

NATO-Russia Relations: The Background

The end of the Cold War was a turning point in Europe’s history. From 1991, NATO began to work hard to establish a strategic partnership with Russia. However, in March 2014, Russia illegally annexed Crimea. In response, NATO suspended all practical cooperation with Russia, while keeping political and military channels of communication open. This factsheet sets out the key dates and events in the relationship.

1994: The Partnership for Peace

In June 1994, Russia became the first country to join NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP), a programme of practical bilateral cooperation between NATO and partner countries.

The Brussels Summit Declaration from January 1994 defined the goals of PfP as expanding and intensifying political and military cooperation in Europe, increasing stability, diminishing threats to peace, and building strengthened security relationships.

1997: The NATO-Russia Founding Act

On 27 May 1997, NATO leaders and President Boris Yeltsin signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act, expressing their determination to “build together a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and cooperative security.”

The Act established the goal of cooperation in areas such as peacekeeping, arms control, counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics and theatre missile defence. In the Founding Act, NATO and Russia agreed to base their cooperation on the principles of human rights and civil liberties, refraining from the threat or use of force against each other or any other state.



Signing of NATO-Russia Founding Act, 27 May 1997

2002-2008: Cooperation through the NATO-Russia Council

On 28 May 2002, NATO leaders and President Vladimir Putin signed a declaration in Rome titled “NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality.” This established the NATO-Russia Council as a consensus-based body of equal members. The NATO-Russia Council led to cooperation in areas such as counter-terrorism, crisis management, arms control and theatre missile defence. NATO and Russia cooperated on supporting Afghanistan – including Russian provision of transit routes for ISAF, counter- narcotics training for officers from Afghanistan, Central Asia and Pakistan, and support for the Afghan army’s helicopter fleet.

2008: The Georgia Crisis

Russia’s military action in Georgia in August 2008 led to the suspension of formal meetings of the NATO-Russia Council and cooperation in some areas. Allies continue to call on Russia to reverse its recognition of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. At the NATO Summit in Strasbourg and Kehl on 4 April 2009, NATO leaders acknowledged disagreements with Russia over Georgia, but decided to resume practical and political cooperation.

2010-2014: Seeking a New Stage of Cooperation

During the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, NATO leaders and President Dmitry Medvedev agreed to embark on “a new stage of cooperation towards a true strategic partnership”, based on the goals and principles of the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the NATO-Russia Rome Declaration. The Alliance invited Russia to explore the potential for expanded cooperation on missile defence, and the two agreed to



Joint NATO-Russia counter-terrorism exercise Vigilant Skies 2011

further strengthen cooperation in the fight against terrorism, and counter-piracy efforts. In the years that followed, NATO and Russia worked together in support of the Afghan army's helicopter fleet, conducted joint counter-piracy and submarine-rescue exercises, and discussed a joint mission to help dispose of Syria's chemical weapons.

2014 - 2020: Responding to the Ukraine Crisis

In March 2014, Russia illegally and illegitimately annexed Crimea, part of Ukraine's sovereign territory. In response, on 1 April 2014, NATO Foreign Ministers decided to suspend all practical cooperation with Russia. Since then, Russia has continued its aggressive actions against Ukraine, including destabilising eastern Ukraine. NATO responded to this more dangerous security environment by enhancing its deterrence and defence posture, while remaining open to political dialogue with Russia.

At the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, NATO leaders made clear that an improvement in the Alliance's relations with Russia will be contingent on a clear and constructive change in Russia's actions – one that demonstrates compliance with international law and Russia's international commitments. Until then, NATO and Russia cannot return to "business as usual".

2018: Salisbury Attack

On 14 March 2018, the United Kingdom briefed Allies on the use of a nerve agent in Salisbury. NATO Allies expressed their deep concern and condemned this breach of international norms.

After intensive consultations among Allies and partner countries that took place at NATO headquarters and in capitals, more than 150 Russian diplomats were expelled by more than 25 nations. On 27 March 2018, the NATO Secretary General announced the withdrawal of accreditation of 7 staff of the Russian Mission to NATO, as well as the denial of 3 pending accreditations, and the reduction of the maximum size of the mission to 20.

2019: The NATO Leaders' meeting in London

At their meeting in London in December 2019, NATO leaders stated that Russia's aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security. But they also stated that we remain open for dialogue, and to a constructive relationship with Russia when Russia's actions make that possible. NATO leaders reaffirmed the Alliance's dual-track approach to Russia: deterrence and defence on the one hand, and dialogue on the other hand.

Channels of Communication

Channels for communication between NATO and Russia remain open, as they have done since 2014. The NATO-Russia Council (NRC), an important platform for dialogue, has never been suspended. We have held ten NRC meetings since April 2016. Ukraine remains top of the agenda in the NRC. We have also made progress by addressing other key security issues on our agenda, including by discussing the INF Treaty in the two NRC meetings held in January and July 2019. In recent years, we have taken a step forward in the NRC on transparency by exchanging reciprocal briefings in advance of major exercises from NATO and Russia. NATO has also used the NRC as a forum to address other key issues in our relations with Russia. For example, Allies have raised in the NRC the issue of Russia's hybrid activities in Allied nations. The situation in Afghanistan has also been addressed on several occasions.

High-level bilateral channels of communication remain open between NATO and Russia. The Secretary General and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also continue their meetings, including at occasions such as the Munich Security Conference. NATO and Russia also keep open military-to-military lines of communication. These channels are important to improve transparency, avoid escalation, and reduce the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation. In recent years there have been several contacts and meetings between General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, and the Chairman of the Military Committee of NATO and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe.

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