The NATO-Russia relationship is undoubtedly one of the most important relationships that affects overall Euro-Atlantic security. Although, there are number of issues where NATO and Russia cooperate (ISAF mission – transit of NATO freight through the Russian territory, counter-terrorism, nuclear weapons issues, crisis management, counter-narcotics), they also face a number of challenges (missile defence in Europe, NATO enlargement), which are negatively influencing the practical cooperation and can be source of potential conflict. However, cooperation enables them to achieve important overlapping policy objectives. The goal of this paper is to analyse the challenges of NATO-Russia relations. By brief evaluation of current status of their relationship, this paper mainly specifies the future platforms of cooperation, concentrating on the post-ISAF period, as cooperation in Afghanistan is currently the most important area of NATO-Russia relations. Here, after 2014, cooperation in the present form will end which will undoubtedly bring about the search for other areas of cooperation.

Current status of the NATO-Russia relations

Foreign and security policy thinking are derived from strategic culture. In this sense NATO and Russia sustain different views on European security and what threatens it. The differing perceptions by both sides on security have to be taken into account in part because each country’s strategic thinking comes out of different security cultures. Whereas Russia maintains a remorselessly geopolitical understanding of security,¹ NATO’s approach moved away from strictly geopolitical towards wider interpretation of security. Russia desires to be a part of the “Euro-Atlantic Club” and has a real influence on the decision-making process. One of the most exclusive examples is Russian position towards missile defence in Europe. NATO’s real focus is on building trust with its partners. The Alliance is encouraging a trust-

building process through the gradual increase and broadening of daily contacts between NATO members and Russian officials because – in their view – it will help build a more durable and trusting relationship. However, there are deep-seated suspicions held by some in Russia’s ruling circles and in several NATO countries as well, which deteriorate the intentions of both sides to cooperate.

Besides strategic interests of both entities, their mutual perceptions play an important role in their policy formulations. According to the new NATO’s Strategic Concept: “NATO poses no threat to Russia” (NATO 2010). This position was further confirmed by NATO Secretary General Rasmussen in his statement at the press conference following the NATO-Russia Council meeting in Foreign Ministers session in April – “We do not consider Russia a threat to NATO countries, to NATO territory, to NATO populations. And Russia should not consider NATO a threat towards Russia” (Rasmussen 2012). However, Russian approach is different. Kremlin perceives Alliance as a military bloc hostile to its interests as was clearly expressed by President Putin at the press-conference after the NATO-Russia Council meeting in Bucharest, when he said that “approximation of NATO to Russia’s borders will be seen as a direct threat to the security of the Russian Federation” (RIA Novosti 2008). Moreover, Russian position was also officially declared in the latest Military Doctrine from 2010, which lists both NATO and its strategic missile defence as first amongst the military dangers faced by the country (Voennaya doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii 2010).

Despite negative rhetoric on the Russian side, there were created two institutionalized platforms of cooperation between NATO and Russia – Partnership for Peace Programme (PiP) and NATO-Russia Council (NRC). Russia joined PiP in 1994 to build up an individual relationship with NATO. PiP offers practical bilateral cooperation on a wide range of issues. Russia was involved in NATO’s peacekeeping operation in Bosnia (SFOR) and contributed the largest troop contingent among non-NATO states. It was also involved in the Kosovo peacekeeping operation (KFOR). In regards to NATO eastward enlargement, Kremlin has a negative view of the PiP. Russia’s resistance can be mainly explained by its classical geopolitical view on the Russian “near abroad”, where Moscow’s key interest is to have a major influence in the region and tie these countries as close to Russia as possible. The secondary reason why Moscow has been restrained with regards to PiP is the fact that Russia has virtually the same status as other post-Soviet countries. This was considered as insufficient for Russia’s own interpretation of its geopolitical position and Moscow demanded
more exclusive position. Moreover, PfP does not have the same significance for Russia as it does for Central and Eastern European countries, which had used the program to reconfigure their armed forces in line with NATO standards.

In 2002, NATO has started cooperation with Russia more intensively on the basis of NATO-Russia Council, which replaced the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC). The post-9/11 atmosphere was fundamental in shaping the NATO-Russia relations. It has allowed Russia to take a greater part in discussions and has been far more satisfactory to Moscow than the previous “NATO +1” format under the PJC (Hendrickson 2005). The major advantage of the new format of cooperation enables Russia to be part of the discussions within Alliance from the beginning, which was not possible under the previous arrangement. Despite ambitious goals to work within the framework of the NATO-Russia Council as equal partners in areas of common interest, real activities have been much more restrained. There is a need to focus on areas where actual results can be achieved such as in Afghanistan.

**NATO-Russia cooperation in Afghanistan**

ISAF is considered one of the most successful examples of practical cooperation between Russia and NATO. They share common interests in the region’s stabilization and face common threats of radical Islamists in Afghanistan. From March 2008, a Russian political decision based on strictly defined strategic interests allowed land transit though Russia of non-military freight from NATO, NATO members and non-NATO ISAF contributors, in support of the ISAF in accordance with UNSCR 1386 (NATO-Russia Council 2011). Moreover, on 25 June 2012 the Russian Government adopted a decree, which extends ISAF transit options to include multimodal transportation to combine – rail, road and air transport. Under these arrangements, the transportation of non-military ISAF supplies through Russian territory has been implemented by Russian transport companies. Since

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2 NATO member states and Russia will continue to intensify their cooperation in areas including the struggle against terrorism, crisis management, non-proliferation, arms control and confidence-building measures, theatre missile defence, search and rescue at sea, military-to-military cooperation, and civil emergencies. This cooperation may complement cooperation in other fora. (Foundation Act of NATO-Russia Council)

3 Mechanism for consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, joint decision, and joint action for the member states of NATO and Russia on a wide spectrum of security issues in the Euro-Atlantic region (Foundation Act of NATO-Russia Council).

August 1, 2012 the transit is implemented through the Vostochny airport in the Russian city of Ulyanovsk (Larionov 2012).

In order to be able to “sell” this political decision in this highly sensitive area of cooperation with NATO to the Russian public and domestic political representatives, an argument of broad international consensus and cooperation in the context of Afghanistan was used, as the head of the parliamentary committee for defence, Vladimir Komoyedov reminded that a refusal to fulfil UN Security Council resolution 1386, would be a major blow to Russia’s reputation as a reliable partner (Vestnik Kavkaza 2012).

According to NATO officials, in order to remove ISAF military equipment from Afghanistan by the end of 2014: “a container would have to leave the country every seven minutes, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, starting now.” So far, more than 60 thousand ISAF containers have been transported by Russian carriers to ISAF through Russian territory and there are about 100 thousand containers and 50 thousand wheeled vehicles that need to go (Felbab-Brown 2012). Thus Russian economic benefits from transit are considerable. Although it has not been officially declared, according to Ulyanovsk Customs Chief Valery Gerasev, the transit of each container costs about 5,000 USD. Based on this figure, it can be roughly estimated that Russia already earned about 300 million USD for the transport of 60 thousand containers so far. The 100 thousand containers that still need to be transported, means another 500 million USD for Russia (Vestnik Kavkaza 2012). Moreover, Russia has also profited from selling military equipment and ammunition to NATO. In 2010 NATO bought from Russia 31 helicopters Mi-17 and refurbished them for the Afghan army, which resulted in earnings for Moscow of about 600 million USD, with NATO planning to buy another 10 helicopters by 2015 (Maslov 2010). According to a statement of Russia’s state arms exporter Rosoboronexport, Russia was for the first time invited by US defence firms to become a subcontractor on the delivery of Russian-made ammunition for coalition forces in Afghanistan. If this tender is realized, Moscow stands to gain additional economic profit from the ISAF mission.

Transit of NATO freight through the Russian territory has been a keystone in NATO-Russia cooperation. Besides the Pakistani route, which is more unstable, expensive and less secure, transit across Russia is the main route for supplying ISAF. In addition Russia is deriving advantage from ISAF in terms of security and stability. Russia welcomes NATO’s efforts to
control the area and stabilizes Russian southern peripheries. Without NATO’s presence, Russian armed forces would have to take the responsibility for maintaining security and launch more stabilizing and defence campaigns in the Central Asia region, as it was the case before 2001. Moreover, ISAF protects Russia against the spill-over and infiltration of extremist powers to the “heart of Asia” – Russia’s key region of influence. Thus it is Russia’s direct interest to preserve stability in the region and keep Central Asia secure.

Key areas of disagreement

Despite positive efforts to cooperate on a practical level in Afghanistan, there are number of areas where the attitudes of Russia and NATO diverge. Among the most contentious one’s is the issue of Georgian war and Russian recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The second is NATO’s open door policy, especially towards Georgia and Ukraine. The third challenge is cooperation on missile defence in Europe. These three issues concern strategic interests of both entities. Further, these problematic issues are long-term and probably will last into the future as well. However, there are disagreements in other areas, as was shown during the recent Syria crisis, where their strategic interests diverged due to the broader geopolitical interests of both entities in the Middle East.

NATO’s position towards the Georgian war is well described on the official NATO website stating, that “Alliance expressed particular concern over Russia’s disproportionate military action which was incompatible with Russia’s peacekeeping role in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia” (NATO 2012a). Following the 2008 war, NATO-Russia relations reached the lowest point in a decade and they were gradually and slowly improving in the following years. The war definitely caused a rift in their mutual relations, which were formally re-built in 2010, when NATO invited Russia to the Lisbon summit.

Another issue critical to NATO-Russia relations is Alliance’s continuing commitment to future enlargement. The less Moscow obstructs potential memberships of the Balkan states, the more it is against accession of countries from “near abroad.” NATO confirmed many times (Bucharest Summit in 2008, Lisbon Summit in 2010, and the latest summit in Chicago), that Georgia is a real candidate for NATO membership. Georgia is also actively contributing to the ISAF as the second largest non-NATO troop contributor nation (NATO 2012a). However, within the Alliance there is a strong group of member states led by France and
Germany who see Georgia’s accession as unacceptable. Despite the fact that the NATO summit in Chicago is considered to be the “last NATO summit without enlargement,” it is more focused on the Balkans.

An Intensified Dialogue on Ukraine’s membership aspirations and related reforms was launched in 2005. Nevertheless, Ukraine’s membership in the Alliance is not realistic in the foreseeable future. The reason is primarily that under the current President Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine is not pursuing NATO membership as a foreign policy goal. Secondly, according to numerous independent polls, NATO membership has low public support (40% of Ukrainians see NATO as a threat) (Gallup 2010). For more than three years Ukraine has been out of NATO’s accession discussions. The change may eventually occur, depending on the results of the Ukrainian parliamentary elections, which will take place in October 2012. However, based on the present situation, such a shift is not realistic. It is important to mention that both Georgian and Ukrainian membership are just theoretical possibilities at the moment.

Missile defence in Europe can be a catalyst for mutual NATO-Russia relations. It could either lead to pragmatic cooperation or to deterioration of relations. As Russian foreign policy expert Dmitri Trenin expressed in an interview for NATO Review – “Missile defence can be a game changer [a bridge towards the future that leads to real cooperation] or a game breaker [bridge towards the past where the danger of sliding back is very real]” (Trenin 2010). When NATO leaders met almost two years ago in Lisbon, the possibilities for cooperation looked promising. They attempted to neutralize the most disputed issue in NATO-Russia relations. The NATO-Russian Council, with the participation of Russian President Dmitri Medvedev, specifically “agreed on joint ballistic missile threat assessment and to continue dialogue in this area” (Chicago Summit Declaration 2012). However the promising political declaration was not further translated into real steps. Until there is some concrete binding document, any real progress on this issue cannot be expected.

Russia would like to participate on the missile defence plan as a partner on the basis of complete reciprocity and transparency. Thus, Moscow wants an equal participation in NATO’s decision-making process. To this effect Russia proposed that NATO creates a “sectoral” missile defence, with each entity responsible for providing missile defence protection for their own sector in Europe. Such conditions are naturally unacceptable for the Alliance. Moreover, Russian officials have expressed concerns about any deployments close
to their borders because the fast interceptor missiles can possibly threaten Moscow’s nuclear deterrence. Therefore Kremlin requires from NATO “more transparency” about missile defence capabilities and plans, which would assure them that it poses no threat.

Whereas the Alliance seeks to develop two separate systems working independently of each other, Russia wants to lock the two systems, thereby effectively securing itself a veto. This in turn clashes with the provisions of The NATO-Russia Founding Act that rules out any “right of veto over the actions of the other” or any restriction on “the rights of NATO or Russia to independent decision-making and action” (Sherr 2011). Currently, pragmatic cooperation is feasible. On the one hand, this sort of cooperation requires trust that just isn’t there. On the other hand, further developing of practical cooperation will help increase mutual trust and improve relations. If Russia misses the chance to collaborate with NATO on common missile defence, for sure the US and NATO will create their own system without Russia and that’s what Kremlin has to take into account. The challenges are tremendous, but returning to the status quo is not a sustainable, longer-term option (Trenin 2012).

**Future platforms of cooperation**

In the post-ISAF period, the importance of Afghanistan will decrease and cooperation in other areas will gain in prominence. Nevertheless, Afghanistan will be important for Moscow in the future as well. **According to the results of the Chicago NATO Summit, there will be a new operation where NATO forces will gradually move into a more supportive role (Chicago Summit Declaration 2012).** So far, there is no NATO official information about the numbers of troops, which will stay there after the deadline, but it is estimated that it will be around 50,000 troops. The force generation procedure will start next year and Russia will have an opportunity once again to be involved in the process of Afghanistan’s transition.

Leaving aside Afghanistan, the cooperation will most probably continue in key areas of shared interests including the fight against terrorism, counter-narcotics, counter-piracy, nuclear weapons issues (New START – a nuclear arms reduction treaty between the US and Russia, signed on 8 April 2010, ratified on 5 February 2011), crisis management [between 1996 and 2003, Russia was the largest non-NATO troop contributor to NATO-led peacekeeping operations (NATO 2012b)], Cooperative Airspace Initiative, non-proliferation and arms control, military-to-military cooperation, submarine-crew search and rescue,
defence transparency, strategy and reform, defence industrial cooperation, logistics, civil emergencies, and raising public awareness of the NRC.

NATO-Russia cooperation in *combating terrorism* has taken the form of regular exchanges of information, in-depth consultations, joint threat assessments, civil emergency planning for terrorist attacks, high-level dialogue on the role of the military in combating terrorism, lessons learned from recent terrorist attacks, and scientific and technical cooperation. NRC members also cooperate in areas related to terrorism such as border control, non-proliferation, airspace management, and nuclear safety. A concrete example of cooperation in this field is the “Stand-off Detection of Explosive Devices” project aimed at confronting and countering the threat of attacks on mass transit and possibly other public gathering places through jointly developing technology to detect explosives. Part of the struggle against terrorism is also Cooperative Airspace Initiative (CAI) for air traffic coordination. This project significantly contributes to building mutual trust between NATO and Russia (NATO 2012b).

In the area of *counter-narcotics* cooperation, NATO and Russia cooperate within the framework of NATO-Russia Council through joint projects such as the NRC Counter Narcotics Training Project. Since 2006, the NRC has been assisting in building regional capacity against narcotics trafficking by training counter narcotics personnel from Afghanistan, Central Asian nations and Pakistan. The initiative seeks to build local capacity and to promote regional networking and cooperation by sharing the expertise (NATO 2012b).

Since December 2004 Russia supports NATO’s maritime *counter-piracy* operation in the Mediterranean Sea – Operation Active Endeavour. Piracy and armed robbery at sea continue to pose a significant and growing threat to maritime security. Taking into account, that the share of maritime transport accounts for 38% of all freight (Cargo.ru 2012), it is in Russian direct interest to keep sea waters secure from pirates which could threaten the country’s export. The NRC member states expand existing tactical level co-operation, including through joint training and exercises. The more Russia and NATO will cooperate in different areas, the better the relationship will be. Diversification of areas where they cooperate means that they are feeling and perceiving the same threat in the same view, which results in more trust on both sides (NATO 2012b).

**Role of the United States and Putin’s return to Kremlin**
The United States as the leader of the Alliance is an important element in NATO-Russia relations, as the US-Russia relationship has always determined the NATO-Russia relations. Generally, if Moscow’s relations with Washington are going the right way, they are also on the right path with the Alliance. In Russia the perception of the Alliance is even more simplified, where the US equates to NATO. After all, much will depend on the outcome of the November 2012 US Presidential elections. If Barack Obama becomes re-elected US, it is probable that cooperation will go on in the same direction. For President Putin it would be much to his advantage, because he can expect some concession from the US side, as it was already visible during Obama’s 1st administration (efforts for realignment via “reset policy,” the decision to cancel Bush administration’s plans for European missile defence system). Should Obama be voted out of office, however, there will be a greater probability that US-Russian relations may sour, given that all leading Republican contenders advocate a tougher stance on issues of importance to Russia, including missile defence. Toughening of US policy towards Russia will force Putin to reciprocate also in order to secure support in the State Duma, where all opposition parties are more anti-Western than the party of power (Saradzhyan – Abdullaev 2012).

Furthermore, some statements made by US representatives do not help Russians to understand the “West” thinking and position. A case in point is the interview for CNN with Mitt Romney, nominee of the Republican Party for President, who recently charged Russia with being America’s “number one geopolitical foe” (Romney 2012). Such contradictions produce only confusion on the Russian side and poison even more NATO’s relations with Russia. Moreover, treating Moscow like a foe will make Russia more suspicious of NATO’s relationship. Washington should not give Moscow additional reasons to indulge its paranoia.

Regarding future prospects of cooperation, we also have to take into account the results of Russian presidential elections and Putin’s return to Kremlin. Foreign policy under the new-old President should not radically change the strategic course, though the tone and style will likely differ from that of Dmitry Medvedev. Even as Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin was the principal architect of the Russian foreign policy, therefore we can expect a significant degree of continuity. Nevertheless, President Putin will have to confront domestic political and economic challenges that may affect his foreign policy choices: he could resort to the traditional Russian tactic of depicting a foreign adversary to rally domestic support as during
his election campaign, or he could pursue a more accommodating foreign policy so that he can focus on issues at home (Katz 2012). The domestic political challenges have begun late last year when the results of Duma elections were accompanied by massive demonstrations. These events led Putin to project himself as a more fervent guardian of Russia’s interests on the international scene as a way to increase his support at home. His foreign policy pragmatism has a long-term goal of making Russia strong and restoring its role as a great world power. Unlike his predecessor, Putin has deliberately cultivated his image as a strong leader ready to defend Russia’s national interests.

**Conclusion**

Although it has been more than two decades since the Cold War ended, the attitudes from that period have continued to influence the political thinking in Russia and NATO. There is still a lingering feeling of distrust and the level of cooperation is not up to its full potential. The animosities of the Cold War years proved difficult to overcome, and each side’s suspicions of the other’s motives persist. While there have been improvements in the relationship, it is still stuck halfway between former enmity and the aspired strategic partnership. The ISAF mission enabled Russia to play an important role due to the transit through Russian territory and enhanced both entities’ ability to work together in areas of common interest.

Common security challenges demand unified responses, which is why cooperation between NATO and Russia is inevitable for ensuring the Euro-Atlantic zone’s security. Both Russia and NATO should deepen mutual cooperation where common interests exist and put on ice differences in conflict areas. The most developed areas of cooperation remain Afghanistan, counter-terrorism, nuclear arms, crisis management, counter-narcotics, and counter-piracy. From a strategic point of view, cooperation on missile defence has the potential to either move NATO-Russia relations down a common path or it could end up in a deadlock. While, the technical hurdles are not inconsiderable, it is mostly the political considerations and Russia’s delusion about the danger of missile defence that block cooperation. Failure to see eye to eye on this issue will not mean another Cold War – it will definitely lead to deeper and more pronounced hostility and further isolation of Russia.

Despite some recent improvements in mutual relations, we cannot make the assumption that cooperation in select areas will have a cumulative effect generating sufficient momentum
towards cooperation in other areas or rule out conflicting approaches on a range of issues in the future.

Sources:


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