

# NATO and Russia After the Bucharest Summit

## Is a New Security Agenda Feasible?

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Changes of administration in both Russia and the United States provide some ground to anticipate a “fresh start” in U.S.-Russian relations. One of the most troublesome areas on the agenda concerns the size and scope of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. On the NATO alliance, what can the international community expect from Russia’s new president, Dmitry Medvedev? Will he be willing to tolerate some distance between Russia and the West, as his predecessor Vladimir Putin was, or will he facilitate a more cooperative agenda? Will Russia confront NATO and resist its expansion; acknowledge the inevitability of NATO expansion and, accordingly, restructure and readjust its military strategy; or possibly even consider joining NATO?

The choice of confrontation is not as obvious as it may seem. Within Russian ruling circles there are at least some inconsistencies in attitudes toward NATO. On the operational level, Russian officials recognize the importance of military cooperation with the alliance; a brief video prepared for NATO’s April 2008 Bucharest summit, and approved by both NATO and Russia, portrayed both sides as close allies with common security interests, holding joint military exercises and developing cooperative training programs. Politically, however, Russia’s emphasis is significantly less cooperative: instead of an ally, NATO stands as one of the most important referents to the “unfriendly West.”

It is unlikely, however, that NATO can be upheld as the major source of Russian insecurity in the long run. To most Russians, NATO as an institution is too unfamiliar, and its member states too familiar, to warrant enemy status. Most Russians do not even understand the nature of the organization that hides behind the acronym. They are even less clear why a group of countries with which Moscow sustains normal working relations, either bilaterally or within international institutions like the G8, are negatively assessed as NATO members.

Moreover, Russian opposition to NATO is premised on two mutually exclusive arguments. On the one hand, NATO is said to be a dangerously strong (even omnipotent) and unfriendly military bloc that threatens Russian interests. On the other hand, it is said to be a relic of the Cold War, incapable of providing security in today's completely altered international environment in which security challenges are not bound to specific territories. For both Putin and Medvedev, "bloc thinking" and, accordingly, territorial expansion are not proper remedies for nonterritorial threats (ironically, on this, the allegedly *realpolitik* Russian government adheres to a line of reasoning propounded by far less hardnosed European schools of peace research and "New Regionalism"). In the end, as Russian Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin said at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June, NATO "should become history."

Finally, while Russia's arguments against NATO expansion have increased in frequency and number since the Bucharest summit, they are based on a number of shaky premises. First, by linking the matter of NATO expansion to warnings it has made in the past about the "Kosovo precedent," Russia makes a political point, but not a very convincing one. It claims that Ukrainian and Georgian applications to NATO are a perfect justification for the secession of Crimea from Ukraine and the permanent separation from Georgia of the breakaway autonomies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's representative to NATO, has said that it is unlikely Ukraine will be able to maintain its current borders if it joined the alliance. The same argument is made with regard to Georgia: that since neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia support NATO membership, they have the right to refrain from going with Georgia into NATO. In the end, Russia is trying to force Kyiv and Tbilisi to make an unpalatable choice between territorial integrity and NATO membership – a controversial strategy, to say the least, especially in light of Russia's continued opposition to Kosovo's independence.

Second, Russia is employing normative links between democracy and security to oppose NATO expansion that it otherwise disavows. It argues that Ukraine should not join NATO since most Ukrainians are against membership in the alliance. In Georgia's case, where popular support for NATO is unquestioned, Russia pushes the democratic dimension by asserting that Georgia does not meet Western standards of democracy and should therefore be unwelcome as a NATO member. However, Putin himself has taken aim against the linkage between democracy and NATO membership, remarking at the Bucharest summit that it would be absurd to consider membership as proof of a country's democratic credentials. In other remarks as well, Putin seems to reject any overall relationship between democracy and security.

Third, Russia appeals to the economic interests of Ukraine and Georgia but unconvincingly puts NATO in the role of spoiler. According to Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov, NATO will force Ukraine to introduce a visa regime for Russia, causing a decline in both Russian tourism to Ukraine's Black Sea resorts and opportunities for Ukrainian migrant labor in Russia. In contrast, Russia claims to want to defend the principle of open borders with its near neighbors. Given Russia's own introduction of a visa regime for Georgia and the severing of economic links with it, however, such a claim lacks credibility. In addition, Prime Minister Putin warned that Ukrainian industry will not be able to produce military equipment in accordance with NATO standards and will thus face hard times as a NATO member. At the same time, he noted that Russia itself will not be interested in investing in joint hi-tech projects with Ukraine if the latter becomes a NATO member.

Finally, Russia threatens purely military roadblocks to NATO expansion. According to Rogozin, Russia is not going to remove its naval base from Sevastopol. For Georgia, Russia's military argument has an added twist. While asserting plans for a long-term military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Russian government accuses Tbilisi of applying military pressure against the breakaway autonomies. It does this aware of the fact that Georgia's chances for NATO membership are dependent on peaceful relations with them.

Despite all this, a glimmer of promise in Russian discourse on NATO expansion can be discerned: meeting with President George W. Bush in Sochi, Russia, after the Bucharest summit, Putin hinted that should NATO focus on cultivating an in-depth strategic partnership with Russia, in time Moscow might not react so negatively toward the involvement of neighboring states in alliance activities. Another positive sign within the Russian discourse has been President Medvedev's openness to the idea of a common Euro-Atlantic security framework based on a trilateral U.S.-EU-Russia partnership.

How might we explain the above inconsistencies in the Russian position? First, Russia's flawed attitude toward NATO is partly grounded in the dilemma Russia has faced in constructing its international identity. Russia is trying to rebrand itself as a pragmatic, individualistic, and depoliticized international actor that plays by the rules and reacts essentially to financial-economic challenges and incentives. At the same time, a strong imperial legacy occasionally reasserts itself, constraining Russia's depoliticized moves. This helps explain why Russia's self-understanding is based upon historical narratives and closely tied to the glorified and cherished past. Putin's emotionally charged remarks expressing the impossibility of "even thinking" about NATO vessels in Sevastopol were one of many expressions of this imperial legacy.

Second, Russia has had difficulty understanding certain of NATO's security concepts. In particular, Moscow has been irritated by NATO's inclusion of energy transportation on its security agenda. Russian suspicions have been further exacerbated by remarks from Georgian leaders like Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili, who said in May that Georgia's NATO membership would lead to new routes for energy transport that would bypass Russian territory.

In conclusion, a number of practical suggestions for easing the NATO-Russian relationship can be considered. First, more creative thinking is required on both sides. In particular, the status of the NATO-Russian partnership could be elevated to the "strategic" level, equal in significance to the NATO-EU partnership. This gesture could both alleviate Russia's fears and strengthen its self-confidence; it would also fully correspond to the above-mentioned idea of trilateral "Euro-Atlantic" cooperation between the EU, the United States, and Russia. In such a partnership, Russia and NATO could give priority to areas of common interest, such as nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, prevention of drug trafficking, and stabilization in Iraq and Darfur. Issues like climate change and the safety of sea routes could also eventually become important components of a joint NATO-Russian agenda. Against this background, the idea of issuing a joint NATO-Russian Declaration, which failed in Bucharest, could be revived for the sake of a better conceptual framing of NATO-Russian relations.

Second, NATO could identify a number of specific projects on which it could consider the Russian position a legitimate one. In particular, Putin's idea of jointly

operating the Gabala radar station in Azerbaijan could be given a second chance.

Third, as the number of NATO “Contact Countries” grows, so do areas of overlapping interest with Russia. In particular, gradually growing interest in cooperation with NATO on the part of states like Japan, Australia, and New Zealand creates preconditions for increasing the involvement of Russia in Asia-Pacific security relations.

Fourth, more reciprocity is needed. For example, NATO could facilitate transit to the Russian “exclave” region of Kaliningrad through Lithuania as a gesture of appreciation for Russia’s willingness to approve NATO transit to Afghanistan through Russian territory.

Finally, new spheres of NATO interest, such as defending against cyber-terrorism, should be divorced from anti-Russian criticism. Considering Estonian complaints accusing Russia of waging a “cyber-war” against it, Russia may already perceive NATO’s new initiatives in this area to be anti-Russian in origin. Additional communicative efforts on NATO’s part could help engage Russia to implement a joint agenda in this sphere.

Should Russia and NATO truly wish to become global security actors and partners, they should begin thinking seriously about cooperating on the global level and, accordingly, disentangle themselves from those regional pitfalls that hinder and misdirect this cooperation. This is one of those times when differentiating the global from the local makes practical sense. Paradoxically, Russia today almost always tries to demonstrate its alleged great power status only on a regional level, while NATO increasingly invests its efforts and resources in not only territorial expansion but the extension of its overall security concept. As a result, Russia seems to act as a classical regional power, overwhelmingly concentrated on its immediate neighborhood at the expense of exploring the possibilities of diversifying its security agenda both territorially (by fostering relations with countries like China, India, and Brazil) and in terms of tackling issues like climate change and global warming, environmental degradation, scarcity of resources, terrorism, and transnational crime. Too deep a concentration on regional security matters prevents both Russia and NATO from developing inclusive global policies and reduces Moscow's status in the international community.

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