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Toward a New Start

Approaches to a strategic partnership between NATO and Russia

Margarete Klein

Following the war in Georgia in the summer of 2008, relations between Russia and NATO were on hold for some time. But now NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has announced a new beginning. During his inaugural visit to Moscow, Rasmussen said his goal was to establish a “true strategic partnership” with Russia. But that will require more than just a return to business as usual. The NATO-Russia Council (NRC) has so far proved unable to transform the relationship – which currently fluctuates between selective cooperation and outright competition – into a more substantial partnership. This would require overcoming fundamental differences of opinion, particularly with respect to the basic elements of the international political order in Europe and the post-Soviet region.

In view of the deep crisis of confidence and the fundamentally divergent concepts of political order, it will not be easy to transform the NATO-Russia relationship into a strategic partnership. A number of building blocks are required.

The first goal is to avoid the needless creation of new obstacles. In developing NATO's new strategic concept, the alliance should refrain from defining energy security as an element of collective military defense. This issue would be better served if it were addressed between Russia and the EU. In addition, the Atlantic alliance should take great care in the implementation of its political declaration on NATO's eastward expansion, agreed at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008.

On the one hand, Russia should not be granted a right of veto. But on the other hand, hastily admitting Georgia and Ukraine to the alliance before they have fulfilled the necessary criteria would unnecessarily damage NATO's relationship with Moscow, and undermine the organization's political credibility.

The next step should be to strengthen confidence-building measures. Both sides already agreed in December 2009 to jointly evaluate potential threats in the 21st century. It would also be worthwhile to intensify the dialogue on questions of military reform, since Russia's recent efforts in this area are strongly influenced by western models. Furthermore, the NRC could formalize a consultation mechanism to pre-

vent one side from closing down channels of communication just when they are most urgently needed.

However, the effectiveness of consultation and confidence-building measures should not be overestimated. The NRC has been active in this area in the past with no discernible reduction in mutual distrust. Reviving conventional arms control, on the other hand, could contribute more strongly to confidence building, because both sides would gain verifiable security guarantees.

The second building block involves expanding practical cooperation. In the case of Afghanistan, that means the areas of transit, equipping the Afghan army and fighting drug smuggling. In the fight against drugs, NATO could reach a formal agreement with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), whose members are Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

To avoid facilitating Russia's quest for regional hegemony, any formal agreements should not replace bilateral cooperation between NATO and the CSTO countries but instead complement them where a regional approach seems to make sense. In the military sector, cooperation in the fight against piracy appears promising. This could provide impulses for more interoperability, an area that has virtually ground to a halt in recent years.

In mid-December 2009, Rasmussen suggested that both sides "combine" their missile defense systems by the year 2020. Although he left open what concrete steps would need to be taken in the coming years to achieve it, cooperation in this area would be a quantum leap. Russia and NATO would not only rid themselves of a key sticking point, they would also jointly address a major security threat. But cooperation in this sensitive area requires a high degree of trust.

The measures listed so far – with the exception of missile defense – are primarily oriented toward expanding cooperation in areas where it would be fairly easy to achieve. But that is not synonymous with a

strategic partnership. To achieve that the two sides would have to begin to reconcile fundamentally divergent concepts of political order that are rooted in contradictory positions regarding the organization of Euro-Atlantic security structures.

A window of opportunity exists to address these questions. NATO and the US are interested in improved relations with Russia; Russian President Dmitry Medvedev himself presented a draft for a Euro-Atlantic security treaty, and the OSCE's Corfu process already provides a framework for addressing the issues.

But it remains unclear whether NATO countries have the political will to move beyond simple discussions to concrete negotiations, as Moscow has demanded. The US and many new alliance members have expressed skepticism and even outright rejection; they fear a split – and thus a weakening – of the Alliance.

To prevent this from happening NATO states would need to agree in advance on certain core issues, including a number of "red lines" that cannot be crossed during negotiations – such as the principle of freedom to choose alliance partners or the rejection of exclusive spheres of influence. Furthermore, NATO countries would have to agree on a positive agenda, a common vision of their long-term relationship with Moscow. That is exactly what is lacking, as the different policies of NATO countries toward Russia currently demonstrate.

Moscow, on the other hand, would have to clearly move away from its maximum demands. The draft Euro-Atlantic security treaty published on Nov. 29, 2009 is the equivalent of an attempt to veto nearly all future NATO activities – a carte blanche for Russian dominance in the post-Soviet area.

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