

Putin's Foreign Policy and the Founding of the NATO-Russia Council

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They say that Russia is angry. No, Russia is not angry. It is pulling itself together.² (Mikhail Gorbachev)

Introduction

For Russia, NATO represents a major foreign policy challenge that continues to create friction within the European security architecture. Although many expected the end of the Cold War to usher in a new era of cooperation, Russia and NATO have continued to harbor mutual suspicions and old biases. This work primarily analyses former Russian President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy against the backdrop of the evolution of Russia's relations with NATO leading up to the founding of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). When appropriate, NATO's internal debate will be duly discussed. This work answers the following questions: how did Russia pursue its relations with NATO prior to the NRC's launch? How, if at all, did Russia's perception of NATO change during the first two years of Putin's presidency? What did Russia expect from closer cooperation with NATO? And finally, why did Russia eventually embrace the NRC?

The period under review begins with Putin's accession to the presidency on 31 December 1999, and concludes with the founding of the NRC on 28 May 2002. As the majority of events preceding the founding of the NRC unfolded against the backdrop of Putin's attempt at alignment with the West, this should

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² Quoted in: Dmitri Trenin (2007). *Getting Russia Right* (n.p.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), 64.

help determine how unique the first two years of Putin's presidency truly were in the context of post-Cold War NATO-Russia relations.

This paper will advance the argument that during his first two years in office, Putin sought to improve relations with NATO and increase Moscow's ability to influence decision making processes inside NATO. This was in part due to Putin's push for a more pragmatic foreign policy and Moscow's recognition of NATO's military preponderance in Europe. In this respect, this research acknowledges the significance of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, and the subsequent surge in cooperation between a predominately Western anti-terrorism coalition and Russia in providing a window of opportunity for strengthening NATO-Russia relations.³

Nevertheless, attempts to foster a closer working relationship were overshadowed by false hopes and expectations not only in Russia, but also among many NATO states. As a result, the NRC reflects the parties' initial, but short-sighted enthusiasm. This research identifies two main factors contributing to the failure of Putin's rapprochement with NATO: First, Moscow harbored unrealistic expectations in that it sought to gain greater influence in NATO. Second, a culture of distrust and reluctance to negotiate with Russia, on the part of NATO, eventually came to reinforce a frustrated Kremlin's conviction that NATO intended to exclude it from constructive security dialogues related to Europe.

NATO and Russia: The Historical Context

Heightened tensions between the US and USSR in the late 1940s prompted the construction of NATO as a collective security organization to counter what was perceived as an impending Soviet military threat to Europe. To solidify their commitment to collective security, the US, Canada and ten Western European states (Belgium, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom) signed the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington D C on 4 April 1949. In response to West Germany's accession to NATO in 1955, the Eastern European countries, at the behest of Moscow, joined the Soviet Union in signing the 'Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance' commonly known as the Warsaw Pact Treaty Organization. Throughout much of the Cold War, NATO and the Warsaw Pact remained entrenched on their respective sides of the so-called 'Iron Curtain,' meticulously planning for a possible military confrontation. Fortunately, a militarized dispute never materialized. The end of the Cold War also saw the demise of the Warsaw

³ This work uses the term 'West' rather broadly encompassing European and North American NATO members.

Pact together with the USSR. NATO, however, managed to remain intact and began to construct a new role for itself in international relations.⁴

Russia under Boris Yeltsin experienced turbulent relations with NATO throughout much of the late 1990s. Espousing Russia's hopes of deepening its ties to the West, Yeltsin, during his visit to NATO headquarters in December 1991, suggested that his country could apply for membership.⁵ However, this episode was quickly forgotten since neither NATO nor Russia followed up on the then Russian President's proposal

Since it had become apparent in the early 1990s that NATO, would not disintegrate but rather would evolve into a permanent fixture on the European security landscape, Russia began to more openly oppose NATO. We can trace early post-Cold War friction between NATO and Russia as far back as the reunification of Germany. In 1990 the immediate question for (then) Soviet policy makers arose whether a newly unified Germany would stay in NATO or not. During intensive diplomatic bargaining, Moscow is said to have accepted Germany's membership in NATO in exchange for the promise of not deploying troops or nuclear weapons eastwards.⁶ Therefore, when NATO began contemplating possible expansion into Central Europe, Russia viewed the policy as NATO's broken promise.⁷ Faced with mounting opposition from nationalists and communists in the Russian Duma, Yeltsin and his pro-Western Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev were pressured to pursue a more confrontational policy towards NATO.⁸

As the internal debate on potential NATO enlargement intensified – especially in the aftermath of the 1995 'Study on Enlargement'⁹ – the Russian government became increasingly alarmed by the prospect of its former Central European satellites joining NATO. Attesting to Moscow's frustration, Yeltsin,

⁴ See, for instance, Fred Kaplan, "NATO in a changing Europe: searching for a reason to stay," *The Boston Globe*, July 7, 1990; Thomas L. Friedman, "NATO's Difficult Career Change," *The New York Times*, June 9, 1991 (Late Edition); John M. Gray, "With the demise of the Cold War, the question arises whether the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is still needed to keep the peace," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), October 20, 1990; Hella Pick, "Nato seeks a new role," *The Guardian* (London), May 18, 1990. Retrieved November 5, 2008, from LexisNexis Academic database.

⁵ Dmitri Trenin (2007). *Getting Russia Right* (n.p.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), 70.

⁶ Derek Averre, "NATO Expansion and Russian National Interests," *European Security*, 7 (March 1998), 10-54.

⁷ Dimitry Polikanov, "Nato-Russia relations: present and future," *Contemporary Security Policy*, 25 (December 2004), 479-497.

⁸ Tsygankov, A. P. (2006). *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 75.

⁹ The study was commissioned by NATO in December 1994 to examine "whys and hows" of future admissions into NATO. NATO On-line library, "Study on NATO Enlargement," 27 January 2000, <http://www.nato.int/docu/basicxt/enl-9501.htm> (accessed 11 November, 2008).

speaking at the 1995 OSCE summit, warned against an impending era of Cold Peace.¹⁰ This ominous warning was meant to remind Western leaders of the possibility of renewed confrontation with Russia.

Also, Russia viewed NATO's military swaggering in the Balkans with distrust and disappointment. In the wake of NATO air strikes against Serbian positions in Bosnia in April 1994, Kozyrev complained about the lack of dialogue with NATO. Kozyrev remarked that

Trying to make such decisions without Russia is a big mistake and a big risk. I would like these words of mine to be heard and to be taken seriously.¹¹

Kozyrev's sentiment underscores Moscow's displeasure over the apparent indifference to its enduring security interests by NATO. Similarly, Straus recalls the following exchange between Yeltsin and a Russian television news reporter in December 1994:

– Bill Clinton said today that NATO is open to everyone.

– Yes, but he omitted to say: except Russia and this is the whole crux of the matter. But to us, in a narrower circle, he said this. And so, it is not the same thing.¹²

Largely to appease domestic opponents, Yeltsin sacked Kozyrev, who had become too closely associated with Moscow's ill-conceived pro-Western policy. In his place, Yevgeny Primakov was appointed in February 1996.¹³ While head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Primakov had overseen the publication of a report on NATO enlargement, which called on the Russian government to oppose NATO growth, as it did not entail a far reaching overhaul of NATO to accommodate Russia's concerns.¹⁴ Never too shy to evoke great-power rhetoric, Primakov with his rather conservative foreign policy credentials, was seen as departure from the generally pro-Western course championed by Kozyrev.¹⁵

¹⁰ Roy Allison, Margot Light and Stephen White, *Putin's Russia and the Enlarged Europe*. (Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 63.

¹¹ "NATO Bombs Bosnian Serbs: Once Again, Russia Was Not Given Advance Notice," *Current Digest of the Post Soviet Space*, 15 (May 1994), retrieved 1 December 2008, from East View database.

¹² Quoted in: Ira Strauss, "NATO: The Only West that Russia Has?" *Demokratizatsiya*, 11(Spring 2003): 229-269.

¹³ Lilia Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality*, (n.p.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 156.

¹⁴ Martin A. Smith, *Russia and NATO since 1991: from Cold War through cold peace to partnership?* (New York: Rutledge, 2006), 56-7.

¹⁵ Lilia Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality*, (n.p.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 156.

Fearing the victory of communist leader Gennady Zyuganov in the 1996 presidential elections, many Western governments decided to temporarily shelve plans of NATO enlargement to reduce the pressure on Yeltsin during his reelection campaign.¹⁶ Upon Yeltsin's reelection (1996) however, NATO moved ahead with its enlargement policy. To ameliorate Moscow's misgivings about extending membership to the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, an effort was made to institutionalize the NATO-Russia relationship.¹⁷ On 27 May 1997 NATO and Russia signed the 'Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security,' establishing the Permanent Joint Council (PJC) as the main channel of communication between Moscow and Brussels.¹⁸

In fact, at least in terms of its language, the Founding Act appeared to be quite gracious towards Russia. It spoke of the need to deepen cooperation on a wide range of issues of mutual interest. Regarding the future redeployment of NATO troops, it stated that

the member States of NATO reiterate that they have no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO's nuclear posture or nuclear policy – and do not foresee any future need to do so.¹⁹

Despite this, there was much to be desired as far as Moscow was concerned as the document stressed that Russia would have absolutely no say in NATO's internal decision-making or its actions.²⁰

Although the PJC looked impressive on paper, it was very little beyond a formalized framework for communication, and even that was about to prove wishful thinking at best. The first real test of the PJC came shortly afterwards with the outbreak of violence in the Balkans. As fighting between Serbian regular and irregular forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) intensified, Serbia found itself under increasing pressure from Western countries demanding an end to 'ethnic cleansing.' After Belgrade refused to yield, NATO launched air strikes against targets in Serbia. Russia had for quite some time displayed wariness about what it perceived as NATO's growing readiness to use

¹⁶ Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (Toronto: Random House, 2002), 145-6.

¹⁷ Martin A. Smith, *Russia and NATO since 1991: From Cold War through cold peace to partnership?* (New York: Ryledge, 2006), 70.

¹⁸ Robert E. Hunter and Sergey M. Rogov, *Engaging Russia as Partner and Participant: The Next Stage of NATO-Russia Relations*, (RAND corporation report, 2004), 1-2, http://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/2005/RAND_CF203.pdf (accessed 2 November 2008).

¹⁹ NATO On-line library, "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation Paris," 27 May 1997, <http://www.nato.int/docu/basicxt/fndact-a.htm> (accessed 11 November, 2008).

²⁰ NATO On-line library, "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation Paris," 27 May 1997, <http://www.nato.int/docu/basicxt/fndact-a.htm> (accessed 11 November, 2008).

force outside its defense perimeter. The bombing of Serbia by NATO confirmed Russia's worst fears that its opinion would matter little in the PJC and beyond. Russia became acutely aware of its junior role inside the PJC framework.²¹ As a result of the bombing of Serbia, Russia condemned NATO followed by an immediate freeze of most of its contacts with NATO. Therefore, it is no small exaggeration to say that NATO-Russia relations hit rock bottom in 1999.²²

The Kosovo crises also marked a further decline of Russian influence in world politics. For Russia, the situation did not look much better on the home-front either; the country was reeling from the 1998 financial crash coupled with Yeltsin's last years of political mismanagement. After Yeltsin's resignation on 31 December 1999, his handpicked successor Vladimir Putin embarked on stabilizing Russia both domestically and internationally.

Putin's Pragmatic Transformation of Russian Foreign Policy

Putin inherited a country mired in domestic ailments and diminished international standing. Lo outlines the mounting foreign policy issues that challenged the new President, while also offering an opportunity for reorienting Russian strategy. Lo states that

[a] succession of failures in the military-strategic sphere, culminating in the humiliation of Russia's impotence during the Kosovo crisis, created space for a more balanced foreign policy that would focus on cooperation and integration with the West in place of an aggressive but futile competition.²³

Similarly, Sakwa points out that "Putin appeared remarkably free of the traditionally static, monolithic and zero sum representation of Russia's role in the world."²⁴ Putin set about on a pragmatic transformation of Russian foreign policy, while "cutting Russia's security commitments to fit its limited means and pursue policies commensurate with Russia's reduced stature."²⁵

²¹ Julianne Smith, "The NATO-Russia Relations: Defining Moment or Déjà Vu?" (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2008) 4, http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/081110_smith_natorussia_web.pdf (accessed 2 December 2008).

²² Rebecca J. Johnson R. J. (2001). "Russian Response to crisis management in the Balkans: How NATO's Past Actions May Shape Russia's Future Involvement," *Demokratizatsiya*, 9 (Spring 2001): 229-309.

²³ Bobo Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, (Malden, Ma.: Blackwell, 2003), 54.

²⁴ Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 210.

²⁵ Roger E. Kanet (ed.), *The New Security Environment: The Impact On Russia, Central And Eastern Europe*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 47.

Putin's Approach towards NATO

Putin may be credited for recognizing Russia's weakness and adjusted his country's foreign policy to its diminished position. Putin's foreign policy has offered fewer "idle promises and bold initiatives" than his predecessor.²⁶ As for the overarching goal of his foreign policy, it appeared that Putin strove first and foremost to secure favorable conditions for Russia's internal development, concentrating on reducing tensions and improving relations with the outside world. Naturally, this approach was to be gradually reflected in Russia's approach to NATO.

Following its withdrawal from the PJC, Russian-NATO relations were at an all time low though two major areas of discomfort with NATO stand out: First, Russia had difficulty coming to terms with the fact that NATO – a Cold War military organization whose main purpose had been to defend Europe against Soviet aggression – still operated. Russia wasted no time expressing its dissatisfaction with what it perceived as the Western-centric organization. To this end, Russia's 2000 National Security Concept spoke about the negative effects of "the attempt to establish a structure of international affairs based on the domination of the US-led developed Western nations over the international community."²⁷ In addition, the 2000 Military Doctrine expressed Russia's frustration over integration processes in the Euro-Atlantic region being carried out "on a selective and limited basis."²⁸ Furthermore, NATO, at its 1999 Washington Summit approved a new strategic concept providing for the possible use of force outside NATO's defense perimeter.²⁹ With air strikes against Serbia, there was a growing anxiety about the possible use of coercive diplomacy against Russia.³⁰

Second, the 1999 NATO enlargement, and the prospects of further expansion into Eastern Europe continued to irk Russia. A statement released by the Russian Foreign Ministry noted that

²⁶ Bobo Lo, "The Securitization of Russian Foreign Policy," In *Russia between East and West*, ed. Gabriel Gorodetsky (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), 17.

²⁷ "National Security Concept of the Russia Federation (2000)," In *Russian Foreign Policy in Transition: Concepts and Realities*, eds. Andrei Melville and Tatiana Shackleina, trans. A. Yastrzhembska (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2005), 129.

²⁸ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russia Federation (2000). In *Russian Foreign Policy in Transition: Concepts and Realities*, eds. Andrei Melville and Tatiana Shackleina, trans. A. Yastrzhembska (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2005), 92.

²⁹ Marcel de Hass, "Putin's External & Internal Security Policy," (Defense Academy of the UK, Conflict Studies Research Center, 2005.), [http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/russian/05\(05\)-MDH-Comp.pdf/view](http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/russian/05(05)-MDH-Comp.pdf/view) (accessed 1 November 2008).

³⁰ James Sherr, "Russia and the West: A Reassessment," (Defense Academy of the UK, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, 2008), <http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/monographs/Shrivenham%20Paper%206.pdf/view> (accessed 1 November 2008).

the expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance will not facilitate the strengthening of trust and stability in international relations, but can, on the contrary, lead to the appearance of new lines of division.³¹

It appeared quite likely that any further enlargement was not going to be taken lightly by Russia. Konstantin Kosachev, then Chairman of the Committee on International Affairs in the Russian Duma explained Moscow's frustration at the time insisting that the

[t]imes of confrontation passed away but Russians still associate the image of NATO with the image of the enemy. We realize that new military structures might be established in immediate proximity to the Russian borders but we appreciate the sovereignty of new NATO member-states."³²

Nevertheless, and for the same reasons, Russia wanted to improve its relations with NATO. Even against the backdrop of anti-NATO rhetoric following NATO's air campaign against Serbia, a degree of pragmatism is visible in Russian foreign policy regarding its relationship to NATO particularly on the need to improve relations with NATO. As Donaldson and Noguee argue, for Russia one of the most pressing issues – with regards to Europe – was to determine how it would fit into a system of European security.³³ Given its considerable presence in Europe, NATO was bound to figure prominently into Putin's security agenda for Europe. As early as July 1999 the PJC resumed its activities.³⁴ Perhaps to justify Russia's continued willingness to talk to Brussels then Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov argued that

[L]ike it or not, NATO is a reality in today's international arena, primarily in Europe but also in the world in general. That's why we concluded the Founding Act on Russia-NATO relations in 1997, although it was not easy.³⁵

Despite voicing publicly opposition to NATO, Putin and his inner circle did not rule out improving relations with NATO. Since Brussels was also keen to pursue more positive relations with Russia, a good opportunity arose with the visit of then NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson to Russia in February

³¹ Itar-Tass domestic news digest (12 March 1999). Retrieved 1 November 2008, from East View database.

³² Denis Alexeev, "NATO Enlargement: A Russian Outlook," (Defense Academy of the UK, Conflict Studies Research Center, 2004), [http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/russian/04\(33\)-DA.pdf/view](http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/russian/04(33)-DA.pdf/view) (accessed 1 November 2008).

³³ Robert H. Donaldson and Joseph L. Noguee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, 3rd ed, (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), 252.

³⁴ Itar-Tass Weekly News (February, 2000), Retrieved November 1, 2008, from East View database.

³⁵ Martin A. Smith, *Russia and NATO since 1991: From Cold War through cold peace to partnership?* (New York: Rytledge, 2006), 90.

2000 where he remarked that “I see this as turning a page on past disagreements and turning to new chapters of dialogue and cooperation on matters of mutual interest.”³⁶

Russia also appeared more willing to cultivate relations with NATO. Ivanov expressed his hopes by noting that

[w]e are in for hard work to restore bilateral international contacts. Moscow realizes that the current state of permafrost in relations between Russia and NATO is not in the interests of European security. It is up to us to determine further steps in our joint work.³⁷

Capitalizing on Robertson’s visit to Russia, both sides agreed to reconvene the PJC meetings to discuss a more comprehensive agenda. The Russian Itar-Tass news agency was quite upbeat in its assessment of the upcoming meeting of the PJC stating that

[t]he word ‘regular’ is hardly to reflect the essence of the upcoming session, which will become a kind of landmark. The Permanent Joint Council will gather after NATO Secretary-General George Robertson’s visit to Russia held a month ago. In Moscow the two sides agreed to defreeze relations [in the wake of] NATO’s aggression against Yugoslavia.”³⁸

Russia’s political leadership pursued a pragmatic foreign policy vis-à-vis NATO. In one of the seminal works on NATO-Russian relations, Allison posits that the NATO debate in Russia was dominated by “pragmatic nationalists.” This school of thought was ready to engage with NATO but only to the extent to which it would reflect Russian interests. Explaining Russia’s posture, Trenin points out that “Russians disagree with the West, but it doesn’t follow that they are happy about Russia’s isolation.”³⁹ Still, they were quite wary about NATO and vigorously opposed to its enlargement.

In March 2000 Putin embarked on another important aspect of Russia’s NATO policy. Speaking on the BBC’s *Breakfast with David Frost*, Putin – in one of his first interviews with foreign journalists as president – elaborated on Russia’s indissoluble links with Europe. The interview caused quite a stir in Russia, and abroad, when Frost asked Putin whether Russia could join NATO.

³⁶ Russia Seeks New Dialogue With NATO, (Associated Press Online, February 2000). Retrieved November 5, 2008, from LexisNexis Academic database.

³⁷ Russia and NATO discuss further joint steps, (Itar-Tass Weekly News, February 2000). Retrieved November 1, 2008, from East View database.

³⁸ “Russia and NATO discuss further joint steps,” *Itar-Tass Weekly News* (February, 2000). Retrieved November 1, 2008, from East View database.

³⁹ Sharon LaFraniere, “Russia Mends Broken Ties With NATO,” *Washington Post*, 17 February, 2000 (Final Edition), A01. Retrieved November 5, 2008, from LexisNexis Academic database.

Putin responded by saying "I don't see why not."⁴⁰ This very well illustrated Putin's attempt to upgrade relations with NATO. Nevertheless, Putin's move was criticized as a sign of weakness, and potentially a signal to return to the Yeltsin era policy of diplomatic lethargy towards the West.

In Russia, however, there were many who considered Putin's attempt at building closer ties with NATO genuine. Yevgeny Primakov, who seemed to believe Putin's policy proclamation, warned that for Russia to seek NATO membership was counterproductive in that it endangered Russian interests, and could eventually make further enlargement possible. Primakov argued that should Russia apply for membership, NATO would not only refrain from granting Russia full membership, but use it as an excuse to proceed with further enlargement.⁴¹

A more plausible explanation for Putin's cautious embrace of NATO seems to be found in his realization of his country's limited economic and military capabilities. Acting on this assumption, Putin tried to translate it into a more cooperative foreign policy, Russia's relations with NATO notwithstanding. Smith argues that this shift towards NATO was in a large part inspired by failures of the Russian military, such as the protracted war in Chechnya or the sinking of the Kursk submarine in 2000.⁴²

To better understand Putin's approach to NATO it is helpful to look at others in his administration. (Then) Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov further clarified Putin's view by noting that

Our approach to relations with NATO will be determined by realistic and pragmatic criteria. Russian-NATO interaction has the potential to become an essential factor that can safeguard security and stability on the continent. Russian-NATO relations, which suffered in the wake of events in the Balkans, are gradually warming again. However, the effectiveness of this cooperation and the level of its intensity will depend on the two sides' readiness to thoroughly fulfill the obligations they undertook, above all under the Founding Act. We will continue to try to persuade our NATO partners that the policy of further expanding the alliance is counterproductive and will lead to the formation of new dividing lines on the continents, and thus

⁴⁰ Interview with Vladimir Putin on BBC (Breakfast with Frost, 5 March 2000). Retrieved November 5, 2008, from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/breakfast_with_frost/transcripts/putin5.mar.txt

⁴¹ Yevgeny Primakov, "International Relations on the Eve of the 21st Century: Problems and Prospects," In *Russian Foreign Policy in Transition: Concepts and Realities*, eds. Andrei Melville and Tatiana Shkleina, trans. A. Yastrzhembska (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2005), 217.

⁴² Julianne Smith, "The NATO-Russia Relations: Defining Moment or Déjà Vu?" (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2008) 4, http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/081110_smith_natorussia_web.pdf (accessed 2 December 2008). 5.

bring about the establishment of zones with varying degrees of security in Europe.⁴³

Ivanov's assessment is a good indication of Russia's pragmatic view of NATO. Until Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks in New York and Washington (9/11) NATO-Russia relations showed few signs of improvement. Keenly aware of the opposition to NATO in Russia, Putin had to tread very carefully in promoting cooperation with NATO so as not to alienate any of his powerful constituencies within Russia's domestic political arena. At any rate, Russia under Putin was moving, albeit slowly, towards more constructive relations with the West in general, and NATO by extension.

11 September 2001 and the Quest for A New NATO-Russia Partnership

The 11 September attacks and the formation of the new international counter-terrorism coalition enabled a wide-ranging realignment in Russian-Western relations. On one hand, the US-led 'war on terror,' especially its Central Asian dimension necessitated some form of cooperation with Russia. On the other hand Putin, by extending his helping hand to the US, gained, at least initially, trust and support from the West. As Wallander argues, 11 September 2001 enabled Putin, who sought to deepen ties with the West, to further pursue his goal.⁴⁴

With preparations for the US military intervention in Afghanistan moving at full speed, Russia, due to its geopolitical proximity and regional influence, was re-cast as an important ally. Speaking on Russian TV in the wake of the terrorist attacks, Putin unveiled how Russia intended to aid anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan, including intelligence sharing and accepting the deployment of foreign troops in Central Asia.⁴⁵ Not everybody shared Putin's enthusiasm. The Russian military continued to view the US and NATO as potential adversaries.⁴⁶ Against the opposition of hardliners in his government and the Russian military, Putin agreed to provide assistance to the US in Afghanistan. In exchange, the

⁴³ Igor Ivanov, "Russian Foreign Policy on the Eve of the 21st Century: Problems of Formation, Development and Continuity," in *Russian Foreign Policy in Transition: Concepts and Realities*, eds. Melville and Shackleina, 263.

⁴⁴ Celeste Wallander, *Security Cooperation, Russia and NATO* (PONARS Policy Memo, 2001), <http://aafnet.integrum.ru/artefact3/ia/ia5.aspx?lv=6&si=RrCDCu2E&qu=251&st=0&bi=2818&xi=&nd=1&tnd=0&srt=0&f=0> (accessed 14 November 2008).

⁴⁵ "Televised Address by Russian President Vladimir Putin," *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, 39 (24 October 2001), p.1-2. Retrieved November 9, 2008, from East View database.

⁴⁶ Igor Korotchenko, "Between the Kremlin and the General Staff," *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, 51 (16 January 2002). Retrieved November 9, 2008, from East View database.

West, among other concessions, accepted Moscow's contention that its military campaign in Chechnya was part of the global war against terrorism, while turning a blind eye to some of the excesses committed by the Russian army.⁴⁷ To explain Putin's possible motivations, Straus argues that, "[Putin] preferred to gain the reputation of being a good ally and to hope for support in return."⁴⁸

Things also began to move with respect to NATO: Russia demanded a greater say in NATO decisions and some members, such as the United Kingdom, Germany and France, were more than ready to listen. Russia rekindled its interest in boosting relations with NATO while the West was prepared to reciprocate. Indeed, NATO and Russia were ready to broaden their cooperation. To demonstrate this change, Putin traveled to Brussels early in October 2001, where he met with then NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson. The meeting was, in general, considered a success, bringing NATO and Russia closer. After the talks with Putin, Robertson noted, "Our relationship is ever-more relevant."⁴⁹ Putin, for his part, highlighted common interests while downplaying potential differences, including further NATO expansion to Russia's borders. Similarly, Putin expressed his desire to develop closer cooperation with NATO in light of the intensifying war against terrorism.⁵⁰

Sympathetic to Russia's cause, then British Prime Minister Tony Blair pushed for more intensive engagements with Russia. British officials saw the post-11 September realignment as a way to overcome old enmities.⁵¹ In November 2001, Blair sent a letter to Putin, NATO Secretary General Robertson, and NATO members in which he outlined his proposal to formalize a new partnership between NATO and Russia. Blair's plan called for the formation of a new joint council to further expand the realm of cooperation.⁵²

Blair's initiative was followed by a flurry of diplomatic activity between Moscow and Brussels. The Russian government and NATO engaged in extensive discussions on the merits of NATO-Russia rapprochement. In the immediate aftermath of the 11 September attacks, there was a revival of Russia's

⁴⁷ Please note that this paper is not primarily concerned with the true extent and motives of Russia's realignment with the West. Instead, it specifically discusses one particular aspect of Putin's foreign policy (i.e. NATO-Russia relations).

⁴⁸ Ira Strauss, "NATO: The Only West that Russia Has?" *Demokratizatsiya*, 11(Spring 2003): 229-269.

⁴⁹ "Russia and NATO entering "new era of cooperation:» NATO chief says," *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 3 October 2001, (Roundup). Retrieved November 5, 2008, from LexisNexis Academic database.

⁵⁰ Michael M. Evans, "Blair plans wider role for Russia with Nato," *The Times* (London), 17 November 2001(Overseas News). Retrieved November 5, 2008, from LexisNexis Academic database.

⁵¹ Stanley R. Sloan, *NATO, the European Union, and the Atlantic Community: the Transatlantic Bargain Reconsidered* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 197.

⁵² Clem Cecil, "Nato to improve ties with Russia," *The Times* (London), 23 November 2001 (Overseas News). Retrieved November 5, 2008, from LexisNexis Academic database.

aspirations to eventually join NATO. During his November visit to the United States, Putin announced, “Russia will have as close a relationship with NATO, as the alliance is ready to have with us.” Interpreting Putin’s statement, Russian defense expert Felgenhauer argues that Putin was again expressing a genuine interest in joining NATO.⁵³ Rogov, director of the Institute for the US and Canadian Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, also appeared to agree that Putin was quite serious about joining NATO in light of the improving Russian-Western relations.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, there were many practical issues that would make Russia’s potential accession immensely problematic at best. NATO membership entails acceptance of certain limits on a country’s sovereignty as well as its freedom of action. According to Skosyrev, Russia was not ready for that: “Judging from Putin’s statements, no ... ‘Russia is a self-sufficient country and is able to provide for its own defense,’ he [Putin] told the Duma.”⁵⁵

Moreover, opposition to closer ties to NATO still remained relatively strong within Russia. Indeed, the Russian military was perhaps the most vocal opponent of closer cooperation of NATO. A case in point is an article titled “Instrument of American Hegemony” authored by a then First Deputy Chief of the General Staff, General Yury Baluyevsky, in which he expressed his view of NATO as a potential adversary.⁵⁶ To this end, Golts argues that for the Russian military to present NATO as a “primordial enemy” served as justification for maintaining a huge fighting force.⁵⁷

Therefore, a more convincing argument is that Putin was in fact attempting to integrate Russia into NATO, but on terms that would suit Moscow. Russia continued to use the new anti-terrorist wave to increase its influence with NATO. In addition, Putin sought to neutralize what many in Russia perceived as the anti-Russian element in NATO, while arguing for NATO’s transformation into a more political organization along the lines of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).⁵⁸ In light of the war on terrorism,

⁵³ Pavel Felgenhauer, “Putin Serious About NATO,” *Moscow Times*, 29 November 2001 (Defense Dossier). Retrieved November 9, 2008, from East View database.

⁵⁴ Pavel Felgenhauer, “Putin Serious About NATO,” *Moscow Times*, 29 November 2001 (Defense Dossier). Retrieved November 9, 2008, from East View database.

⁵⁵ Vladimir Skosyrev, “On Friendly but still Formal Terms: NATO and Russia Are Cautiously Forging Closer Relations,” *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, 47 (19 December 2001). Retrieved November 9, 2008, from East View database.

⁵⁶ Igor Korotchenko. “Between the Kremlin and the General Staff,” *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, 51 (16 January 2002). Retrieved November 9, 2008, from East View database.

⁵⁷ Stephen J. Blank, *The NATO-Russia Partnership: A Marriage of Convenience or a Troubled Relationship?* (Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. War College, 2006), p. 7. Retrieved November 2, 2008 from <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB734.pdf>

⁵⁸ Michael Heath, “Putin prepares for long march to NATO,” *The Russia Journal* 039, (5 October 2001). Retrieved November 1, 2008, from East View database.

Russia saw a chance to enter into a special relationship with NATO, which was supposed to underscore Russia's preferential status. "This line proceeded from the idea of constructing 'special relationship' with NATO that would be deeper and more substantive than NATO's relations with any of its other partners," Vladimir Baranovsky asserts.⁵⁹ More importantly however, Russia sought to influence NATO from the safe distance of its special relationship. Andrei Kolesnikov in *Kommersant* summed up Putin's rational. "(H)e [Putin] wants to be involved in NATO policy-making."⁶⁰ Indeed, forging closer relations with NATO seemed to be of great importance for Putin as he noted in his interview for the *Financial Times* in November 2001 stressing that Russia's relationship with NATO was more important than the US initiative to develop missile defense.⁶¹ However contentious the issue of scrapping the Anti-Ballistic Treaty (ABM)⁶² might have been, Putin was apparently ready to sacrifice the treaty to avoid unnecessary friction with the US in order to pursue his NATO agenda. As Hill argued, "Putin is hoping that his flexibility will allow him to get other important things, like a closer relationship with NATO."⁶³

As the cooperative atmosphere produced by the 11 September attacks began to wane the first cracks in the newly formed alliance began to appear. Increasingly, there seemed to be less need for Russia's cooperation. Similarly, both Russia and NATO became more reluctant to deepen their ties as old disagreements reemerged.⁶⁴ As for Russia, it continued to express its misgivings about NATO as an anti-Russian organization. Despite Putin's muted response, the Russian leadership became gradually more uneasy about the prospects of further NATO enlargement, especially with regard to the Baltic countries. Lo points out that the Russian government "regards the alliance's move as an unfriendly act."⁶⁵ Apart from geostrategic considerations concerning a potential shift of NATO infrastructure closer to Russian borders, Russia feared becoming

⁵⁹ Vladimir Baranovsky, *NATO Enlargement: Russia's attitudes*, prepared for the IISS/CEPS European Security Forum, Brussels, 2001. Retrieved November 3, 2008 from <http://www.eusec.org/baranovsky.htm>.

⁶⁰ Andrei A. Kolesnikov, "Vladimir Putin was admitted into the family," *Kommersant*, 22 December, 1. Russian Press Digest. Retrieved November 2, 2008, from East View database.

⁶¹ Vladimir Kara-Murza, "Tony Blair has found Russia's place in NATO," *Kommersant*, 19 November 2001, 1. Retrieved November 2, 2008, from East View database.

⁶² The Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty concluded between the Soviet Union and the United States in 1972 prohibited the deployment of missile defense systems, thereby reinforcing the concept of mutual assured destruction. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia relied heavily on its nuclear arsenal to preserve its great power status. Hence, Moscow viewed negatively attempts by Washington to abrogate the treaty. In December 2001, the US finally withdrew from the treaty, rendering it defunct.

⁶³ Megan Twohey, "NATO on His Mind, Putin Visits Blair," *Moscow Times*, 21 December 2001. Retrieved November 6, 2008, from East View database.

⁶⁴ Robert E. Hunter, "NATO-Russia Relations after 11 September," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 3 (2003), 28-54.

⁶⁵ Bobo Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, (Malden, Ma.: Blackwell, 2003), 76.

excluded from European security dialogues. Similarly, as expressed by some Russian officials, there was a fear of new dividing lines emerging in Europe as a result of continuing NATO enlargement. “Russia worried that, after enlargement, NATO would become the principal organization of collective security in Europe, and Moscow would not have an opportunity to participate in its decision-making.”⁶⁶

At the same time Brussels began to question the extent it should let Russia affect the decision-making processes within NATO. NATO leaders sought to acknowledge Russia’s role in the post-11 September environment, but they were not sure how far they were willing to go to accommodate Moscow. Allegedly, the Bush administration found itself at odds over how to deal with Russia. Then US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld reportedly lobbied against the new NATO-Russia Council.⁶⁷ New NATO members from Central Europe, along with Eastern European candidate countries, also voiced their concerns that any substantial integration of Russia would severely paralyze NATO’s defense role. The truth remained that for some of those new member states Russia was still seen as a potential security threat.⁶⁸ “Fear for the consensus of NATO has been the fundamental obstacle to a new Russia-NATO relationship.”⁶⁹ To add to this, Western leaders did not shy away from expressing their skepticism about the real extent to which they might want to develop relations with Putin’s Russia, often emphasizing its purported uniqueness and certain disconcerting trends. As former US Secretary of State James Baker argued, “Russia has never been ripe for membership – because it has embraced democracy free markets only rhetorically, without creating the institutions or exercising the political will necessary to commit itself fully.”⁷⁰

Creating the NATO-Russia Council

Throughout the early part of 2002, Russia continued to promote the idea of a new NATO-Russia consultative body to address common challenges. In April 2002 Putin, during his visit to Germany, repeated his call for a new joint body

⁶⁶ Leonid A. Karabeshkin and Dina R. Spechler, “EU and NATO Enlargement: Russia’s Expectations, Responses and Options for the Future,” *European Security*, 16 (September 2007): 307-328.

⁶⁷ Simon Tisdall, “Bush cabinet at odds over Nato pact with Russia,” *The Guardian* (London), 10 December 2001 (Guardian Foreign Pages). Retrieved November 5, 2008, from LexisNexis Academic database.

⁶⁸ Simon Tisdall, “Bush cabinet at odds over Nato pact with Russia,” *The Guardian* (London), 10 December 2001 (Guardian Foreign Pages). Retrieved November 5, 2008, from LexisNexis Academic database.

⁶⁹ Ira Strauss, “NATO: The Only West that Russia Has?” *Demokratizatsiya*, 11(Spring 2003): 229-269.

⁷⁰ James A. Baker (2002). Russia in NATO? *The Washington Quarterly*, 25 (Winter 2002), 95-103.

with NATO.⁷¹ In his pronouncements on Russia's relations with NATO, Putin maintained that the council linking Russia and the (then) 19 NATO members "will only be effective if all countries taking part in the process are cooperating on an equal basis."⁷²

Smith points out that the beginning of 2002 was marked by protracted negotiations over the new council as both sides were unable to reconcile their differences especially pertaining to what extent Russia should be able to influence decision-making in NATO. The end result of this were two summits in Reykjavik and Rome in May 2002, which may be seen as attempts to salvage the post-11 September good-will to enhance the Russia-NATO partnership. At that time there was a sense of increasing urgency to produce at least some concrete results as the prospect of a more durable partnership between Russia and NATO began to disappear.⁷³

Meeting in Rome on 28 May 2002, NATO leaders and Putin adopted a declaration to give a formal seal to the new NATO-Russia Council.⁷⁴ In the document, NATO and Russia outlined the main areas of prospective cooperation, such as the struggle against terrorism, arms control, and threat assessment. From Russia's point of view, the confirmation of its equal status vis-à-vis NATO member states, albeit only in certain areas, was arguably the most important feature of the new document. Regarding the PJC, Russia always complained about not being treated equally; NATO countries tended to work out common positions on the issues that would be then discussed with Russia in the PJC. On the other hand, the NRC, at least in theory, was based on the presumption of Russia's voice being equal with that of NATO members. All the discussion was supposed to take place in the NRC with NATO's countries forswearing to 'precook' their positions.⁷⁵ To that effect, the Rome declaration clearly stated that

In the framework of the NATO-Russia Council, NATO member states and Russia will work as equal partners in areas of common interest. The NATO-Russia Council will provide a mechanism for consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, joint decision, and joint action for the member

⁷¹ "Russia suggests establishing new organ of Russia-NATO Consultations," *Economic News*, 11 April 2002. Retrieved November 6, 2008, from East View database.

⁷² Henry Meyer, "Putin demands "equal" role with NATO," *The Baltic Times*, 25 May 2002, 2. Retrieved November 1, 2008, from East View database.

⁷³ Martin A. Smith, *Russia and NATO since 1991: From Cold War through cold peace to partnership?* (New York: Rutledge, 2006), 94-97.

⁷⁴ NATO Press Release, "Declaration by Heads of State and Government of NATO Member States and the Russian Federation," 28 May 2002, <http://www.nato.int/docu/basicxtxt/b020528e.htm> (accessed 11 November, 2008).

⁷⁵ Robert E. Hunter, "NATO-Russia Relations after 11 September," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 3 (2003), 28-54.

states of NATO and Russia on a wide spectrum of security issues in the Euro-Atlantic region.⁷⁶

Praised by many, the new council nevertheless lacked substance. By inserting a clear reference to the 1997 Founding Act, NATO sent an unequivocal message to Russia that it retained its ability to act alone outside of the new council. Members reserved the right to withdraw any matter from the council's agenda. Russia could not possibly hope to restrain NATO's freedom to act. In fact, NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson provided a rather fitting description of the Russia-NATO partnership after the Rome summit by arguing:

that the real differences between the former '19=1' arrangement and a new '20' forum is a matter of 'chemistry rather than arithmetic, as even the best format and seating arrangements can be no substitute for genuine political will and open mind on both sides.⁷⁷

Conclusion

To conclude, Putin in the run-up to the founding of the NRC pursued a generally pro-Western policy aimed at improving relations with the Western institutions, particularly NATO. Regarding NATO, Putin attempted to repair damaged relations following the NATO air campaign against Serbia based on the recognition of NATO's position within the European security architecture. Immersed in economic and political woes at home, Putin attempted to improve Russia's battered standing abroad. Regardless of some positive signals from Moscow and Brussels, prior to 11 September 2001, there was very little in terms of real progress in NATO-Russia relations.

The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks proved instrumental in reintroducing Russia as an important player on the international stage, especially as the US-led war against terrorism was moving to Central Asia. As a result, Western governments were eager to reward Russia for its role in the war against terrorism. Putin, for his part, recognized this opportunity and pushed for closer ties with NATO against opposition from some hard-line elements within his government.

⁷⁶ NATO Press Release, "Declaration by Heads of State and Government of NATO Member States and the Russian Federation," 28 May 2002, <http://www.nato.int/docu/basic/txt/b020528e.htm> (accessed 11 November, 2008).

⁷⁷ Stanley R. Sloan, *NATO, the European Union, and the Atlantic Community: the Transatlantic Bargain Reconsidered* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 197-198.

Putin's overtures to NATO were in a large part motivated by Russia's fear of exclusion. Russia's perception of NATO was still largely negative, in that the organization was seen as harboring anti-Russian bias. That is why Russia wanted to increase its influence in NATO to redress this trend. Despite the rhetoric about joining NATO, Putin's Russia primarily sought a special relationship with NATO to increase its influence on NATO's decision-making, and thus avoid isolation. In this respect, Russia continued to express its hope that NATO might be transformed from a security organization into a more political one.

Against the backdrop of the war on terrorism, initial expectations for a functional NATO-Russia partnership were too high. As far as Russia was concerned, it is fair to say that Moscow wanted to see NATO, more or less, as a 'talk-shop' with some degree of Russian participation. As Trenin argues

Still, Russian leaders remain highly skeptical about the outlook for Russia-Western security cooperation, even though they admit a degree of commonality of interests. This conclusion is based on their reading of the results of the post-Cold War period during which they maintain the West took advantage of Russia's temporary weakness.⁷⁸

The question of how far the Russian leadership in general, and Putin in particular, were willing to go to forge closer relations with NATO is highly speculative", however Russia was unlikely to willingly limit its sovereignty within a NATO framework. It goes without saying that Russia was unlikely to subject itself to any significant limitation of its sovereignty within a NATO framework. On the other hand, any significant breakthrough in the relationship was precluded by deeply rooted misgivings on both sides. NATO countries, especially some of the new members, were afraid of political paralysis if Russia were to be able to influence NATO's decision-making.⁷⁹

Therefore, the period 1999–2002 – particularly following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks – serves as an example of unwarranted optimism in the face of deeply rooted trends in NATO-Russia relations. Despite the glowing praise from politicians on both sides, the NATO-Russia Council was by no means a significant improvement in the developing partnership between NATO and Russia, nor was it a major success of Putin's foreign policy. Quite the contrary; the NRC ended the brief honey-moon period in NATO-Russia relations. Unless NATO and Russia commit themselves to profoundly reconsider their long-term strategic assumptions regarding each others' international ambitions, they cannot hope to forge an enduring partnership.

⁷⁸ Dmitry Trenin, *Russia's Threat Perception and Strategic Posture* (Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. War College, 2007), 7. Retrieved November 2, 2008 from <http://se1.isn.ch/serviceengine/FileContent?serviceID=47&fileid=E7CC33D3-FDE9-CB4D-4EA4-5BC8E01FC58E&lng=en>.

⁷⁹ Henry Meyer, "Putin demands "equal" role with NATO," *The Baltic Times*, 25 May 2002, 2. Retrieved November 1, 2008, from East View database.