

September 11 and the Challenge of Integrating Russia into the West

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The events of September 11, 2001, have triggered a significant rethinking of international security priorities in major states that has not occurred since the end of the Cold War. Clearly, the major security challenges for the United States, western Europe, and Russia have shifted toward “soft” security issues such as international terrorism and transboundary crime that traditional military means could have difficulty meeting. The source of various challenges to western security may have also shifted geographically to a huge belt beginning at Casablanca and stretching toward the Isle of Mindanao and the Korean peninsula. The challenges emerging from that belt are both quite traditional, like situation in the Taiwan Strait, and new, like the most acute task of fighting the Taliban and Osama bin Laden.

In the 1990s the Western geopolitical frontier was considered to be located somewhere between the Baltic and the Black Seas in Central and Eastern Europe. With the deployment of U.S. troops in southern Uzbekistan, the frontier may have dramatically jumped to the former Soviet southern border. Thus, states that were earlier generally considered outside the Western geopolitical space—Russia and majority of other post-Soviet states—have suddenly emerged in the rear of the new front lines.

The recent challenges have demonstrated that traditional institutions of Western security were not well prepared to meet new substantive and geographic challenges. As a result, the response to the September 11 attacks was not organized primarily through established organizations like NATO, to say nothing of the United Nations, but through an ad hoc coalition, assembled specifically for fighting in Afghanistan. This caused concerns that the main institution aimed at maintaining nondivisible transatlantic security was losing its relevance.

In the fall of 2001 Russia’s important role in this ad hoc antiterrorist coalition was commonly pointed out. Without Moscow’s green light for U.S. troop deployment in the Central Asia, obtaining permission from regional governments, including Tashkent, would have been much more difficult. Russia has provided very detailed intelligence data about the situation in Afghanistan—so detailed that, if revealed, the sources of that information could be threatened. According to some media reports, after September 11 Russia considerably increased its training, arming, and even clothing of the forces of the Northern Alliance—the only military power inside

Afghanistan able to sustain a ground fight against the Taliban. On November 13, a few hours before Putin's limousine arrived at the White House, Northern Alliance troops, moving in Russian-made KAMAZ trucks and dressed in uniforms allegedly provided by the Russians, seized Kabul. Russian crews reportedly drove the alliance's Soviet-made tanks.

Certainly Afghanistan represents a unique case where U.S. and Russian interests significantly overlapped even before the September 11 attacks. Because of that, coordinating efforts during that particular operation was easier. However, Moscow's visible role during the anti-Taliban war demonstrated the fact that, even a decade after the Soviet collapse, Russia remains an important factor not only in Central Asian politics, but also throughout Asia. Indeed, Moscow still represents an indispensable factor in calculations in every important Asian region—the Middle East, South Asia, and the Far East. Without Russia, or opposed to Russia, meeting challenges emerging there would be much more problematic. The operation in Afghanistan draws attention to the need to secure Russia's cooperation in the future—not only in the short run, but for the foreseeable future as well.

Since September 11, relations between Moscow and the West have progressed more significantly than they did during perhaps the past decade. The European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) prescribes regular consultations with the Russians, as frequently as once a month. NATO has also accelerated discussions with Moscow on subjects that had been on the agenda for a year or even more. Russia-NATO consultations on European missile defense are about to start. For the first time, Russian representatives will participate in a meeting of the NATO armaments committee.

Moreover, Brussels has realized that NATO's interaction with Russia requires involving Moscow more closely in planning and even decisionmaking than is possible through the Russia-NATO Permanent Joint Council (PJC)—the institution created by the 1997 Founding Act and later criticized by both sides for its inefficiency and impotence. On November 16, 2001, British Prime Minister Tony Blair sent a historic message to the other 18 NATO leaders and Russia, suggesting that instead of the PJC, NATO establish a mechanism for joint decisionmaking in three key areas—fighting international terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and planning peacemaking operations. This proposal permitted the NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson during his visit to Moscow, which took place a day after Blair's message was made public, to state that Russia might realistically expect to receive a veto over the alliance's decisions in some areas.

In Russia, this recent surge in positive relations with the West has produced both enthusiasm and concerns on the irreversibility of current trends. On one hand, the Putin administration likely made a firm choice in favor of Russia's integration into Western structures, which was Moscow's pro-Western and reformist community certainly welcomed. On the other hand, it has been argued in Moscow that friendly gestures recently made by NATO could be purely symbolic and declaratory with the narrow aim of guaranteeing Russia's friendly attitude to the U.S.-led coalition as long as the Afghan operation continues. Concern has also been voiced that the West's friendly overtures aim to promote the soft incorporation into NATO of the Baltic states, which NATO might invite into its alliance at its Prague summit in November 2002.

Skeptics argue that Moscow should not be in a hurry to establish new relations with NATO. They still see NATO as a relic of the Cold War and perceive that building ties with that

organization could contribute to its revitalization. Consequently, maintaining cool relations between Moscow and Brussels might help to accelerate the marginalization of NATO in Europe.

The more pro-Western groups think that Russia should seize the opportunity to initiate a real dialogue with NATO. Some of them also consider the alliance—and not the EU—as the main Western institution with which Russia could integrate in the foreseeable future. This school generally supports recent NATO offers to Moscow. However, this group also shares some concerns that the proposed framework of Russian participation in the NATO decisionmaking process in the areas of terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and peacemaking operations would be inadequate to secure that mission. The suggested Russia–North Atlantic Council (R-NAC) as of yet has no mechanism to implement its decisions. Creating such an implementation mechanism could be painful and time consuming, raising risks that R-NAC would be no different than the existing PJC, where the Russians have been briefed on decisions made earlier by the North Atlantic Council—the main decisionmaking body inside the alliance. The R-NAC per se would not prevent NATO members from coordinating their positions before R-NAC meetings and thereby giving Russia no input into decisionmaking and merely forcing it to accept what has already been decided.

Establishing new bodies responsible for decisionmaking in a few important areas might represent a challenge in light of NATO's bureaucracy. In times of crisis inadequately established procedures for implementing decisions made by the new council could affect the adequacy and flexibility of a potential response. That could then threaten the credibility of the alliance and might force the organization to act through well-established institutions, like NAC, circumventing R-NAC. Consequently, cracks would emerge in NATO-Russian relations—and this could happen in times when cooperation might be the most needed.

Therefore, as a first step to secure Russia's real engagement in western security institutions while maintaining the cohesion of the alliance's decisionmaking mechanism and addressing the concerns of the pro-Western community in Moscow, the NATO countries might do well to consider two alternatives to the R-NAC:

- Use the North Atlantic Council itself, with full Russian participation, as the forum for discussing terrorism, WMD proliferation, and peacekeeping operations. That would likely assure Moscow that NATO sincerely wants to integrate Russia into the heart of the alliance's decisionmaking process in these key issues. NATO would thus maintain its current decisionmaking institutional structure.
- At a later stage, NATO could consider permitting Russia to attend all meetings of the NAC without voting rights. This would still deprive Moscow of a veto over NATO decisions, where members do not want to be dependent on Russia. In this sense, for those who are concerned about a Russian veto, the recent situation would not really change. However, such a move would greatly enhance the level of transparency and trust in relations between NATO and Russia, and would alleviate Moscow's concerns that NATO members could strike a deal between themselves behind Russia's back.