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Russia and the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept: New Era of Partnership or Wishful Thinking?

A Policy Update Paper

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ADVERSARIES NO MORE?

On November 19 2010, at the Summit in Lisbon, Portugal, NATO adopted its new Strategic Concept to serve both as a roadmap to navigate its twenty-eight member states through the minefields of the post-9/11 world and also as a relationship guide for their interactions with about three dozen partner countries. The adoption of this landmark document was preceded by a complex three-phase Research and Development (R&D) process that involved an expert group led by the former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. The group was tasked by the NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, to lay the groundwork for the concept through a year-long series of consultations with the Allied governments and its recommendations formed the basis of the final document

Not surprisingly, Russia with its huge arsenals of Weapons of Mass Destruction inherited from its predecessor state, the Soviet Union (the original driving force behind the creation of NATO), was featured more prominently than any other partner country in the recent NATO documents. Equally predictable was the elated reaction of some European media and politicians to the declaration of a strategic partnership between NATO and Russia (German Chancellor Angela Merkel even saw this as the “proof that the Cold War [had] finally come to an end.”), given Europe’s uneasy proximity to Russia and its dependence on Russian energy supplies. Conversely, many observers, especially in Eastern Europe, have been largely unimpressed, echoing lingering scepticism among some countries about Moscow’s commitment to a positive relationship with the West. The expert group’s report correctly pins down “history, geography, and recent events” as causes of such scepticism. In light of this, another look at NATO documents through the prism of a Russian foreign policy personality may be helpful in determining whether the signs of the much touted NATO-Russia rapprochement are substantial enough to justify calls for a review of Ottawa’s cautious view on Russia.

The issue of dealing with Russia has been among the most polarizing within NATO, especially after the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, which split the alliance in the middle and created two major groups along the division lines, according to US diplomatic cables made public by WikiLeaks releases. One is led by Germany and consists of France, the Netherlands, Spain, Norway and sometimes Portugal. The group, nicknamed the “gang of five,” opposes Ukrainian and Georgian membership out of concern that any further eastward expansion will put NATO on a collision course with Russia who is particularly nervous about intruders (real and perceived alike) in the post-Soviet space.¹ On the opposite side of the divide, the US and Canada lead

¹ Former soviet republics becoming independent states as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 should have invalidated the old appeasement adage of non-interference in internal affairs of the communist empire, which was a de-facto endorsement of Moscow’s free reign over roughly two dozen nations. That, however, did not happen and, instead, the term “near abroad” was put in circulation to denote the former Soviet Bloc countries as the area where Russia has “privileged interests,” hence retaining Moscow’s control over them and giving Russian sympathizers in the West a renewed lease on the old argument against getting in Russia’s way in areas in which Moscow feels it has special interests. Quoted in William Safire’s 1994 article ‘ON LANGUAGE: Near Abroad’, William Bodie gave a precise explanation of the origins of the expression, “Russia’s political classes have difficulty viewing the republics on its periphery as fully sovereign entities; use of the term near abroad, in addition to qualifying their independence, signifies to the ‘far abroad’ that Russia claims certain rights in the region that transcend traditional diplomatic conventions.” Dubious from the viewpoint of international law, the term nonetheless exemplifies the sentiment underlying the premise of Russian somewhat delusional outlook on the world as a perpetual us vs. them battlefield. In the context of the NATO-Russia paradigm, that outlook was recently communicated by the Russian Defence Minister. “And, of course, the fact that NATO is getting

some of the former Warsaw Bloc countries and the Baltics, while other allied members – the UK, Italy, Denmark, Greece and Turkey – sit on the fence.

Despite the member states' diverging views on Russia,² the alliance, according to the Albright group's report, is unified in its desire to engage with Russian authorities to work out misconceptions and identify common goals. Given how much the world has changed since the previous Strategic Concept was adopted in 1999, there can be very little doubt that both parties have a lot of common security issues to address.³ The report recommends security cooperation with Russia towards building a cooperative Euro-Atlantic security order, which implies a team effort to establish defences against ballistic missile attack against Europe. Although NATO's wish to see Russia involved in the European security order stems from the initial concept of the NATO-Russia partnership as a Euro-Atlantic security component, the ulterior motive to engage Russia in Euro-Atlantic cooperation is to offset the 2009 Russian proposal for a new European security treaty that NATO considers to have been "designed in part to constrain NATO's activities."

The new Strategic Concept indicates that the alliance wants Moscow's cooperation on missile defence and will seek an agreement with Russia towards transparency of the country's nuclear weapons that NATO wants removed from its borders. It also conditions concrete steps towards partnership on Russia's progress in reducing its huge short range nuclear weapons stockpiles. The document states NATO's willingness to step up consultations and practical collaboration with Russia in other areas of shared interest, including terrorism, narcotics and piracy.

The agreement to discuss missile defence cooperation was further reiterated in the NATO-Russia Council Joint Statement on the last day of the Lisbon summit, which said, "We agreed on a joint ballistic missile threat assessment and to continue dialogue in this area." Although the left-leaning media and the pro-Russian lobby in Europe got decent mileage out of the "breakthrough news" of Russia-NATO cooperation on missile defence in Europe, once the

closer to Russia's borders with its eastward expansion constitutes a military threat to our country," said Anatoly Serdyukov in October 2010 interview with Spiegel.

² It was not the purpose of this study to discuss the Georgian Membership Action Plan prospects or speculate on why Ukraine dropped its membership bid. What seems noteworthy, and yet somehow escapes the attention of many observers, is that the entire North Atlantic alliance and, by extension, Europe and the rest of the western world have been divided over Russia's intolerance towards bids of two independent countries, full members of the UN and other international fora, to join another international organization.

³ Neither the expert group's report, nor the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept were the first documents to spell out the need for a new kind of relationship with Russia. The framework for a partnership was laid down in the 1997 "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security," and a couple of years later, prompted by the colossal collapse of the global geo-security environment on September 11, 2001, it was upgraded to equal partnership enshrined in the "NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality" declaration signed in 2002 at the Rome Summit. The Rome Declaration heralded a new page in bilateral relations – "a qualitatively new relationship between NATO and the Russian Federation" – in the shape of the NATO-Russia Council, created to facilitate the ability to "work on areas of common interest and to stand together against common threats and risks to our security." While admitting twice that the NRC failed the one and only real test it ever faced – the 2008 war- the Albright group's report recommends that the Strategic Concept "underscore[s] NATO's desire for a qualitatively better relationship with Russia based on shared interests, mutual confidence, transparency and predictability." The Strategic Concept also makes reference to the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the Rome Declaration, but puts a special emphasis on, "the respect of democratic principles and the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states in the Euro-Atlantic area."

fanfare had subsided more cautious voices have been sounded that question the likelihood of such cooperation. What causes doubts is the conceptual difference on how European missile defence should be organized. While NATO proposes to build two independent defence systems, Russia wants to see the two systems integrated into one. The “sectoral missile defence” concept implies that Russia will be responsible for intercepting missiles fired against allied states that travel over its territory, while NATO will reciprocate should Russia be targeted. That NATO would have found this proposal unacceptable could have easily been anticipated and the Secretary General, speaking about the Russian concept in February, said, “The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is responsible for protecting the territory of NATO member states and for the safety of their populations. We do not intend to transfer that responsibility to anyone else.”

Nonetheless, the proposal was endorsed in no uncertain terms by President Medvedev, who said, “Either we agree on certain principles with NATO and create a joint [sectoral] system to resolve missile defense tasks, or we fail to reach an agreement, and then we will have to make a number of unpleasant decisions regarding the deployment of offensive nuclear missile installations,” which suggests that Russia is falling back on the Soviet-style tactics of intimidation, bluff and unreasonable counter-proposals. It also shows that, as it stands now, the differences may not be reconcilable,⁴ which, given the hype around this component of the rapprochement, may have a detrimental effect on the entire NATO-Russia partnership prospect.

The language of the report and, especially, the Strategic Concept in reference to Russia, while certainly not confrontational, is quite down-to-earth in that it clearly pinpoints the areas that provide opportunities for cooperation, but also hits the nail on the head in isolating culprits and possible derailment scenarios. Furthermore, neither document leaves any room for doubt that NATO is prepared to defend its members.⁵ In that respect it is curious to see how one particular statement from the Experts Group’s report claiming that “the Alliance neither poses a military threat to Russia, nor considers Russia a military threat,” got truncated in its final version. Although repeated almost verbatim by NATO officials before and after the Summit,⁶ the line did not make it into the final document in its entirety: the text of the Strategic Concept, while repeating the first part of Albright’s text, stops short of stating that NATO doesn’t consider Russia a threat. Instead, the Alliance proclaims its willingness to move towards a “true strategic

⁴ Analysts have recently voiced doubts about the compatibility of these viewpoints. “Disagreements around the missile defence controversy is likely derail NATO-Russia relations in the long run,” writes Jakub Kulharek of the Association for International Affairs of the Czech Republic. His sentiment is echoed by Alexei Fenenko, Leading Research Fellow, Institute of International Security Studies in Russia, who in an interview on the RiaNovosti website said, “There is little chance that the talks on missile defense in Europe will succeed, in my opinion.”

⁵ The experts group report first states its defensive resolve directly within the context of proposed cooperation with Russia, “NATO should pursue a policy of engagement with Russia while reassuring all Allies that their security and interests will be defended,” and then reiterates it while expressing the alliance’s desire to engage with Moscow to prevent misunderstandings and pursue common goals, “The Alliance does not consider any country to be its enemy; however, no one should doubt NATO’s resolve if the security of any of its member states were to be threatened.” The Strategic Concept is equally unequivocal about NATO’s fundamental mission as it states under “Core Tasks and Principles” that “NATO will deter and defend against any threat of aggression, and against emerging security challenges where they threaten the fundamental security of individual Allies or the Alliance as a whole.”

⁶ David Hobbs, the Secretary General of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly told Russian newspaper *Zavtra*, “Realistically, I can't say that today's Russia poses military threat to NATO.” Speaking after the NATO-Russia Council summit on November 20, 2010, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said, “The NATO nations and Russia have, today, agreed, in writing, that while we face many security challenges, we pose no threat to each other.”

partnership” with Russia and expects reciprocity from Moscow, which is symptomatic of Brussels’ careful approach to the West-East partnership.

RUSSIA HELPS WITH IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN...FOR A PRICE

Among the things Moscow has done since President Obama “reset” relations in 2009 that were meant to signal its willingness to better the relations with the West, two gestures are often mentioned: helping Washington apply more pressure on Iran and facilitating NATO’s mission in Afghanistan. Trying to analyze the rationale behind Moscow’s foreign policy decisions since the “reset” may help determine if Russia’s behaviour in the past two years does indeed imply a genuine desire to become a constructive security partner for NATO, or is it just an attempt to capitalize on some of the Alliance’s weak spots while also mending its public image damaged in the West as a result of the Georgia war?

In June 2010, Russia joined other permanent members of the UNSC to pass resolution 1929, which imposed a new round of injunctions on Iran. This step ended Russia’s opposition to US-led international efforts to sanction Iran into dropping its controversial nuclear program. A signatory to previous SC resolutions that started the UN-approved sanctions strategy in 2006, Russia – in a rather petulant reaction to Western criticism of its attack on Georgia and the recognition of Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s independence – curtailed in the fall of 2008 its participation in some international programs and put a freeze on its economic and security cooperation with the West.⁷

Mimicking the notorious Soviet strategy of driving a hard bargain in negotiations with the West to reap the maximum advantage of the deal at any cost – the Yalta Conference in 1945 being one of the most vivid examples⁸ – Russia manipulated the West into absorbing the huge markup it put on agreeing to lift its veto on Iran sanctions without actually making any significant concessions of its own. Observers point to several developments that may be responsible for

⁷ The fact that while publically retreating from its WTO membership commitments (Russia’s Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was quoted as saying, “We don’t feel or see any advantages from membership [in WTO], if they exist at all.”) Russia was careful to exclude its participation in the prestigious G8 from its “problem list,” (according to an August 2008 Russian Foreign Ministry statement, “Russia confirms its disposition to constructive interaction within the framework of the G8 group,”) suggests that Moscow is very selective in its priorities and pursues a rather unattainable ambition of being viewed as a global player with a say in resolving international conflicts (Putin has criticized the way NATO and the US handled Kosovo and Iraq) and a stake in the global economy, but is not willing to take on the obligations that come with the prestige of playing in the “big league,” and, more importantly, is prepared to defend the “near abroad” from any foreign influence.

⁸ Perceived by many as a “sellout” of Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union, the meeting of the three major allied leaders (Rossevelt, Churchill, Stalin) in the Crimean resort of Yalta in early 1945 was convened with the purpose of discussing the post-war organization of Europe. While all parties had their own agendas for the conference, it was the USSR that ended up getting the better end of the deal: in return for agreeing to the establishment of the United Nations and joining the Allies against Japan, Stalin demanded a veto power in the Security Council for his country, the US’s recognition of Mongolia’s independence from China, and the Kurile Islands handed over to the Soviet Union. Stalin also managed to lay down the foundation of the future Eastern Bloc by getting Churchil and Rossevelt to agree to a buffer zone between the USSR and Western Europe (redrawing Poland’s and Germany’s maps in the process) by pledging to allow free elections in territories of Eastern Europe liberated from the Nazis. Once the buffer around the western border of the country has been secured and the Soviet influence over northeast Asia formally recognized, Stalin promptly reneged on his promise for free elections and pro-Soviet regimes were installed in most Eastern European countries, which in 1955 joined the USSR in the military alliance under the Warsaw Pact.

Russia's change of heart on Iran: Washington's willingness to revise the deployment of the nuclear defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic; the Obama Administration's decision to resubmit to Congress the Peaceful Nuclear Agreement with Russia, initially submitted by Bush in early 2008 only to be withdrawn following the August war in Georgia; and, the signing of the new bilateral Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. To sweeten the deal, President Obama lifted sanctions the US had previously placed on four Russian organizations for supporting Iran's nuclear program and selling embargoed military supplies to Syria.

Although these events did motivate Russia's decision, it must be noted that certain negative trends in bilateral relations between Moscow and Tehran had already been unfolding, serving as a fitting backdrop for Russia to play its Iran card. Among these trends were a measurable decline in Russia-Iran economic cooperation connected with an unprecedented increase in Russia's trade with Turkey (\$30 billion in bilateral trade with Turkey against \$3 billion with Iran in 2009), Moscow's losing interest in pursuing joint energy projects with Iran fuelled by new opportunities elsewhere, and the delays in delivering the S-300 defence missile system that had started before Russia rejoined the sanctions program.⁹

However, there were two other developments, for which the Kremlin can take full credit, that are critical to understanding Moscow's motivation to start lifting the nearly two year-long chill in Russia-US relations. The (chronologically) second event was the victory of the pro-Moscow Viktor Yanukovich in the February 2010 presidential elections in Ukraine. The election triggered a series of steps distancing Ukraine from its pre-election priorities and drawing Kiev closer to Moscow, which culminated with President Yanukovich announcing in November that Ukraine had abandoned its bid to join NATO. The first event took place 16 months prior when, in response to Georgia's ill-advised assault on its autonomous region of South Ossetia, Russian troops in a swift air and ground attack took over South Ossetia and another breakaway Georgian region, Abkhazia, and briefly occupied some parts of Georgia. The two events, although directly unrelated, had as their ultimate outcome the disruption of NATO membership

⁹ The air defence system S-300 contract was signed between Russia and Iran in 2005, but Russia after several years of dragging its feet in fulfilling the obligation, formally cancelled the contract in September 2010 as it contradicted the UNSC resolution 1969 signed by Russia three months prior. Some observers saw US and Israeli pressure behind Russia's reluctance to deliver the systems as scheduled, but as Alexander Pikayev notes in his excellent analysis of Moscow's motives to support the resolution (Pikayev, A. *Why Russia Supported Sanctions Against Iran?*), Russia had not had any problems shrugging off such pressure before. The conclusion that Russia had been weary of Iran's persistent snubbing of the Security Council – which has traditionally been viewed by Moscow as the ultimate guardian of international peace and stability (Russian Federation, as the successor-state of the USSR, has veto power in the SC) – as well as its growing concern that nukes developed by Iran may end up in the hands of anti-Russian terrorist groups, was confirmed by Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the upper house of the Russian parliament, Mikhail Margelov, who in May 2010 explained the delays in Russia's delivery of the missile system, said, "Russia is a responsible seller of any of its products on foreign markets and we are not interested in the militarization of the [Middle East] region."

bids for Ukraine and Georgia¹⁰ – the two direct concerns of Russia since the two former republics had formally requested to join MAP.¹¹

Having expertly quashed the immediate threat of NATO's eastward expansion (in the process placing the blame for the Georgian war squarely and illogically on NATO), Moscow could now resume flirting with NATO as it felt it had the upper hand in the relationship. "We came out of the crisis that we had after the August 2008 events [the war with Georgia], the crisis in the South Caucasus, stronger," Russia's Permanent Representative to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, told Russian channel Vesti TV: "Our Western colleagues saw in Russia a partner that one cannot wipe one's feet on. We are strong... and we are restoring cooperation, including on our terms."

Confident and no longer worried about NATO moving in with the neighbors, Russia agreed to resume negotiations in order to strike a political bargain. And it did exactly that by attaching a hefty price tag to its cooperation with NATO on Afghanistan: in return for extending arrangements to carry non-lethal NATO supplies to and from Afghanistan through Russian territory, delivering helicopters and small arms to the Afghan army and stepping-up anti-narcotics training of Afghan troops, Moscow asked for a provision limiting NATO troop deployment anywhere in the former Eastern bloc territory to a 3,000-strong brigade and restricting aircraft stationed in Eastern Europe to 24 units to the total of 42 days a year. Russia also demanded that NATO lift limits on Russian troops stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and a veto power on any additional large NATO deployments in Central Europe, the Balkans and the Baltics.

HURDELS ON THE PATH TO RAPPROCHEMENT

Following up on the expert group's recommendations, the Strategic Concept calls for a strong partnership with Russia based on mutual confidence, transparency and predictability. It is no coincidence that exactly these factors are the three weakest blocks in the foundation of the NATO-Russia bilateral relationship at the moment and, realistically, for the foreseeable future.

Mutual confidence is a cornerstone of any productive relationship and the glaring lack of trust between NATO (both as a whole and on the individual member level) and Russia while not surprising given the past, is especially damaging. NATO is aware of the problem and looks to engage in a confidence building process by focusing on areas of common interests. Since historically NATO's predominant concerns are rooted in the concrete Cold War experiences of some of its (mostly newer) members, Moscow's demonstrated willingness to meet Brussels half-way will go a long way in allaying those concerns and helping solidify the alliance. However, doubts about Moscow reciprocating for the sake of trust building persist among some experts who believe that deep-seated prejudice against the West, typical for the decision-making elite, will be hard to overcome. Many Russian experts warn against partnership with NATO, arguing that rapprochement with NATO would mean a "civilizational choice" for Russia and question

¹⁰ And while it is probably true that the August 2008 war (much to Moscow's expectations) pushed NATO MAP out of Georgia's reach, at least for now, it is also true that NATO was well on their way to opening up to Russia several years ago, but Russia went ahead and attacked Georgia, thus showing one more time where its national security priorities lie. So the question today is, what is it exactly that the proponents of pre-emptive friendliness with Russia see in the country's history, geography or recent events that suggests that there won't be another war against Georgia (or, maybe some other, insufficiently obedient, former subject) in the future?

¹¹ Membership Action Plan – NATO program launched in April 1999 designed to advise and assist countries aspiring to join the alliance.

whether the “Russians – not the outspoken Westernized minority, but the majority – willing to forge an alliance with the forces which fought against Russia for centuries and are currently waging a Cold War against it, employing novel indirect-impact strategy and chaos control?”¹²

A decade ago, when Putin embarked on his journey of restoring Russia’s power and influence, he chose patriotism as the platform for his efforts. Patriotism (nationalism in Russia’s traditional context) is a powerful motivator that has historically given the Russian people a tremendous boost every time the country needed to pull itself up by its bootstraps, but it was in a state of deep hibernation in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. By unleashing the tremendous power of Russian patriotism, Putin sought to guide its charge towards economic and military recovery. And, although the renewed sense of belonging to a great nation, amplified by rising oil prices, have been driving Russia’s revival, the by-product of patriotism as a national ideology is the belief that cooperation with the world, in the name of global security, inevitably comes at the expense of one’s national security, which minimizes the likelihood of a goodwill gesture because it is viewed as a concession without any tangible return.

Not unlike their Soviet predecessors, Russian government officials and the state-controlled media don’t shy away from using the West as a scapegoat for any domestic or international problem. Recently, Victor Ivanov, director of Russia’s Federal Service for the Control of Narcotics, publicly blamed NATO policies in Afghanistan for the recent spike in heroin use in Russia, while deputy director of the Institute for Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Anatoli Yegorin, claimed in an interview with RiaNovosti that it is “the Americans who’re pulling the strings” behind the current unrest in North Africa and the Middle East. Intended for domestic audiences, statements like these are used by Russia’s security and military establishment and state-controlled media to justify their visceral anti-Americanism, which translates into a largely negative public perception of NATO, making it so much harder for progressive voices – emanating mostly from outside of the Kremlin – to be heard.

Even though partnership with NATO can be clearly beneficial for Russia (help stabilize Afghanistan, cut off the flow of narcotics via Russia’s southern borders, aid Moscow’s counter-terrorism efforts, give access to new technologies, etc), it is likely any attempts by the liberal minority within the Russian government will be met with strong resistance from the mighty *siloviki*, or defence, police and security agencies, supported by a smorgasbord of nationalists and other hard-liners to whom NATO will always be an enemy as it epitomizes the Soviet’s defeat in the Cold War.

NATO’s calls for increased transparency on Russia’s nuclear arms will almost certainly fall on deaf ears, as the Russian military, just like its Soviet predecessor, operates on the basis of secretive exclusivity, which has traditionally been accepted by the public as an integral part of an effective defence mechanism. Simply put, in the mind of a Russian military bureaucrat, transparency usually equals disloyalty and any activity related to either researching defence data, or publishing it, is frequently perceived as subversion. Likewise, whereas civilian control over the military is a core principle of inter-operability between allied members, the autocratic nature of the current political system in Russia, with all power in the hands of the executive

¹² Victor Kovalev, member of the Russian Military Academy and a frequent contributor to the Russian Foreign Ministry’s official periodical *International Affairs*, is not alone in trying to portray NATO, the US and the West as conniving enemies who Russia must outmaneuver to survive. A simple internet search reveals that similarly existential us-against-them sentiments appear in many blogs and online forums in Russia, which is not surprising given that the new Russian military doctrine, despite being described by the expert group’s report as “strictly defensive,” lists NATO as the foremost external threat.

branch, makes the elite intolerant of any attempts for independent media or public investigation of issues related to military procurements, arms trade or defence. Michael Bohm in his article “5 Reasons Why Russia Will Never Join NATO” correctly notes that transparency, accountability and civilian control over the military are incompatible with any vertical power structure.

The Kremlin’s unique blend of cultural and psychological attributes – the idiosyncratic mistrust for anything foreign, the “us vs. them” *raison d’être* dominating the foreign affairs field and a strong impulsive ingredient responsible for the occasional irrationality of Moscow’s actions¹³ – with pragmatic shrewdness and global ambition traditionally centered on the “divide and conquer” principle make it unpredictable. It is as difficult today as it was in the past to anticipate how Moscow will react to any collaboration proposals, except, perhaps, that counter-proposals will inevitably be offered.

Russia’s foreign policy mechanism seems to be an extension of its peculiar domestic model in which an aggressive market economy coexists with centralized executive power and corporate government. Domestically, the model allows two seemingly contradictory notions to coexist, for example trying to attract foreign investment and seeking to control it at the same time. Internationally, the Kremlin wants closer ties with the West to gain access to investments, technology and markets, but at the same time it resents the West for being able to provide what it needs, it mistrust its intentions and mocks its values. While the short-term results of such a model have been good for the elite, chances that the same approach will work over a longer period of time are slim. Russia’s resource-based economy, vulnerable to increasingly rapid and severe market fluctuations, will not be able to sustain its growth for very long, forcing a transfer to what President Medvedev calls an “innovative economy,” which in its true form is incompatible with Russia’s corrupt and xenophobic bureaucracy and will be unattainable without Moscow reaching out westwards for tools, methodology and markets. And that is where the much feared by Russian conservative nationalists “civilizational” choice will be waiting to be made: from the old long-distance vertical relations to new horizontal equal partnerships.

CONCLUSION

Two observations come to mind after reading the report and the concept document:

1. NATO’s overtures towards Russia are less of an acknowledgement of a changing Russian attitude towards the West, but rather a pragmatic response to increased security threats the Alliance shares with Russia. For the first time since the 1950’s NATO and Russia are facing same challenges – terrorism, nuclear threats and cyber-attacks. Presently, NATO and Russia do not share enough values for a genuine strategic partnership, but NATO seeks rapprochement with Russia to jointly address common threats through gradually extending cooperation on specific issues.
2. While it looks to step up its cooperation with Russia, NATO – by no means certain that Russia will hold its end of the deal – makes an important provision, “Because Russia’s future policies toward NATO remain difficult to predict, the Allies must pursue the goal of cooperation while also guarding against the possibility that Russia could decide to move in a more adversarial direction.”

¹³ Writing about Russia’s impulse decision to stop supporting sanctions against Iran in response to America’s criticism of its war in Georgia, analyst Alexander Pikayev notes, “This also produced a bit of a paradox. Russia’s desire to punish the Bush administration for what was perceived in Moscow as overreaction to the 2008 Russian-Georgian war appeared for a time to outweigh Russian interests related to nonproliferation and the UN role.”

Although hailed by NATO Secretary General Rasmussen and President Medvedev as “historic,” most observers view the agreement on strategic cooperation between the alliance and Russia as a mere declaration of intent. Whether the heralded NATO-Russia rapprochement will actually shape up or not depends on how many of the numerous historical and newly built stumbling blocks the parties are able and willing to remove on the road to a real partnership. And how soon Russia will drop the Cold War-era assumption of a concession as a sign of weakness in negotiations with the West and instead of trying to intimidate and manipulate an imaginary enemy will take a step or two towards a real partner. But until that happens any revision of Canada’s reserved stance on Russia appears to be premature and unsubstantiated.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An independent international policy analyst, Mikayel Bagratuni monitors international multilingual media reports and expert analyses on issues pertaining to Canadian and international security, researches regional developments in Russia, FSU and the Middle East to track trends with a potential of short and long-term impacts on global stability.

Born and raised in Tbilisi, Georgia, Mikayel moved to Armenia, where he graduated from Yerevan Linguistic University with a Master's degree in Russian Language and Literature. He taught Russian at high schools and universities while contributing original articles and translations to various Moscow-based publications, until the movement for independence started in Armenia in the late 1980's. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, wishing to contribute to raising the country's international profile, Mikayel started the first English-language newspaper in Armenia, also working as an interpreter with Western media organizations covering the Caucasus.

Prior to immigrating to Canada in 2005, Mikayel resigned from the Armenian Foreign Ministry where he worked first as a deputy communication officer for media relations and then as an advisor to the policy planning department. During his 13-year diplomatic career, Mikayel was posted as a press-secretary to the Armenian Embassy in Washington, DC, represented his country at the Council of Europe's Standing Committee on Mass Media in Strasbourg, and spent three years as the Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy in Ottawa.

Mikayel is fluent in Russian, English and Armenian with basic Georgian and French. His public appearances include speaking at Model UN, Model NATO, Welcome to Washington International Club, Close-Up Foundation, St. Mary's College of Maryland and the Ottawa Symposium on Multiculturalism.

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