

## Institutionalizing Security Cooperation between Russia and the West

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 135  
May 2011

Kimberly Marten  
*Barnard College, Columbia University*

Are there any mechanisms that would allow the security relationship between Russia and NATO member states—whether European or North American—to become deeply and permanently cooperative?

On paper, cooperation was institutionalized long ago. The Founding Act on Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation was signed in 1997. The NATO-Russia Council (NRC) has provided a forum for ministerial level consultation since 2002. By 2006, according to political scientist Vincent Pouliot (in his book *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy*), the NRC was a well-established talk-shop with 25 working groups. Practical initiatives tended to go forward there despite the ups and downs of high-level diplomacy.

Yet anyone who follows the issue closely knows that this cooperation has been episodic and often rather shallow. Russia and NATO seem to go through repeated cycles of a “two-steps-forward, one-step-back” dance. Nothing sums up the sometimes schizophrenic character of the relationship better than the official 2010 Russian military doctrine, which cites NATO expansion and NATO’s tendency to take on global intervention roles as an “external military danger” even as it simultaneously calls for more cooperation with NATO to “strengthen collective security.” Later statements by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev emphasized cooperation with NATO while downplaying any remaining threat, but it remains too early to tell whether permanent optimism about the security relationship remains warranted this time around.

The administration of U.S. President Barack Obama has emphasized that outreach to Russia on security issues is one of its prime foreign policy goals. Its own National Security Memorandum of 2010 is replete with calls for cooperation and outreach toward Russia as an emerging power center. The problem, however, is that unless such cooperation is truly institutionalized—inside the minds and behavior patterns of key senior bureaucratic and political actors in Moscow, Washington, and

European capitals – the forward and backward dance will resume as soon as U.S. attention wanes or the next crisis erupts (whether a militarized crisis like the 2008 Georgia war or a diplomatic one like the 2011 question about what action to take toward Libya).

This memo argues that traditional military-to-military programs are unlikely to be a source for meaningful institutionalization of the security relationship anytime soon. Yet three emerging areas – Russian cooperation with U.S. and NATO efforts in Afghanistan, U.S./Russian joint interests in improving border controls and counternarcotics interdiction, and Russian weapons and defense service purchases from European NATO member states – may allow an institutionalization of the relationship to truly emerge. As an increasing number of domestic actors on all sides have an interest in maintaining a cooperative relationship, joint efforts are more and more likely to become an entrenched standard operating procedure.

### **Why Military-to-Military Programs Won't Work Soon**

Russian and Western military officers have engaged in significant cooperation since the end of the Cold War era. The 1989 Dangerous Military Activities (DMA) Agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States, designed to prevent the unintentional or miscalculated use of force in peacetime, was particularly notable in this regard. It marked the first time ever that negotiations were led and an agreement was drafted and signed primarily by military officers on both sides. Both the Soviet General Staff and the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff had to fight significant bureaucratic battles with civilians at home to make the agreement possible. Such common interests among senior military officers – both in avoiding unintentional militarized conflict and in doing end-runs around civilians – might have laid the groundwork for growing trust between the two military organizations.

During the Gorbachev era, there were a series of ad hoc military-to-military visits and educational exchanges. After Russian independence, these were codified into a 1993 Memorandum of Understanding on Defense and Military Relations. Yet the message that Western military organizations received from these programs was discouraging: the young Russian officers who participated in exchanges were afterwards sent into backwater assignments at home, instead of being promoted. A common refrain was that those officers were never heard from again. It seemed that Russian senior officers feared that a trick (or a contagion effect) would emerge from too much contact with Western military forces.

Starting in 1996, Russian army troops served side by side with NATO forces in the IFOR and follow-on SFOR peace enforcement operations in Bosnia; in 1999, Russian soldiers again joined NATO (after an initially tense confrontation at the Pristina airport) in the KFOR peace enforcement mission in Kosovo. This occurred even though the question of Kosovo has remained a thorn in the Russian/NATO relationship. In 2006 and 2007, cooperation extended into the realm of counterterrorism, as Russian naval ships for short periods of time joined Operation Active Endeavor, the NATO-commanded effort to patrol and interdict potential threats crossing the Mediterranean

Sea from the Middle East and North Africa. A wide variety of smaller scale exercises and exchanges, especially related to evacuation, search-and-rescue, and counterterrorism operations, are now routine.

Yet jointness never really gelled as an enduring characteristic of the relationship, and these instances of cooperation remain hard to arrange and implement. The Western side often blames the recalcitrance of the Russian military bureaucracy. Any realist can easily explain the motive for such recalcitrance. Despite all the talk of American decline and impotence in today's globalized world (and despite the United States' continuing economic malaise), the U.S. base defense budget (i.e., expenses outside of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) proposed to Congress in February 2011 was at a record high of \$553 billion. While a large chunk of that money is slated for veterans and health care benefits and personnel costs, the budget also reflects the continuing U.S. effort to deploy high-tech weapons that give it unquestioned battlefield (and, increasingly, internet) superiority against any state adversary.

In contrast, the 2009 Russian defense budget is estimated to have been \$50 billion, while NATO military staffers reportedly have denigrated Russian military equipment, transportation, and manpower, including in their analysis of the 2008 Georgia war. While the recent spike in oil prices has led to promises of a \$650 billion spending spree by Moscow over the next decade on weapons and equipment, Russia cannot hope to match U.S. capabilities anytime soon. Leaving aside questions of pride (which Pouliot emphasizes in his book), these facts mean that it is completely rational for Russian military officers to be suspicious of U.S. intentions.

There is likely nothing the United States can do to reassure those officers that its ultimate intent is not to enfold Russia into a smothering military alliance. Some Russian officers may publicly pretend that they still fear a conventional war with NATO, but more likely what they most fear is having their own autonomy and freedom of action taken away by the U.S. military behemoth—as it arguably was in Kosovo. They do not fear war, but paralysis and irrelevance. Those officers, and the politicians who support them, will always resist deep institutionalization of military-to-military ties with the West because of the long-term implication of alliance building with a 500-pound gorilla. If the issue is pushed too hard, Washington will only harden their suspicions. Instead, the West needs to wait for Russia to decide if and when to prioritize those connections.

### **Afghanistan: The Potential for Institutionalization**

Russia is currently providing crucial assistance to U.S. and NATO efforts in Afghanistan: through the Northern Distribution Network that crosses Russian territory, allowing the transit of non-lethal supplies (including fuel and food) from Baltic ports via Central Asia as an alternative to the dangerous roads of Pakistan; through a jointly planned counternarcotics raid in October 2010 that destroyed a huge cache of heroine in Afghanistan; through a counternarcotics training program for hundreds of Afghan military officers; and through weapons assistance to the Afghan police. Such small-scale cooperation will likely continue to increase with time, since Russia benefits from U.S. and NATO military efforts that help control the spread of both illegal narcotics and

radical Islamism into Central Asia. A future U.S. and NATO failure in Afghanistan might provoke feelings of *schadenfreude* among some Russians, but instability in Afghanistan harms core Russian security interests.

At the same time, both the history of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan and the variety of competing geopolitical interests in the region make large-scale cooperation difficult to envision. Many Russians have bad memories of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, and many Afghans have even worse ones. It is unlikely that the Russian military would participate in any action there, except perhaps in very small numbers as well-camouflaged special forces. Despite recent Russian government pronouncements about supporting reconstruction of large-scale civilian infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, it is also unclear that Russian civilians in large numbers would feel comfortable relocating to Afghanistan for commercial or humanitarian purposes, or that Afghans would welcome their presence. Most likely, the reconstruction support will instead center on funding and off-site advising.

Geopolitical competition also limits how much assistance Russia provides to U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan. The U.S. military presence provides a continuing excuse for the U.S. base at Manas, in Russia's backyard of Kyrgyzstan, and the Northern Distribution Network helps cement a larger U.S. commercial presence throughout Central Asia. It makes sense that Russia would want the U.S. and NATO to leave Afghanistan as soon as practicable, even if it benefits from U.S. and NATO efforts to restore stability.

Yet if the U.S. is truly interested in permanent outreach to Russia in Afghanistan, there is one mechanism for making institutionalized cooperation more likely: encouraging Gazprom's investment in the planned Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline (TAP or TAPI) natural gas pipeline connecting Turkmenistan to India through Afghanistan and Pakistan. Gazprom has expressed interest in this recently. Russian participation in TAPI is sometimes portrayed as a negative outcome by Western analysts, who fear that Gazprom would use its participation to cut off Turkmen gas supplies into the planned Nabucco pipeline (the Turkish-European gas supply alternative bypassing Russia). Yet many analysts, including in the U.S. government, doubt that Turkmenistan would be a significant Nabucco participant anyway. Giving Gazprom—an enterprise whose taxes contribute significantly to the Russian state budget—a stake in the security of a pipeline that crosses dangerous Afghan territory is a mechanism for tying Russian interests much more deeply to U.S. and NATO success in Afghanistan. TAPI can make military success in Afghanistan a win-win solution, and cooperation there a long-term possibility, by getting Gazprom on board.

## **Border Security**

Over the past several years, narcotics gangs located in neighboring Mexico have increasingly threatened U.S. border security. Mexico itself is sometimes thought to be approaching "failed state" status. Over 34,000 people have been killed by drug gangs, often in horrific ways, since Mexican President Felipe Calderon's December 2006 decision to wage a military conflict against the cartels. Direct threats to the United

States from Mexico remain rare, but several U.S. federal officials have been assassinated while on duty in Mexico in the past year. Further, the tourist trade of Americans visiting Mexico has declined, as Acapulco and Cancun have become targets. Mexican drug gangs have massacred groups of illegal immigrants en route to the United States, creating a human security problem that resonates with the growing U.S. Latino population. Gangs that are connected through Mexico from Colombia are winning new converts to their cartels in U.S. prisons.

This gives the United States an important security problem that Russia shares, as the latter is concerned about defending its own borders from the narcotics trade and gang influence. In December 2010, for instance, Russian authorities expressed an interest in resuming Russian border troop cooperation with authorities in Tajikistan. Earlier in the decade, Russian border troops had defended Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan, but they withdrew from the country in 2005 by mutual agreement (although a major Russian military base remains). Tajik border troops now shoulder guard duty alone.

Often Russia's neighborhood border security situation is portrayed by analysts in terms of a "Great Game" competition. Indeed, the United States is currently building training facilities for the Tajik army as part of its effort in Afghanistan, and some analysts believe that a permanent U.S. military base might be located there eventually. Rather than seeing the Russian interest in returning to Tajikistan and the U.S. interest in retaining a security presence in Tajikistan only in terms of competition, however, this situation might actually provide a key opportunity for additional bureaucratic cooperation on security issues. There is already reported cooperation between U.S. and Russian military officials in various Central Asian locations. U.S. Homeland Security officials might also reach out to their counterparts in the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) to search for common gains in border security collaboration. One can imagine, for example, the sharing of border security best practices, the exchange of trainees, and even joint conferences on security issues held in Tajikistan among all of the involved parties. Drug gangs in Mexico and Colombia probably share some fundamental operational characteristics with those that transit Tajikistan, since theorists tell us that the political economy of violent organized crime and the motives for individuals to join such networks are similar around the world. Given the overstretched U.S. defense and diplomacy budgets, and the desire of the Tajik government for better relations with Russia, cooperation on counternarcotics and border control on the Tajik/Afghan border could be fruitful for the core interests of all three states.

### **Military Purchases from the West**

Finally, this analysis suggests using a different framework for viewing recent Russian military purchases from Western Europe. Georgian leaders have insisted that Russia's purchase of two Mistral-class amphibious helicopter- and troop-carriers from France (to be followed by a joint project to build two more on Russian territory) is intended to threaten Tbilisi's sovereignty. Some also see the Mistras as a potential threat to NATO's Baltic member states. Russia itself emphasizes that it intends to deploy the first two

ships in its Pacific Fleet off the Kurile Islands. While some see this as a threat to Japan, especially given the latest posturing between the two countries over the islands, it is more likely that long-term Russian fears are centered on the possibility of spillover from a future war in Korea, or on the prospect of an increasingly sophisticated Chinese coastal naval presence.

U.S. Senator John McCain criticized the Mistral sale publicly, and Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates did so quietly in Paris. An agreement with Germany to build a combined-arms troop training center in Russia has similarly been portrayed by some as a Russian effort to undermine NATO defense planning and coordination, as have smaller military equipment purchases by Russia from France and Italy.

Yet Western defense analysts might accept the arguments of Paris about the Mistral and think of these sales in a similar way to how the United States thinks about its own military sales to foreign allies: as building relationships, rather than as one-off deals. For example, U.S. officials say that they are somewhat less worried about the future of Iraq because Iraq is dependent on the United States to provide it with advanced military aircraft, a sale that will be accompanied by long-term follow-on contracts for the provision of spare parts and training. Indeed, reports indicate that Russian state funds for building the two Mistras on Russian territory will not be available until 2020, leaving Moscow dependent on French Mistral technology for at least a decade. This defense industrial relationship between Russia and France, like those it has begun to establish with Germany and Italy, can become a mechanism for trust-building in yet another set of security institutions.

## Conclusion

The more that a larger variety of Western and Russian domestic security institutions see common interests in working together, the more likely it is that the halting dance of post-Cold War cooperation will grow into enduring teamwork. This can happen even under conditions when official NATO-level cooperation and military-to-military programs stall. Rather than fearing each other's influence in a competitive "Great Game," Moscow, Washington, and the European capitals should welcome opportunities for common problem solving on security issues. While traditional military-to-military relationships may not lead to vibrant jointness, collaboration on energy, border security, and defense industrial issues may be promising avenues for change.