

The NATO-Russia partnership: more than meets the eye

Paul Fritch reflects on developments over the last decade in the relationship between the former Cold War adversaries.

Much has changed in the ten years since Russia and the North Atlantic Alliance made their first attempt at strategic partnership. Ten new states in Central and Eastern Europe have joined the Alliance. The enlargement of the European Union (EU) has transformed the socio-economic landscape of the continent. We have overcome major challenges in the Balkans, only to face the new threats posed by terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Much has changed in Russia as well, where efforts to build a functioning democratic state, a free society and a prosperous market economy have faced enormous challenges.

These changes should have brought NATO and Russia closer together, and in many cases they have. Yet too often, when the NATO-Russia relationship makes headlines, it is for the wrong reasons. In Russia and in the West, journalists, political scientists and all too many senior politicians thrive on confrontations, both actual and potential. Nothing sells newspapers like the declaration of a “new Cold War”.

Has the NATO-Russia partnership been free of controversy? Of course not. We have had our disagreements, sometimes minor, sometimes less so. Could we have done more, on both sides, to build an effective and enduring partnership? Perhaps. In this issue of the NATO Review’s online version, two experts will initiate a very necessary

debate about where the NATO-Russia relationship should go from here.

But in order to understand where we’re going, we must first acknowledge where we are today, and how we got here. For amid all the speculation over the problems in our relationship, there is too little awareness of what Russia and the member states of NATO have actually achieved together.

We often look back on the first years of the NATO-Russia partnership as a necessary but unpleasant transitional phase, brought to a decisive close with the 1999 Kosovo crisis. Yet in those difficult years, we succeeded in managing Europe’s most pressing security crisis – the chain of civil war and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia – and in doing it together. Russia became the largest non-NATO troop contributor to NATO-led military operations, a distinction it held for more than seven years.

The second phase of the NATO-Russia partnership, which began with the creation of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2002, was intended to be a more decisive step away from the stereotypes of the past, and toward more effective cooperation in facing the challenges of the future. When heads of state and government gathered in Rome five years ago, the memory of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks was still fresh in their minds. They resolved that the threats of the 21st century demanded a new, more interdependent approach to security, and that Russia and the member states of NATO could no longer afford to dwell upon the residual stereotypes and hostilities of the past.

Paul Fritch is Head of Section, Russia and Ukraine Relations, in NATO’s Political Affairs and Security Policy Division.



© NATO

28 May 2002: Opening a new page in NATO-Russia relations, the first NATO-Russia Council meeting in Rome, Italy

Much has been accomplished since that time. In order to enhance their ability to stand together against shared security threats, NATO and Russia have intensified work to develop interoperability of military forces and equipment, of civil emergency planning teams, of theatre missile defence systems and – not least – of threat analysis. In 2004, the NATO-Russia Council approved a comprehensive Action Plan on Terrorism, which includes concrete initiatives to prevent, combat and manage the consequences of terrorist acts. Russia became

the first non-NATO state ever to contribute to an Article 5 collective defence operation, when in 2006, Russian Navy assets joined the Alliance’s anti-terrorist naval patrols in the Mediterranean Sea.

The transformation of the NATO-Russia relationship has not been limited to technical projects. An intensified political dialogue on contemporary security issues has served to identify new areas in which NATO and Russia share fundamental challenges, and new ways in which they can pool their efforts to enhance common security.

In Russia and in the West,
journalists, political scientists and all
too many senior politicians thrive on
confrontations, both actual and potential

Nowhere has this trend been more evident than in the international effort to bring peace, stability and democratic development to Afghanistan. In 2005, NRC foreign ministers recognised that the illegal narcotics trade posed a fundamental challenge to this effort. They launched a path-breaking joint



© NATO

Russia's President Vladimir Putin signs the NATO-Russia Declaration in May 2002

training programme designed to build counter-narcotics capabilities throughout the region. By the end of this year, more than 350 officers from Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbours will have graduated from this programme.

The NATO-Russia Council
has evolved into a forum for
serious dialogue on those issues
where we do not see eye-to-eye

Finally, the NRC has evolved into a forum for serious dialogue on those issues where we do not see eye-to-eye. Earlier this year, when Russia expressed concern over the implications of US plans to locate a third missile defence site in Central Europe, both Moscow and Washington turned to the NATO-Russia Council as the appropriate forum

to address this politically charged and technically challenging issue. Experts agreed to expand the scope of the NRC's annual work programme, to build upon an established record of cooperation in field-deployed theatre missile defence and to explore broader cooperation in the missile defence area. The NRC agreed to organise a series of high-level meetings, reinforced by policymakers from capitals in order to promote transparency and dialogue, to better understand the US plans and the Russian concerns, and to find a cooperative way forward.

Another contentious issue on our agenda concerns the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). Here, there are longstanding differences over complex legal and political questions – from the Russian side over the timetable for ratification and entry into force of an agreement to adapt the Treaty to the current



© NATO

Celebratory flyover of the Italy's aerobatic team, Frecce Tricolori, during the first NATO-Russia Council meeting

security environment, and from the Allied side over Russia's compliance with the Treaty's host-state consent provisions in Georgia and Moldova. In April, President Putin declared a "moratorium" on Russia's implementation of the Treaty, and Russia subsequently called for an extraordinary conference of the Treaty's participants.

Amid all this controversy, it is easy to forget what NATO Allies and Russia have achieved together in the CFE framework. More than 60 000 pieces of heavy military equipment have been destroyed, and the potential for a large-scale military attack in Europe virtually eliminated. NATO's holdings of Treaty-limited equipment have been reduced so dramatically that today's Alliance of 26 states is more lightly armed than the Alliance of 16 that existed in 1990. The NATO-Russia Council has expressed repeatedly its support for CFE as an essential cornerstone of European security, and rightly so.

As the NATO-Russia relationship moves forward, we need to continue our dialogue on these and other difficult issues, even as we work to intensify our practical cooperation in areas where our interests clearly converge. In the first five years of our partnership, working in the framework of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council, our primary focus was on overcoming the legacy of the past by promoting transparency and mutual confidence. In the second stage, motivated by the urgent threats of terrorism and proliferation, we geared the work of the new NATO-Russia Council almost exclusively toward questions of the future and toward new ways in which we could join forces to face unprecedented new threats. Over the next five years, we will have to pursue both of these goals simultaneously, in order to ensure that deepening cooperation stands on a firm foundation of mutual trust. If we are to succeed in facing tomorrow's challenges, we can do no less. ■