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Research Report

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SWP Comments, No. 41/2014

Provided in Cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs,
Berlin

Suggested Citation: Klein, Margarete; Kaim, Markus (2014) : NATO-Russia relations after the Newport summit: Reassurance, cooperation and security guarantees, SWP Comments, No. 41/2014, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256309>

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NATO-Russia Relations after the Newport Summit

Reassurance, Cooperation and Security Guarantees

Margarete Klein/Markus Kaim

A key aspect of the NATO summit in Newport (Wales) was the reaction of the alliance to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine. However, apart from the decision to create a high-readiness force, and an action plan for Eastern Europe, heads of state and government did not focus enough on the long-term prospects for NATO's relationship with Russia.

Until the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, the Atlantic alliance had ambitious goals for its relations with Russia. There are several founding documents and offers of cooperation to testify to this. The political framework for their bilateral relationship is the "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation" of May 1997. In this document, which reflects their cooperative spirit during the 1990s, the two sides not only agreed upon numerous areas of cooperation, but also described their view of one another. NATO and Russia no longer saw themselves as opponents, striving instead to build a "strong, stable and enduring partnership". In return for NATO's first round of eastern expansion, which was already under way, Moscow was given the political assurance that – under the circumstances prevalent at that time – the alliance would not transfer nuclear weapons or de-

ploy substantial numbers of troops to its new member states.

In 2002 the two sides deepened their cooperation still further by creating the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). This allowed NATO members and Russia not only to discuss a wide range of security issues, but to try and resolve them together. Ultimately, the cooperation was accorded high priority in NATO's Strategic Concept of 2010. The governments of NATO states defined cooperative security in the Euro-Atlantic area (i.e. security cooperation with non-NATO countries) as the alliance's third core task, after mutual defence and international crisis management.

Why the "Strategic Partnership" Failed

The fact that NATO's desired "strategic partnership" did not come to fruition is

partly due to the persistent asymmetry of power between the USA and Russia, but more particularly due to the lack of a stable foundation of common interests. Russia and NATO have cooperated very closely in some areas – most notably on international crisis management (especially in Afghanistan), counter-terrorism, disarmament and arms control. However, the NRC has lacked a “showcase project”. Hopes that limited cooperation over missile defence could improve the quality of relations between Russia and NATO were dashed, when the two sides’ expectations as to the scope of the cooperation could not be reconciled.

The “strategic partnership” also failed because there was no shared concept for the development of bilateral relations or the intended Euro-Atlantic security community. Moscow demands an equal say and power of veto over all the continent’s key areas of security policy. Moreover, the Russian leadership insists that the post-Soviet space should be recognised as Russia’s exclusive sphere of influence. NATO cannot accept this as it contravenes basic principles, such as the right of free choice to form alliances as laid down, for instance, in the Charter of Paris.

This conflict over the European political order, which has dimensions of both political power and ideology, has intensified during Putin’s third term in office. The Russian president now justifies his claim to leadership in the post-Soviet space in terms of civilisation, casting Moscow in the role of a protective power for the Russian-speaking community. This calls into question the inviolability of state borders in the post-Soviet space. Moreover, Moscow relies less on the rule of law to achieve its interests than it does on political, economic and military power. In pursuing its Eurasian integration projects in general, and in its Ukraine policy in particular, Russia aims to reach a position of strength from which to forcibly renegotiate the Euro-Atlantic security community to take more fully into account Russian interests and “red lines”. This “transnationalisation” of Russian security policy

presents an entirely new set of challenges to Western security policy makers, who view the Euro-Atlantic area almost exclusively in terms of established nation states.

Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis

Since Russia has annexed Crimea, and seems determined to destabilise Eastern Ukraine, for the time being it has lost its status as a strategic partner of NATO. In April 2014, in response to Russia’s actions, foreign ministers of the NATO states suspended all military and civil cooperation between NATO and Russia below the level of the NATO Council. Some members of the alliance have even expressed the view that NATO-Russian relations should be cut off entirely. However, this has not become the majority position. On the one hand the argument still prevails that if NATO countries also stop abiding by existing obligations, they will risk losing the credibility of their own security policy.

On the other hand, NATO’s long-term view is still that of an order which (re-)integrates Russia into the Euro-Atlantic security community. In line with this view, cooperation should only be temporarily reduced. However, this is largely a symbolic policy as many governments continue to cooperate with the Russian leadership outside the NATO framework, for instance on energy supplies and international counter-terrorism issues.

Possible Scenarios for NATO-Russia Relations

Since the partnership model for relations between Russia and NATO has failed, the alliance is faced with the question of how to shape its future relationship with Moscow. There are three courses of action available:

Containment

Proponents of a policy of containment believe that Moscow can only be prevented from pursuing its aggressive policies by

meeting force with force. This would mean abandoning military caution with regard to the permanent stationing of troops and equipment in new NATO states. It would also mean expanding NATO's collective defence capability against Russia.

However, those who defend this position are overlooking the risks and limitations of such a strategy: although it would deter Russia from a military attack against the Baltic states or Poland, it is unclear whether it would prevent the use of destabilisation strategies – such as the mobilisation of Russian minorities, irregular militia operations, propaganda, or economic sanctions.

Above all, a policy of containment does not solve the fundamental problem of competition over the political order of the post-Soviet space. As long as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova remain outside of NATO, their powers of deterrent will be too weak to protect themselves effectively. However, if these countries were granted accelerated membership, the current conflict between Russia and NATO would only become more entrenched, making cooperation practically impossible even on questions of common interest.

Peaceful Coexistence

Another option would be to return to the model of “peaceful coexistence” associated with the Cold War period. Peaceful coexistence works on the idea that there is no prospect of integrating Russia into the Euro-Atlantic framework of institutions and principles of behaviour. However, it is assumed that the two sides can agree not to resort to military action in their conflict, as this would be damaging to both.

At the same time, peaceful coexistence means marking out and acknowledging one another's sphere of influence. NATO would almost certainly not be able to go along with this, as it would mean giving up the principles and norms which it agreed with Russia in 1990. The notion of a state's sovereignty over its foreign policy and territorial integrity would then only apply

to NATO members, and not to countries falling within the Russian sphere of influence. Thus the cost of trying to achieve security for NATO would be borne by mutually neighbouring states; yet this scenario would also cost the alliance its credibility and diminish its influence.

Reassurance, Cooperation and Security Guarantees

It seems, then, that the stability of the Euro-Atlantic area would benefit from a strategy which provides reassurance to eastern NATO member states whilst at the same time keeping the offer of cooperation with Russia open.

This reassurance does not mean relinquishing existing political obligations under the founding act, although that certainly remains an option if Russia continues its aggressive destabilisation of other states. However, channels of communication and forms of cooperation which serve common interests should be maintained in principle.

A stumbling block in all this is the Crimean question. Yet there may be a way to isolate – politically and legally – the issue of this territory's annexation, so that cooperation remains possible. A model for this kind of policy is the way Western governments cooperated with the Soviet leadership, despite not recognising the Soviet Union's annexation of the Baltic states in 1940. However, as long as Moscow sticks to its course of subverting and destabilising Eastern Ukraine, the position of those NATO states who want to freeze cooperation with Moscow, and are no longer prepared to adhere to agreements they have made, will be strengthened. This is easy to observe in the current triangular relationship: unless Russia changes its policy towards Ukraine, a cooperative attitude on the part of NATO towards Russia will be unimaginable.

A rapprochement would require not just an institutional framework outside the NRC (and the OSCE could play an important role

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ISSN 1861-1761

Translation by Andrew Mason

(English version of
SWP-Aktuell 58/2014)

in this); it would also require the Russian leadership to make concessions to NATO over several issues of security policy which have been controversial in the past. A willingness to compromise in these areas could really open doors, especially in relation to missile defence or reducing tactical nuclear weapons stocks.

However, if the conflict over the political order of the post-Soviet space is not resolved, cooperation will remain shaky. The dilemma for NATO is that on the one hand it wants to avoid the appearance of decisions being taken over the heads of the countries involved (which means it can only agree to a solution which also has the consent of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova); but on the other hand it cannot simply bypass this process by granting those countries NATO membership, as this should depend solely on whether they fulfil the membership criteria. The “external factor of Russia” should have no influence over such decisions, either as a veto power or as a justification for hurriedly (perhaps prematurely) allowing new members to join.

It is therefore worth considering ways to create security in Russia and NATO’s shared neighbourhood without granting formal NATO membership to the countries in question. Neutrality has often been proposed as a solution in this debate; however, this would only increase security for those countries if it included specific agreements and guarantees.

Given that Moscow’s annexation of Crimea violated the Budapest Memorandum, Russian security guarantees are no longer very convincing. Although Western assurances have also become questionable as a result, NATO should provide security guarantees to the relevant countries without actually granting them full membership of the alliance. Rather than collective defence, NATO could commit to providing clearly stipulated help in case of an attack, such as swift deliveries of weapons. The EU could also make a useful contribution here: its Association Agreement with Kiev is an expression of Ukraine’s Western orienta-

tion, which the Russian leadership is seeking to prevent. Any attempts, therefore, to make the agreement compatible with the Eurasian Economic Union would be helpful from a security policy perspective.