third, Russia could act as a potential counterbalance to American unilateralism and dominance within NATO. However, if any country could take a lead in advocating Russia to join the Alliance it would be the US, which needs a good partner to support its fight against global terrorism. La Porte states that a full Russian membership should be a future aim in Russian-American relations (2004). Americans, thus do not deny this possibility. For instance, in one interview Condoleezza Rice said that the Bush administration's policy is based on friendly cooperation and it does not see Russia as a strategic adversary (People's daily 2001). However, both countries still face a lot of disagreements over foreign policy issues. For example, at the Vilnius conference in 2006 Vice President of the US Richard B. Cheney delivered a lot of strict remarks of Russian foreign policy. A few days later, Russian President V. Putin delivered his state-of-the-nation address with a few critiques of Washington as well (2006). So, the situation is not very clear or peaceful between Moscow and Washington.

Finally, a democratic and transparent Russia would change its image in the West. It would help not only in furthering Russia's political partnership with the Atlantic community, but also Russia's access to the European market.

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To sum up, despite Russian reluctance to join the Alliance, scholars and policy makers are still holding a debate around this subject. Both sides have many strong arguments to deliver; yet in every sense the debate is meaningless whilst Russia continues to demonstrate a lack of interest in standing in a NATO membership queue with all other applicant countries.

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## **Framework vs substance**

It is obviously too early to talk about Russia joining NATO. Moreover, real political debate does not exist. Of course, Russian membership could not be ruled out for good. However, this country is still unstable, unpredictable, it faces too many domestic problems, not to mention remaining 'frozen conflicts' with the Commonwealth of Independent States. At the same time, NATO remains quite passive with regards to Russia's loud declarations and influence over the region. For instance, NATO took action in Kosovo stopping the Serbian human rights abuses. In Chechnya, however, the Alliance is almost silent and refuses to call Russian actions as war crimes (Mendelson 2002:54). Consequently, it can be concluded that the Alliance is deterred from strengthening its engagement along Russia's borders, and with Russia itself (Kennedy-Pype 2000:63).

At present it is questionable if either European countries or the US need Russia in NATO. It seems that the preferred situation is 'Russia and NATO' rather than 'Russia in NATO'. Moreover, the US has huge influence within the Alliance. So, it can be observed that as long as the US and Russia stand apart, there is no possibility of eventual membership. All recent political events show that both countries are drifting apart, and very much depends on Russian behaviour. However Mendelson points out that the US government has a strong interest to

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support Russia's democratic transition (2001:69). At the same time, it is important to mention that despite the fact that there are continued human rights abuses in Russia, the country is still welcomed as a partner in 'the fight against terrorism' (Mendelson 2002:55).

At the moment though, the Alliance needs to be effective and finish its transition first. Yet, Russia can and could continue to enjoy its close involvement in NATO operations. Moreover, it should be more engaged in day-to-day cooperation and build confidence at all levels. The work of Hunter and Rogov indicates that there are three levels within the NATO framework where Russia could be more deeply involved – the North Atlantic Council, the NRC, and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (2004:26). A lot of problems come from the mid-level Russian military officials, who are still faithful to the former Soviet regime and its system. Golts and Putnam reveal that Russia has to reorganize and modernize its military, notably restructuring relations between the Ministry of Defence and the dozen other 'power ministries' (2004:122). Moreover, the fact that military chiefs and semi-military ministries are reporting to the President and the rest of the Ministers report to the Prime Minister, shows that the Russian government is fragmented (Golts and Putnam 2004:148). At the same time, this reveals how important military and security affairs in Russia are. So, the Alliance is confronted with a huge system, with many problems.

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Despite all the problems, Russia is one of the main actors determining Europe's stability. Balogh states that if Moscow does not cooperate with Euro-Atlantic institutions, a common and comprehensive European security system cannot be built (2000:194). So, there is no doubt that Russia is very important for Europe's and NATO's further security development, however a transparent and close partnership is still a long way down the road.

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## **Conclusions**

NATO's door is not closed for Russia, but at the moment neither side is showing a serious effort to opening it. It is true that Moscow must solve a lot of domestic problems, including finalizing democratisation and to meet NATO's explicit and implicit goals. Russia has a long way go in order to be eligible for voice with a veto, i.e. full membership.

The question of NATO enlargement would be less controversial if we discussed any other country but Russia. This European hegemon has always been special insofar as Moscow continues to show signs of 'greatness syndrome'; the reason behind Russia's drive to achieve special status in Euro-Atlantic institutions. At the same time, it could be argued that the fallen superpower has failed to find a relevant Western institution, and as a result this is likely to have a negative impact on Russia's Western identity. Moreover, Moscow has already started looking for other allies, notably China. So, there is a danger that Russia will 'slip from Western hands' and will make an Alliance with the new emerging countries. But again, it is hard to tell how relevant this threat is, as the political and economic centre together with the majority of the population are found in European territory.

The fact is that Russia is very important for the European security system and it has a significant role to play in terms of 'hard' and 'soft' security. So, the European common and comprehensive security system must involve both NATO

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and Russia, and the framework of their cooperation is not as important as its substance.

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