

After Georgia?: The future of NATO-Russia relations

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THE FUTURE OF the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is again in the spotlight following the May 2009 military exercises at a former Russian air force base east of the Georgian capital Tbilisi.¹ This comes less than a year after the Georgia-Russia conflict and the breakaway of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia. It also coincides with growing political unrest within Georgia that has seen large-scale protests and calls by the opposition for the resignation of President Mikheil Saakashvili. In addition, allegations of a Russian-backed mutiny at a tank base near the military exercises underscored the precarious situation in Georgia and the stability of the region, fuelling suspicion and diminishing any potential for ironing out differences between Moscow and Tbilisi.² Notwithstanding Moscow's strong objections to the war games in its back yard, 1 100 troops from NATO countries and six partner states, including Georgia, Bosnia, Ukraine, Macedonia and Azerbaijan, have converged in the southern Caucasus state.³

Since the end of the Cold War, relations between Russia and NATO have been lukewarm at best. This has been the result of a number of controversial issues including NATO's continued eastward expansion, the unilateral decision to recognise the independence of Kosovo, and the expulsion of diplomatic representatives from both Moscow and NATO headquarters in Brussels in April 2009. Despite its position as a forum for consensus-building and co-operation between the alliance and Moscow, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) has witnessed the periodic freezing of diplomatic relations. This was the case during the Georgia-Russia conflict and followed the decision to host the war games in Georgia. While Tbilisi is once again at the epicentre of conflicting views between Russia and the West, these developments raise wider questions about the future of NATO in its current configuration.

This policy brief seeks to analyse the implications of NATO's military exercises in Georgia for Russia-NATO relations, United States-Russia relations, and the security and stability of the southern Caucasus region. The brief has been divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief history of NATO and the alliance's relations with Russia. The second section highlights the weak justifications presented by NATO for the provocative war games, as well as the opposition by some NATO partner states. The final section addresses Russia's growing disillusionment with NATO as a framework for European security and the implications of the war games for the future of NATO-Russia relations. The policy brief concludes by offering recommendations and positive steps for addressing the volatility of the situation.

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NATO and the NRC

Following World War 2, NATO was conceived as an alliance between the United States, Canada, and Western Europe for the purpose of guaranteeing their mutual defence against the mounting threat represented by the Soviet Union.⁴ Despite being a product of the Cold War and the military stand-off between the United States and the Soviet Union, NATO has evolved to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing global security environment. This has seen a number of political and military transformations within the organisation, including the enlargement of its membership and engagements well beyond (its traditional domain) the Euro-Atlantic area. NATO has also taken on an ever expanding role as a global peace-keeper with military operations in the former Yugoslavia, Kosovo and Afghanistan.⁵

Today, NATO has 28 member countries and is far more than a mutual defence pact. It includes dozens of institutions: military training schools, air and army bases, research institutes, a pipeline system, parliamentary associations, and civil society support groups from across Europe. Since the early 1990s, it has also sought to develop partnerships with non-NATO countries in an effort to promote a dialogue on security and co-operation.⁶ There are currently 22 partner countries actively involved in NATO operations. A key focus of these initiatives, often with states of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, is to help build a democratic environment and modernise armed forces. It was towards this end that the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and the Partnership for Peace (PFP) Programme were established in 1994 and 1997 respectively. The PFP, as the operational wing of the EAPC, is particularly significant as it includes members from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a region comprising states located within the former Soviet Union.⁷

Although relations between Moscow and Brussels were formalised within the framework of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) in 1997, this was not a legally binding international treaty and failed to act as an effective basis for partnership. The impulse for the development of deeper co-operation between NATO and Russia flowed from Moscow's support in combating terrorism following the September 11 (2001) attacks in the US.⁸ In contrast with the current tension between Britain and Russia, it was former prime minister Tony Blair who initially advocated the strengthening of ties between the alliance and Russia, a position supported by the other member states. Established in 2002, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) provides a formal basis

for advancing relations. It aims to create a forum for the promotion of 'continuous political dialogue on security issues with a view to the early identification of emerging problems, the determination of common approaches, the development of practical cooperation and the conduct of joint operations, as appropriate.'⁹

The NRC has, however, faced difficulty in sustaining the engagement between Moscow and Brussels. Indeed, on 5 May 2009 the Russian foreign ministry announced that it would no longer be sending a delegation to the planned NRC meeting. According to Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, '[c]onsidering . . . the persistence and stubbornness with which NATO plans to hold military drills in Georgia, and despite all the warnings and taking into account the crude move regarding our officials, the hosting of a Russia-NATO Council ministerial session looks inappropriate, at least in the designated timeframe.'¹⁰



Source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/cis_europe_pol_2003.jpg

NATO and the Georgian war games

From 6 May to 1 June 2009, Georgia hosted the NATO PFP Programme aimed at building military co-operation between NATO and non-NATO countries.¹¹ In response to Russian condemnation, NATO argued that the military exercises were planned prior to the outbreak of the conflict between Georgia and Russia and that Georgia had hosted annual PFP exercises since 2001. The fact that the military exercises were being conducted in what was fairly recently a war zone has been underplayed by the alliance. NATO asserted that Georgia was 'just hosting' the exercises which are designed to improve 'interoperability' between the alliance members and partner countries.¹² Furthermore, NATO affirmed that the exercises were being conducted in a non-aggressive manner, based on a moot UN-mandated and NATO-led crisis response operation and, therefore, represented no threat to Moscow. According to NATO, broadening ties with former Soviet republics such as Georgia is aimed at breaking down barriers with countries previously dominated by Moscow as well as strengthening regional security and stability in Europe.¹³

The general sentiment within the alliance is that Russia's reaction was unwarranted as the Kremlin had been aware of the operations for several months, was fully informed of the exercises and, as a NATO partner country, was free to participate. Indeed NATO has been frustrated by their depiction as NATO exercises rather than as '... exercises of NATO with its partners which Georgia is hosting'.¹⁴ In a move to allay Moscow's concerns, NATO secretary-general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer cautioned that the 'exercises shouldn't be misinterpreted or misused by anybody for internal political purposes'.¹⁵ As far as NATO is concerned, the war games are nothing out of the ordinary as Russia had recently led a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) military exercise in Tajikistan.¹⁶

As a leading partner in NATO, the United States had expressed its approval of the exercises, although responses were muted following the Russian backlash. While the United States has maintained its objection to any Russian attempt to establish a 'sphere of influence' within its immediate neighbourhood, President Barack Obama has fallen short of being the vocal supporter of Georgia's inclusion into NATO that his predecessor George W Bush had been. This is in part a reflection of the Obama administration's new internationalism and focus on dialogue aimed at extending an olive branch to Moscow, offering to 'press the reset button' on previously badly damaged relations.¹⁷ However, there is seemingly a disconnection between Washington's new professed desire to

improve relations with Moscow and its active involvement in military operations that are clearly provocative from Russia's standpoint. It appears to be a case of misguided United States priorities, in which military practice is yet to be aligned to the new administration's reconciliatory foreign policy pronouncements. The United States, particularly within NATO, must put policy into practice in playing a more constructive role in building improved relations between Russia and the West.

Since extending a hand of reconciliation to Russia, it has proved increasingly difficult for Moscow to explicitly take up its concerns with the United States. This is particularly so in light of the agreement between Moscow and Washington to hold the first round of full-scale talks on signing a new treaty on strategic offensive arms. Pointing a finger at NATO is useful as it has become synonymous with the West in general. In other words, the alliance has become a convenient outlet for Moscow's exasperation with the West, allowing the Kremlin to apportion blame without specifying any particular country.¹⁸ Yet NATO continues to dismiss Russia's criticism of the exercises, downplaying their negative implications for Moscow's security and national interests.¹⁹

Regrettably, the alliance's decision was to continue with the exercises in what is clearly an unstable area, despite sufficient time to reconsider. This follows large-scale opposition protests against Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's leadership, his democratic record, and his handling of the war with Russia. An alleged mutiny in tank barracks near the capital Tbilisi only served to underscore the mounting paranoia of the current regime. Nevertheless, Saakashvili has been an avid proponent of the continuation of the exercises as initially planned, despite obvious disappointment at NATO's limited support during the conflict with Russia. One argument is that the war games are a symbolic demonstration of the alliance's solidarity with Georgia following NATO's somewhat detached position during the August 2008 conflict. Russia is, however, concerned that Tbilisi's designs may be to rearm as well as provide an opportunity for greater Western influence within the region. These fears flow from links identified between previous NATO military exercises in the region and Georgia's military intervention in South Ossetia. According to the South Ossetian envoy to Russia, the same troops that participated in NATO's military training launched the artillery fire on South Ossetia.²⁰

The expansion of NATO to the borders of what Moscow has identified as its sphere of interest has only heightened Russian sensitivity of what it perceives as Western encroachment. The CIS, which includes Georgia, has been identified as a particular priority in Russian foreign policy. This is aimed



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at 'ensuring mutual security, including joint efforts to combat common challenges and threats.'²¹ In contrast to Georgia's enthusiasm in hosting the NATO exercises, a number of states from the CIS region and Eastern Europe declined participation. This not only includes the Russian aligned states of Armenia, Kazakhstan, Serbia and Moldova, but the NATO member states of Estonia and Latvia. There is still debate concerning the motivation behind the decision by Estonia and Latvia to withdraw from the military exercises. Questions remain whether the move was based on support for Moscow's opposition to the war games, or a reaction based on trepidation regarding their larger neighbour.

Moscow's growing disillusionment with NATO

Since the end of the Cold War, relations between NATO and Russia have been Janus-faced.²² On the one hand, the alliance has drawn on Russia as a partner in restoring peace in the Balkans, as well as extending a hand of friendship through the NRC.²³ On the other hand, the Organisation's continued eastward expansion within what Russia has identified as its particular sphere of interest, does not support the move towards improved relations. For the Kremlin, it is an indication that the alliance cannot be trusted. This is premised on the fact that it has failed to live up to the promises made in the 1990s that there would be no deployment of military bases near Russia's borders and that 'NATO would not move a centimetre to the east.'²⁴

Although Moscow has been at pains to highlight that it does not consider NATO a threat, concern has been expressed over the desire to 'revert to the confrontational logic of the Cold War.'²⁵ Indeed, according to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, the war games in Georgia represent 'muscle-flexing' by the alliance that is both 'wrong and dangerous,' driving a wedge between the alliance and Russia.²⁶ From a Russian perspective the 'Cooperative Longbow 09/Cooperative Lance 09' exercises that form part of NATO's PFP is yet another act of provocation, demonstrating that the organisation does not take Russia's concerns seriously and that it continues to be perceived as a junior partner. This has been compounded by indications from NATO that membership may be extended to Georgia and the Ukraine, provoking further anxiety within the Kremlin. Indeed, at a presentation following the G20 Summit in London (2009), Dmitry Medvedev openly questioned the 'urgent need to accept as NATO members countries that are not at all ready for membership, creating tension with other countries.'²⁷ At the same time, the decision to maintain NATO-

Russian relations within the framework of the Council has effectively kept the Federation at arm's length rather than embracing it as an equal partner. While the agenda of common activities and co-operation is impressive, beyond the large number of conferences, meetings and seminars, there has not been a significant move towards building deeper co-operation on the basis of equality and partnership.

Russia's frustration with NATO's continued focus on expansion and the decision to host the war games in Georgia has found expression in the recently released Russian national security strategy (May 2009). In building a long-term defence plan based on 'modern-day realities and potential threats,'²⁸ the strategy highlights the importance of territorial integrity as well as the threat posed by expansion efforts near the Federation's borders. It argues that '[t]he instability of the existing global and regional architecture, especially in the Euro-Atlantic region ... is an increasing threat to international security.'²⁹

This effectively challenges the role of NATO in providing an adequate security framework for Europe. Moscow is not only questioning NATO's credibility in addressing regional and wider international security; it also lends support to Russia's focus on building its military capacity, including the continued presence of troops stationed within Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the June Kavkaz-2009 military exercises, a large-scale military operation in the Northern Caucasus. It also adds credence to Dmitry Medvedev's calls for a new security framework, one that overcomes the asymmetry of NATO's existence after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. This would mean a new dispensation centred on an inclusive approach to European security, with responsibility being ceded to the larger Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The seasonal freezing and thawing of Russia-NATO relations reflects an inherent crisis within the NRC. Moscow believes that the NRC would make a significant contribution only if it returns to its founding principle of 'indivisibility of security,' thus providing a mechanism for dialogue and co-operation among all its members on an equal basis.³⁰ Instead of acting as a platform for strengthening political and diplomatic relations, this has been where ties have been severed whenever hostilities arise. Despite this increasingly volatile relationship, NATO's ambitious policy objectives need greater co-operation with Russia, especially in the context of the military intervention in Afghanistan, Iran and the development of nuclear technology, and the global financial crisis. There is a growing need to recognise that a NATO without Russia no longer makes sense.

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For Moscow the decision to continue with the military exercises is an indication that it still faces a 'wall of more or less polite indifference'.³¹ This has not only spurred a more critical stance towards the role of the alliance as the framework for Europe's future security, it has also seen the Kremlin increasingly focused on bilateral relations with the United States and member states of the European Union (EU). Contrary to rising tensions between NATO and Russia, a meeting between Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and United States secretary of state Hilary Clinton identified United States-Russia relations as 'productive' linked to discussions on nuclear non-proliferation, Afghanistan and the Middle East.³² This comes against the backdrop of a research report on *The Right Direction for U.S. Policy Towards Russia* which notes that, 'few nations could make more of a difference to our success than Russia, with its vast arsenal of nuclear weapons, its strategic location spanning Europe and Asia, its considerable energy resources, and its status as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council'.³³

Moreover, the May 2009 Russia-EU summit held in Khabarovsk (Siberia) was aimed at improving co-operation between Europe and the Federation following the Georgia-Russia war and the gas dispute in January which saw the suspension of gas to the Ukraine. Nevertheless, relations with Europe remain strained, especially regarding energy security and the EU's 'eastern partnership' initiative aimed at improving ties with former Soviet Union states.³⁴

Conclusion

Russian hostility towards NATO is in many ways justified, but the increase in tension can also be interpreted as calculated to pressure the West into taking a step back from Georgia. That said, Tbilisi is guilty of playing the same game. Even assuming that the mutiny was genuine and allegations of a Russian-supported coup attempt were true, the immediate and public accusations against Russia were clearly intended to capitalise on the situation to secure declarations of NATO support. The consequences have been dire. Moscow's announcement that it would be pulling out of the forthcoming NRC's ministerial meeting has once more put co-operation between the Federation and the alliance on hold.

NATO has failed to arrive at a considered approach towards the Russian Federation to the detriment of greater co-operation in the war in Afghanistan, relations with Iran, and in addressing the future of Europe's security. In addition, the Organisation's actions have lent support to Moscow's

challenge concerning the viability of NATO in a post-Cold War period, justifying the Kremlin's calls for a new security architecture for Europe. Ultimately, these military exercises may result in NATO's losing more than it gains, especially in light of Georgia's internal political instability combined with its antagonism towards Russia. Not only do relations between Brussels and Moscow face a new diplomatic hurdle, but these military exercises have served to reignite questions concerning NATO's credibility as well as highlight divergent responses to issues of regional security.

Policy recommendations

- *Consider the future of military exercises in the border regions:* Consideration should be given to the suspension of current and future military exercises in the border regions between Russia and Europe. While war games may provide an important avenue for improving 'interoperability' between states within the Southern Caucasus region, the presence of both Russian and NATO troops exacerbates hostilities between the two, contributing to a deterioration in relations. A decision by both parties that would see the cessation of war games within the region could provide a platform for trust-building and improved relations.
- *Clarify the future development of the NRC:* It is becoming increasingly important to clarify the role of the NRC as a forum for equal partnership and discussion as well as its role in guiding future Russia-NATO relations.
- *Develop a new security framework:* Further consideration should be given to the development of a future European Security Framework. This should include critical debate on the role of NATO, the prospects for the development of a Euro-Atlantic Security Zone, and a more prominent position for the OSCE, in developing an alternative to the current regime.

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ISSN 1607 2375

Produced by Acumen Publishing Solutions, Johannesburg.