NATO and Russia after the Prague Summit: The Way to Practical Cooperation

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The Prague Summit marks an end to Russian-NATO relations as they were known in the previous decade. The irony is that in May 2002, when the Russian-NATO “20” Council was established, this was described as the true end of the Cold War. Keeping in mind that the Cold War was completed back in 1989-1991, what we had in the 1990s was not the Cold War, but its ghost. For Russia such a ghost was NATO. In these terms the Prague Summit is a “silver bullet.”

Threat Perception or Misperception

Strictly speaking, NATO’s military arsenal may be regarded as a military threat to Russian security. However, military threat was usually not prevailing in Russian debates on the Alliance. It was used as a secondary (additional) argument, but rarely became the decisive factor of Russian policy. Moreover, through the 1990s the Russian national security apparatus preferred to codify Russia’s attitude toward NATO in doctrinal documents in quite a vague way. For example the Concept of National Security (2000) mentions NATO only twice: the first time in the section on “primary threats to Russia’s national security in the international sphere” and then in the section on “primary threats in the military sphere.” Nonetheless the portrayal of NATO as an organization hostile to Russia characterizes the entire document, and there are allusions to NATO in other sections. In its outlook on NATO, the document remains practically unaltered since the 1997 edition. The important feature of the aforementioned and other doctrinal documents is that the NATO threat does not come from the bloc itself, but from the enlargement process.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the adoption by Russia of democratic values and the course of reform tremendously altered the issue of European security. The Eastern threat, materialized by thousands of tanks and aircraft, diminished, if not vanished completely. The military might that was inherited by the Russian leadership was clearly disoriented. While divisions were still in place, which could theoretically justify capability-based military planning by NATO, the political will in Russia had nothing to do with the Soviet era.

The Eastern threat for NATO, represented by the Soviet Union, disappeared. Russia did not see itself as a threat in political terms. In this regard the clear search by NATO for a new mission, or redistribution of priorities in its missions, was not understood, let alone appreciated in Russia. Lack of understanding of NATO’s policies was the major engine of Russian/NATO-related policies.

The Trauma of Enlargement Debates: Confusion on Both Sides

Russia was alarmed by NATO expansion being discussed in a more or less anti-Russian mode. One of the key reasons for NATO enlargement in the mid-1990s was the potential Russian threat, the argument being that Russia remained unstable, nuclearly equipped and with a strong communist (revenge-oriented) opposition. This argument was rarely logically completed by saying that an instable Russia could return to aggressive foreign policy under new political leadership, but it was supposed.

The irony is that this myth turned out to be the major selling point in the mid-1990s for the Yeltsin regime to raise political and economic support. This confused Russia completely. To get loans, Russia was threatening the West with angry communists knocking at the Kremlin.
gates, ready to take control of a still great military, including nuclear arsenal (the assumption was, albeit very far from reality, but still prevailing, that Russian communist opposition would pursue an anti-Western foreign policy). However, after using this argument to sell and resell Yeltsin to the West, Russia had absolutely nothing to counter this very argument when it came back as a boomerang as a reason for NATO expansion.

The truth is that Russian communist opposition was never taken seriously internally after 1993. It was a means and an excuse for various political manipulations. In this regard Russia’s surprise with this argument being used as the reason for NATO expansion was true. Nonetheless, to prove this to be true after exploiting the same myth internally and externally was next to impossible. Still, Russia kept trying.

But, more importantly, the use of this “unstable Russia” argument was provoking the Russian apparatus to take a strong stance with regard to NATO expansion. In the eyes of the Russian apparatus this was becoming to some extent a debate not about European security, but about the future of democratic reforms in Russia. To prove the uselessness of NATO expansion meant to prove that reforms in Russia are secure and irreversible. So, surprisingly, Russia in its own understanding had to oppose NATO expansion to prove that Russia was not a threat to the West.

Beside this, Russia still has to deal with the many faces of NATO. Western debates on NATO are so rich and various that the Alliance is alternatively portrayed as still a military bloc, a more political one, a community of values, or all of those at the same time, depending on the expert or the institution. So Russia could never fully focus its NATO-related policies, since whatever arguments or counter-arguments Russian diplomats or the military used, they could be easily dismissed as lacking the point and not reflecting the current NATO mission.

Putin’s NATO Doctrine: Practical Cooperation

The Russian national security apparatus regards NATO in a broader sense than just as a military threat. NATO is taken as an exclusive club, strong enough to pose a direct military challenge to Russian security. So the first need is to exclude the direct military threat. This threat, however, is basically excluded by the very fact that Russia is a democratic state, so presumably there is no need for NATO to threaten or use military power against the Russian Federation.

But the nature of exclusivity is taken negatively by Russia. The “open door” policy, on the one hand, relieves the pressure of exclusivity, but on the other does not really solve the problem. The process of criteria-setting and selection can be taken as a disguised form of exclusivity, which can be regarded as unjustified snooping into internal Alliance procedures by a non-member state, namely Russia. This interpretation is supported by the fact that no other state in Europe (except Belarus, and former Yugoslavia before Milosevic’s regime collapse) is concerned with NATO expansion or any NATO policies to the extent of regarding the Alliance as a threat or security concern. For most non-member countries the only concern is the selection of new members and the wish to get on this list.

Russia’s major concern with regard to NATO is the threat of being left out of European integration processes and on the periphery of the European security architecture. The only radical solution is Russian membership of NATO (even lacking participation in military structures, following the French or Spanish patterns). However, this is impossible because of Russia’s Orient policies. Chinese and Indian factors prevail here. Moreover, full membership of the organization that was the winner of the Cold War challenges Russian dignity. So Russia would prefer to base its relations with NATO on partnership (more or less equal) rather than on membership.
Putin started changing relations with NATO in February 2000. However, it took more than two years to make the U-turn in Russian foreign policy. Neither Russian nor Western security bureaucracies wanted to completely abandon the Cold War ghost, which underpinned the previous logic of Russia-NATO relations.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to understand clearly what the new Russia-NATO relations will be. This track will never be the best one for Russian-Western cooperation. It will never be the cornerstone of security relations. It is wise to limit this track to practical security projects, such as intelligence-sharing, rescue operations, military doctrine consultations, theater missile defense debates, military reform assistance, etc. However, strategic debates are unlikely to succeed within the NATO framework. A new concert of great powers, either an institutionalized G8 or another body, will deal with that. It does not undermine the role of NATO at all. Cooperation on military reforms may already be an invaluable contribution to members and partners, including Russia.

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Notes

1. The total number of such threats is seven. The complete list in original order looks like this:
   - The aspiration of individual states and international organizations to weaken existing mechanisms for ensuring international security, above all the UN and the OSCE;
   - the danger of a decline in Russia’s political, economic, and military influence in the world;
   - the fortification of military-political blocs and alliances, above all NATO expansion to the east;
   - the possibility of the appearance of foreign military bases and large military contingents near Russia’s borders;
   - the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems;
   - the deterioration of the integration processes within the Commonwealth of Independent States;
   - threats to the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation.

2. The total number of this type of threat is four. The complete list in original order is:
   - The way in which NATO’s use of coercive (military) methods outside of the bloc’s jurisdiction and without sanction from the UN Security Council has become a strategic doctrine [for NATO], and threatens to destabilize the entire international strategic environment;
   - the growing technological advantage of a number of leading nations and their increased ability to create weapons and military technology of a new generation create a precedent for a qualitatively new stage in the arms race and for a profound change in the forms and methods of conducting military actions;
   - foreign special services and the organizations that they employ have increased activity on the territory of the Russian Federation;
   - negative tendencies in the military sphere are exacerbated by the prolonged process of reforming the military organization and the defense-industrial complex of the Russian Federation, the insufficient funding of national defense, and inadequacies in the normative legal base. As a result, problems of a domestic nature are weakening Russia’s military security.