

Towards a new strategic partnership

Willem Matser examines NATO–Russia relations in the wake of 11 September and the prospects for improved cooperation.



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Moscow meeting: The *rapprochement* of recent months has made it possible to bring far-reaching proposals to the table

Few events bring people together more effectively than a tragedy and few tragedies have been greater or their consequences more wide-reaching than that of 11 September. In addition to the several thousand Americans who lost their lives, close to 800 citizens of other NATO countries and nearly 100 Russians died as the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed, watched live on television by millions around the world. In the wake of this shared disaster, the unity of purpose of Allies and Russia in the face of a common threat has been a key feature of the international coalition's war on terrorism. Moreover, the shuttle diplomacy, summits and flurry of new proposals of recent months have clearly opened up great opportunities for closer cooperation and a deeper relationship between NATO and Russia.

It is not, of course, the first time that expectations for NATO–Russia relations have been so great. In 1997, by

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signing the NATO–Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security, the heads of state and government of NATO and Russia committed themselves to “the goal of overcoming the vestiges of earlier confrontation and competition and of strengthening mutual trust and cooperation, thus marking the beginning of a fundamentally new relationship between NATO and Russia and intending to develop a strong, stable and enduring partnership”. Moreover, the NATO–Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) was created to provide “a mechanism for consultations, coordination and, to the maximum extent possible, where appropriate, for joint decisions and joint action”.

Since then, NATO–Russia relations have seen many highs and lows. In the course of this journey, the many personalities involved have played their part, as have shifting political paradigms and pressing security challenges, including the Balkan conflicts, the first Chechen War, NATO's Kosovo campaign, the second Chechen War and now the international coalition's war on terrorism.

In attempting to place the NATO-Russia relationship on a sound footing, therefore, it is important to examine where, when and how it has turned sour in the past and to determine whether certain lessons can be learned for the future. Such an analysis should perhaps have been made earlier. But until very recently, it was precluded by the political baggage weighing on the NATO-Russia relationship in general and the functioning of the PJC in particular.

To appreciate fully the current situation and to assess the nature of the difficulties that have to be overcome, the NATO-Russia relationship has to be viewed in its historical context. It is, after all, only a little over a decade since the end of the Cold War and attitudes from that period have continued to influence thinking. Although some individuals at the very top of Russian society were eager to pursue a pro-Western agenda in the early 1990s, many senior officials found it difficult to come to terms with the demise of both the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union and the loss of super-power status that this entailed. Indeed, in many cases, they found it humiliating to have to continue to deal with NATO, the “victorious Cold War adversary”, as they saw it. Many in Russia viewed NATO’s very continued existence as a betrayal. If the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact – the “threats” NATO was formed to counter – had ceased to exist, they wondered, why was a Western military alliance still necessary?

As Russia struggled to integrate itself into Western institutions and economic hardship dashed the dreams of capitalist prosperity for ordinary Russians, disillusionment set in. At the same time, NATO failed to find the right tone for developing its relationship with Russia and was therefore unable to convince the Russian bureaucracy of its positive intentions. Russian foreign and defence ministry officials were disappointed to find themselves treated no differently than their counterparts from former Warsaw Pact countries and other former Soviet constituent republics in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, the predecessor of today’s Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). The decision by Allied leaders, at the 1994 Brussels Summit, to reaffirm that NATO’s door was open to new members, followed by the commissioning of a Study on Enlargement in 1995, contributed further distrust to the relationship. In Russian eyes, not only had NATO outlived the threats that had given birth to it, but it was also expanding its military and political influence ever closer to the Russian border.

The appointment of Primakov as foreign minister in 1996 was a turning point and led within a year to the sign-

ing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act. From the moment Primakov took charge of the foreign ministry, Russia’s foreign and security policy became more cohesive and assertive. Indeed, one objective underlying the NATO-Russia Founding Act was that of ensuring that Russia had a voice in the key Euro-Atlantic security institutions and influence on their decision-making processes. Since the PJC was supposed to include mechanisms for both joint decision-making and joint action, Russia viewed it as an opportunity to exert such influence.

Despite early optimism, however, it rapidly became clear that the PJC was not functioning as intended. Some of the PJC’s shortcomings could be attributed to cultural differences. NATO functions on the basis of consensus and has therefore always had a bottom-up approach to collaboration. This presupposes an ongoing process of informal consultations among the Allies’ Permanent Representations at NATO headquarters in order to smooth the way towards agreement, including, in some instances, agreement to avoid particular areas of discord. Despite promoting the PJC, however, Primakov decided not to establish a permanent presence at NATO headquarters. This decision, when viewed in conjunction with Moscow’s top-down approach to collaboration, was critical, as it severely limited potential Russian participation in this consensus-building process.

An even greater obstacle, however, was the reluctance on both sides to overcome Cold War stereotypes. Russia, driven by Primakov’s aspiration to restore his country’s great-power status in a “multi-polar” world, remained focused on obstructing Alliance solidarity. Allies responded by requiring that no discussion with Russia could proceed without a formally agreed NATO position. For the Russians, denied the opportunity to influence Alliance policies before decisions had been taken, the “nineteen-plus-one” format became “nineteen-versus-one”, and NATO-Russia exchanges often amounted to no more than repetitions of well-known positions. The PJC ceased meeting early in 1999, when Russia walked out in protest over NATO’s decision to wage an air campaign to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. This freezing of NATO-Russia relations was, however, above all confirmation of pre-existing difficulties in the relationship and diverging approaches to the PJC.

Although the terrorist attacks against the United States and the process of building an international coalition against terrorism have certainly given the NATO-Russia relationship added impetus and injected a sense of urgency into discussions, the roots of a better relationship pre-date 11 September. Already at the beginning of 2000, the

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appointment of Vladimir Putin as president of Russia paved the way for a new and more constructive relationship and in May of that year the PJC resumed its activities. Since then, despite Western unease with Russia's operations in Chechnya, NATO and Russia have been able steadily to increase the range and number of joint activities.

By spring 2001, the PJC's work agenda had expanded to cover a wide range of issues of mutual interest, including ongoing cooperation in and consultation on peacekeeping in the Balkans, discussions of strategy and doctrine, and cooperation in arms control, proliferation, military infrastructure, nuclear issues and theatre missile defences, as well as the retraining of discharged military personnel and search and rescue at sea. Indeed, the programme was almost as broad as the one that existed at the end of 1998. In February 2001, after a year of negotiations, NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson was able to inaugurate a NATO Information Office in Moscow. It was in this, more congenial atmosphere, therefore, that Lord Robertson and Russian President Putin had two constructive meetings during the latter part of 2001.

The Putin-Robertson meetings in Brussels in October and Moscow in November, and several meetings between Presidents Bush and Putin during this same timeframe have clearly put both NATO-Russia and Russia-US relations on a new footing. Indeed, in a joint statement following their meeting in Crawford, Texas, in November, the two Presidents pledged that Russia and the United States would "work, together with NATO and other NATO members, to improve, strengthen, and enhance the relationship between NATO and Russia, with a view to developing new, effective mechanisms for consultation, cooperation, joint decision, and coordinated/joint action". Moreover, at the December foreign ministers' PJC meeting at NATO headquarters, NATO and Russia committed themselves to "forge a new relationship" and tasked ambassadors to explore "effective mechanisms for consultation, cooperation, joint decision, and coordinated/joint action".

The *rapprochement* of recent months has made it possible to bring far-reaching proposals to the table, including the institutionalisation of NATO-Russia cooperation "at 20". It has also generated great expectations, on both sides, not all of which are realistic. Establishing mechanisms for meeting with Russia "at 20", without pre-coordinated Alliance positions, does not mean that Russia will secure a veto over Alliance decision-making. The Alliance will continue to function "at 19", and to maintain its freedom of decision-making and action on any issue consistent with its responsibilities under the Washington Treaty. However, where common ground can be found and NATO and Russia are able to work together, it is important to build the necessary mechanisms to make this possible.

Many Western analysts believe that President Putin is currently far ahead of other players in the Russian defence and security community. Some even think that he is overextending himself and thereby making himself vulnerable. Whatever the precise nature of his situation, the pressure for success is high – both for President Putin and for NATO – and the need to deliver concrete achievements will become increasingly important as the Prague Summit approaches and the issue of NATO enlargement begins to loom larger. A carefully considered and coordinated package of visible steps forward could help President Putin bridge the gap with the more conservative elements in his security elite. Moreover, a prudent public information policy is also required, since media expectations and/or speculation risk generating a dangerous level of pressure on what will inevitably be a complex political process.

The fundamental attitudes of many institutional actors in the NATO-Russia relationship have not changed. As a result, "breakthroughs" at the highest political level and/or constructive approaches in informal talks will not automatically be translated into practical achievements. Concrete proposals and programmes will still have to be implemented through the same bureaucratic channels and, in some instances, in spite of them. Although the environment for cooperation appears conducive to progress, success is not assured and high-profile initiatives may not come to fruition soon, or at all. A more realistic approach might therefore be the time-consuming process of pushing forward smaller, formal and informal, but still substantive issues.

Russia's principal objective has not changed. It still wants, above all, to be treated as a mature, influential partner and to have a voice in the key Euro-Atlantic security institutions and in defence and security decision-making. If the Allies are unwilling or unable to give substance to this objective, the backlash could be serious and long-lasting. Although symbolic steps forward can be of value, the process will also need substance. New cooperative mechanisms can help to overcome the mistrust of the past and to streamline our ability to take joint action when appropriate. New mechanisms alone, however, cannot form the basis of a strong, durable NATO-Russia partnership. There must be new attitudes, particularly on the Russian side.

As policy makers and political leaders attempt to seize an historic opportunity, they should understand what is at stake. False moves could seriously undermine the good will that has been built up in recent months and actually set back the relationship. If, however, despite the complexity and sensitivity surrounding this issue, NATO and Russia can come together and forge a new strategic partnership, this will have considerable benefits stretching well beyond the common interests of the two partners. ■