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Russia as Ally: The Chances and Pitfalls of Expanding Transatlantic Relations

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At its summit meeting in Prague in November 2002 the Alliance admitted seven new members, all from North-, Central- and Eastern-Europe, some of them direct neighbors of the Russian Federation. Russia is, in other words, getting ever closer to NATO's security-cum-defense perimeter – and vice-versa. This amounts to changing not only the erstwhile strategic East-West relationship but, more fundamentally, the security landscape of the entire continent. Some observers, particularly those in Russia, are inclined to see such a «rapprochement» of «East» and «West» if not as a threat then at least as «problématique» or provocative, all the cooperative treaties and councils of cooperation between the two sides notwithstanding.

The central questions for the future relationship between Russia and the Atlantic Alliance are therefore whether a) Russia's membership in NATO is becoming ever more likely, if not desirable or unavoidable; whether b) such a move would really serve the interests of Russia, of the Alliance and of international security writ large, and whether c) it could be possible that neither side might actually profit from such a marriage and hence rather leave the relationship in a friendly cooperative but institutionally not committal state? After all, Russia sees itself still double-headed as both an Asian and a European power, in other words, as a world power in waiting, still shy of one-sided engagements in general and particularly with a Western world that is dominated by the erstwhile rival and presently only superpower, the United States.

In any case, any institutional linking of Russia to NATO and hence contractual commitment to a transatlantic relationship are likely to signal a sea-change in Russian foreign policy and strategic orientation no less than in that of both the Alliance and, at least in part, of the United States. Furthermore, all this would happen just at a time when alliances of the «old type» are losing their former mission with no clearly identifiable common enemy on the European continent's horizon. Russia joining NATO would be fundamentally different from Poland or Romania joining NATO. Such a new kind of relationship would rather change and possibly challenge many of the determinants of transatlantic relations so far.

Russia in or of Europe?

At the outset it seems fair to state that today's Russia is – its mental ambiguities about its real identity notwithstanding – more «European» than its Communist and Tsarist predecessors have been in the last two centuries. However, it still holds true that, to reverse Winston Churchill's statement about his own country's relationship to Europe, Russia is certainly «in Europe» but in some respects it is not, or not yet, «of Europe». That is at least what many Russians feel when looking at the vast expanses of their

country beyond the Urals, while at the same time believing that the future status of Belarus, Moldova and even of Ukraine remains covered by clouds of uncertainty.

Nobody can therefore be absolutely sure as to whether Russia's political-demographic-ethnic configuration is more or less definitive, not to mention its still tangible interest and presence in the Caucasus and in Central Asia. Some uncertainty therefore remains as to whether Russia behaves, and can be treated as a full-fledged European and transatlantic-oriented partner. Some may say that such ambivalence should not really be a serious obstacle to Russia's getting ever closer to, or even actually joining NATO and possibly, though less likely, the European Union.

And yet, once tied into the structurally somewhat loosened and conceptually somewhat diluted network of inter-Alliance relations, Russia's dream about a renaissance of its global power status may then come to rest. It is arguable, if not desirable, however, that – as security concerns transcend ever more geographical frontiers – Russia's own security preoccupation will eventually coincide with those of NATO. These concerns go well beyond the traditional strategic objectives; they go from unfinished business in the Balkans via actual or nascent wars in the Middle East to manifold uncertainties in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Afghanistan. In substantive terms, geographic limitations or frontiers are losing relevance. In either case, Russia, who interprets its security interests quite extensively, could ask for a special status when it comes to act as a security provider on the Eurasian landmass or as a principal combatant in the fight against Islamist terrorist movements.

Russia's joining NATO would therefore not only fundamentally change the nature of this institution. It would at the same time change Russia's view of itself and its role on the continental heartland. A Russian journalist, A. Pushkov, quite provocatively described the consequences of such a Russian NATO membership. He argued that in this case the US strategic protections of its European allies would no longer be needed because Russia could offer more or less the same protection – and even much closer by. This is of course a somewhat specious argument. But it does reveal both Russia's almost desperate effort to be still respected as global strategic player, i.e. to be not simply another ordinary member of NATO but rather a strategic alternative to the United States.

Question marks

Beyond these somewhat speculative but far from negligible strategic-political considerations, i.e. whether Russia is or will become a truly European or even global power, there are at least two other issues that deserve serious consideration when it comes to decide whether or not relations with Russia should either get still closer to, or indeed become a full-fledged member of the transatlantic community and its core institution, the Alliance.

There is, first, the state of the Russian economy and the breadth and sustainability of its reforms. There seems to be general agreement that President Putin has in fact been able to push through a series of economic as well as legal reforms. In fact, the Russian economy is growing by about 4 % annually. Central bank reserves are at their highest level since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia's financial self-sufficiency seems to have eliminated the danger of a government debt crisis. The country seems now able to pay US \$ 15.5 bn. in foreign debt in 2003, down from \$ 20 bn. Russia has become a (almost?) full-fledged member of the G-8 group and is lobbying strongly for WTO-membership.

The snag in all these good news lies in the fact that much, if not most of this economic recovery is due to Russia's oil and gas exports. This makes the country vulnerable in at least two respects: first, to a decline in oil price, and second, to ever higher transportation costs from ever more distant oil and gas fields. Still, Russia holds, after the Middle East/Gulf region, the second biggest proven oil reserves and is first as far as

proven gas reserves are concerned. And yet, all these substantial assets notwithstanding, Russia, with a GDP one third of that of Germany, is still, economically speaking, a middle power at best.

The second area of concern relates to the state of the country's environment. The legacy of the past, particular nuclear waste, does and will even more in the future, constitute a burden of yet unknown and immeasurable dimensions. Some agreements on its control and reduction already exist, particularly with the United States. But with Russia as an institutionalized «associate», let alone a full-fledged member of the Alliance, this staggeringly huge legacy is almost bound to become a matter of common transatlantic concern – with all the financial and social implications that go with it.

An emerging relationship

No doubt: Russian-NATO, hence also Russian-American relations, have undergone important changes in recent time. Most of them seem to be positive changes. Whether they are substantial enough to withstand reverses of fortune here and cope with as yet unsettled issues there, remains to be seen. In the eye of many Russians their country's rapprochement with the West is as much, if not principally, due to its (or Putin's) concessions to primarily US demands. The country has in fact – reluctantly – accepted NATO's Eastward enlargement; it has taken note of America's withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and has agreed to a hardly more than symbolic reduction of the abundant nuclear weapons arsenals. Russia has also accepted the presence of US armed forces in several countries of Central Asia.

In this context, it is worth noting that out of the fifteen former Soviet republics three – the Baltic states – are now members of the Alliance and eight (the Baltic states included) have already, or may have in the future, US forces stationed on their territory. Neither fact has had so far any discernable effect on Russian-NATO, let alone Russian-US relations. On the contrary, criticism of this reversal of fortunes is addressed less to the West and more to the Russian leadership itself. It has, in the words of an observer, «wasted Russia's assets in Central Asia» and, one might add, probably elsewhere, too, partly because it was either too weak or too irresolute to prevent such an «intrusion» and retraction, or because the United States (or the West) toned down its criticism for Russia's war in Chechnya. In fact, Putin's standing and reputation in the West, in Washington in particular, has constantly improved. He was upgraded from being «an active proliferator» to a «valuable partner», or, in President Bush's own words, from «that guy Putin» to «Vladimir», thus reviving «the personalization of a strategically extremely central relationship» for which, only two years ago, Clinton (and other Western politicians) were severely criticized.

Be that as it may, the important conclusion from all this is that the Russian-NATO and Russian-American relationship has undergone important, partly unexpected but on the whole positive changes. In it on this account that in particular Russian authors, both official and independent, wonder whether NATO's Rome declaration and the newly established NATO-Russian Council (NRC) constitute a sufficiently resilient and authoritative base for a solid and mutually confidence-building partnership capable of handling central and sensitive security issues. The jury on this is still out.

We begin with the actually or potentially positive trends towards a more and more resilient convergence of interests, hence also cooperation. The first, and that has already been briefly referred to, lies in closer economic cooperation, in particular and inevitably in the field of energy supply and demand. Here we find a convergence of Russian primarily economic and Western/Euro-American primarily strategic interests: the former aiming at assuring and boosting its export incomes, the latter at securing its energy supply and security outside of, or at least as a reassurance against, events in the Middle East. But even such an increasingly important link between the «West» and «Russia» will remain contingent upon various factors. They can either further strengthen or seriously

put in jeopardy what now appears to become an important component in this emerging relationship.

The second field of potential or actual convergence of interests and hence cooperation is to be found in the «war against international terrorism». Both the United States and, somewhat more reluctantly NATO (or several of its European members) have toned down their criticism of President Putin's campaign in Chechnya. Thus, NATO's Secretary General, Lord Robertson, while on visit in Moscow, called joint counter-terrorism efforts «the very heart of what NATO and Russia are doing together» (IHT, 10.12.02). From there to a series of cooperative agreements (such as joint sea-search and rescue missions and, possibly soon, joint work on a theatre missile defense system) is – it would seem – one such step.

The question is thus not whether a close cooperation with Russia in these or related fields under the heading of «war against terrorism» and assuring «global security» is desirable and feasible. The question is rather, it is whether its underlying conceptual basis, namely a common understanding of the nature, scope and duration of this war, the definition of «terrorism» and, more broadly, the organization or defense of international security, is solid and durable enough to underpin and possibly institutionalize such NATO-Russian and/or US-Russian cooperation. For the moment it would seem that there are still too many «non-dits», un-opened Pandora boxes, to be sure of an affirmative answer to this question.

A third positive effect of such NATO-plus-Russia operation can be seen in involving Russia in what might be called a «pan-European security conglomerate». Its purpose would be to assure Europe's stability in, or control of, its still volatile «fringe regions», be they the Balkans, the Caucasus or the Near East. Without full and reliable Russian participation such commitment would lose both credibility and support.

There remains, finally, the still unsettled and almost forgotten issue of the CFE-arms control agreement about the limitation of conventional forces in Europe. Russia's argument that the membership of now ten Central-Eastern European countries (of which seven belonged to the Warsaw Pact and thus fell under the treaties' ceilings) has fundamentally changed the agreement's content and hence needs revision, has some justification. A closer association of Russia with NATO, possibly beyond the NRC, might provide the necessary stimulus to re-assess the treaty and, incidentally, other East-West arrangements such as the OSCE, lest they become outdated, one-sided or simply untenable.

So much for the actually or potentially positive sides of a NRC-plus relationship between Russia and NATO. There is, however, a down-side that deserves some observations.

The pitfalls

We begin with Russia's view of itself, its identity and role as a major player either of Eurasian dimensions or at least with a clear-cut European orientation and influence. Only Russia itself, or indeed the Russian population, can provide the answer to the country's future orientation and role. But in a certain sense the answer may also become a function of a rapidly changing international environment which places new demands and defines new priorities for all players. There is no doubt that the «war against international terrorism» has changed – and is still changing – both the nature of international security and the role and reach of military power to provide it. If indeed the central threat is perceived to originate on what Halford Mackinder called the «Eurasian landmass» and its immediate neighborhood, then the biggest power on it, i.e. Russia, acquires almost overnight a new and central role. In other words: Despite of its domestic weakness Russia's relevance and influence are becoming central again in such a radically enlarged and new security environment. As such, Russia may have the unexpected option of becoming again the rival to or hopefully the strategically indispensable partner of NATO and the

United States. There are signs that the latter is more likely. But one thing seems certain: Russia will ask for a return of favors – today and, more likely, still more so tomorrow.

Second, if this assumption is not too far off the mark, then we must count with the possibility that Russia's misgivings about an open-ended US military presence in major parts of Europe and Eurasia may grow. In Russia's eyes this presence is perceived as leaving the country with a second-rate status in the very regions in which it has been dominant for centuries. The bond of common interests in the still vaguely defined «war on terrorism» is, in Russia's view, not sufficiently strong to induce the country to renounce indefinitely on a come-back as global power.

From this follows a third consideration which relates to the future role of military power in international politics and the kind of strategic doctrine to justify it. Up to this day, Russia's strategic concept is in several respects different from that of either NATO-Europe or the United States. This again becomes evident in the controversy about President Bush's revived project of ballistic missile defence; it is also different when it comes to fighting terrorism and the role of conventional forces.

The fourth potential or indeed ongoing controversy can be found in Russia's choice of partner or client countries. It is primarily a function of both tradition, both Tsarist and Communist, as well as of geography. Iran, Iraq, India and to some extent also China are cases in point. Inevitably, NATO or some of its members may disagree with, or even object to, such special relationships. As a consequence they may entertain serious reservations about involving Russia too closely into a common security policy. Here again the bond that the common war against terrorism is expected to create is institutionally too weak and conceptually too diffuse to make one overlook such historical and geographic differences.

In final analysis it must be concluded that such actual or potential sources of dissent, conflict or simply difference of views put limits not just to Russia's membership with NATO but also to Russia becoming a full-fledged part of the transatlantic community. In other words: the idea and implementation of partnership is almost bound to find its limits in geography and history, in self-perception and diverging views of the future structure and organization of the international order. Russia remains determined not to leave the latter's shape and content to either the US or to the transatlantic community. It rather likes to have several options once it comes to an agreement on defining its own role in the world.

Some theses

1. Russia's view of itself and its role in international politics still differs in important ways from that of the «transatlantic West». Russia's desire to regain great or global power status as a function of its size, geopolitical position and wealth of resources may be dormant, but it is not dead. Joining the «war on international terrorism» almost on a par with the United States is acting here as an additional stimulus.
2. A more succinct understanding between Russia and «the West» of what the «common threats» or «security challenges» and what kind of policies and means should be employed for common action is therefore necessary. From this follows the question if and to what extent the US and the Alliance are prepared and willing to share strategic/security responsibilities with third countries in general and Russia in particular.
3. The EU's interest in a closer relationship with Russia is not necessarily and in all fields identical with that of the United States (Canada?). That of the US would

seem to be of a more strategic-global nature (i.e. nuclear armament, non-proliferation, energy supply), the former more instrumental (i.e. economic cooperation, border control, crisis management). Such divergence need not but can be divisive, in the US-EU relationship. Hence it will require more broadly institutionalized consultation mechanisms than NATO can offer so far.

4. Russia clearly distinguishes between a «common European space» (of which it wants to be part) and «European institutions» which, if joined, it thinks would limit its freedom of action both on a continental and a global level.
5. The very notion of full-fledged «partnership» is not yet a household word in Russia's political practice. While the agenda of common interests between Russia and «the West» is growing, the urge for really operationally valid institutions does not seem irresistible for the moment on either side. Under these circumstances, the NATO-Russian Council remains adequate for assuring the necessary cooperation in the foreseeable future.
6. While Russia is and will remain a central actor in international security writ large, more thought should be given to involve more directly, durably and possibly institutionally, other major actors such as Japan, China, and India in a network of transnational security cooperation: the revived «re-militarization of international relations» is becoming again a major feature and concern lest it boils down to either a monopoly of the United States or, more likely, gets out of control. A conceptually and institutionally enlarged security cooperation could help to avoid either.