



BÖLL EVENT REPORT

‘Nato-Russia Relations: Taking Stock’*

Despite some attempts to improve relations between the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) and the Russian Federation through strengthening their institutional basis, such as with the Nato-Russia Council, the fragile relationship has significantly worsened with each round of Nato enlargement, culminating in a new low over the recent August conflict between Georgia and Russia.

The aim of this event was to debate both actors’ perception towards one another as well as the future possible trajectories this relationship might take. In this vein, the event intended to discuss questions such as what is the current state of the relationship? To what extent do the discussions surrounding Membership Action Plans (MAPs) for Ukraine and Georgia affect Nato-Russia relations? And what policy tools are available to both actors to limit the damage and come to a workable relationship?

Before discussing the present state of relations between the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Russian Federation, the Böll Policy Discussion began with a thorough debate on the relationship’s historical context as its current problems cannot be discussed without having a common understanding of the past.

The Historical Context

This history, however, is not without controversy. For many, Russia’s grievances *vis-à-vis* NATO started with the end of the Cold War, which they believe the West portrayed as a victory over the Soviet Union. During the event it was argued that, in fact, it was the Soviet Union which stopped the Cold War and the arms race and that Russia did not lose the Cold War but, on the contrary, won its statehood from it. In addition, Gorbachev and Yeltsin provided Europe with a security it had not known for a thousand years and that instead of gratefulness Russia was treated without respect and NATO expanded to the East in spite of assurances given to Gorbachev and Shevarnadze that it would not do so. Not all participants at the event agreed with this assessment arguing that the so-called ‘Gorbachevian promises’ never existed and that the Soviet Union collapsed because of domestic problems and not of a genuine desire to put an end to the Cold War.

The discussion continued focusing on NATO’s development in this post-Cold War environment. With the Soviet Union dissolving and the Cold War having come to an end, it was mentioned, that NATO had lost its *raison d’etre* and naturally adjusted itself to the new situation in two ways:

1. Expanding its geopolitical scope by occupying the power vacuum created after the fall of the Soviet Union and giving membership to the Eastern European countries. And even now that NATO has 26 members and has expanded into the former Soviet space by including the Baltic countries, which was received with negative reactions in Russia, the memberships of Ukraine and Georgia are discussed and some, such as Mr Lugar have even considered membership for Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan
2. Expanding (as opposed to changing) its nature and scope of activities as exemplified by its bombing campaign against Serbia.

* This Policy Discussion under Chatham House Rules took place in Moscow on 25 November 2008. The report is based on the presentations and ensuing discussion at the event. The opinions expressed therein do not necessarily represent the opinion of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

Of course militarily NATO has also slightly changed. Its collective armed forces are now much smaller than when NATO consisted of only 16 members. However, participants noted that this did alleviate the strategic tension between Russia and NATO, particularly as there are still hundreds of US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and airplanes to transport them as well as roughly 500 British and French nuclear weapons, all of which are predominantly targeted at Russia, while of course Russia has also nuclear weapons targeted at Europe. But it is particularly the open-ended expansion eastwards by NATO that lead to such strategic tension with Russia.

Russian Exclusion

It was said that these enlargements by NATO are particularly aggravating to Russia as Russia has been effectively excluded from any significant European security structures. This point was heavily debated as some participants pointed out Russia's participation in the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) while others described the Partnership for Peace (PfP) Programme and the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) as simple and marginal fora for discussion that could not act as a real bridge for co-operation. According to the latter, Russia was effectively ignored from European decision-making and, unfortunately, it required a war in Georgia for people to take Russia serious.

Following these comments the event drew comparisons between the Cold War and the current situation in which Russia-NATO relations are finding themselves in. To some, the current state of affairs are considered in fact more dangerous.

Cold War Over But Now More Dangerous Game of Contested Spheres of Influences

This is, they claimed, because now there exists a gray area, a power vacuum, in the post-Soviet space where both sides are claiming influence. The tension could be much worse than under the Cold War as, first and foremost, there is no possible equality. The West is much stronger than Russia, meaning that with each confrontation Russia will try to prove that it is stronger while the West will try and prove that it is not weak – effectively locking the two into acts of brinkmanship. Secondly, as mentioned above, there are no tacitly recognised spheres of influence as under the Cold War. In today's world Russia does not recognise the American sphere of influence in Latin America and the West does not recognise the post-Soviet space. Most importantly, however, the lack of control exercised by both Russia and the West over their partners was considered by participants as a major issue. This was emphasised as very dangerous since these partners could draw both actors into conflict as Georgian President Saakashvili did when he attempted to solve his territorial problem in order to fast-track NATO accession, and as Venezuela's Hugo Chavez could do.

In this context, some argued that the August War between Georgia and Russia really marked a turning point in the NATO-Russian relationship in spite of the fact that NATO had nothing to do with Georgia and was not involved. The discussion continued on that point with some participants saying that NATO did not want to continue relations in a business-as-usual scenario (BAU) but that it was unclear what exactly a non-BAU scenario really meant. Others stated that the events in August did not demonstrate that the NRC was a failure since the NRC was never designed to act as a communication mechanism in case of a crisis.

Most participants at the event, however, agreed that the real litmus test in NATO-Russian relations is with Ukraine's membership perspective.

Ukraine's Membership Perspective

According to several participants, 90 percent of Russia's foreign policy concerns and fears emanated from Ukraine's accession to NATO as it would provide the alliance not only with

an additional 1000 km common border with Russia but NATO would, for the first time in history, supposedly have the ability to win a conventional war with Russia, forcing the latter to resort to the use of nuclear weapons. In addition, Russia would lose its Black Sea Fleet, military hardware imports from Ukraine, and early missile warning radars stationed in Ukraine. Russia would consider itself defenceless and would be very worried. This, it was claimed, is accentuated by public opinion polls where 58% of respondents consider NATO an aggressive alliance and 52% believe NATO is a threat to Russian security. In this context, it was said that Russia's missile defence concerns were greatly inflated although it could lead to an arms race where Russia deploys Iskander missiles, Poland and the Baltics then demanding a massive deployment of NATO air strike capability, and Russia in turn stationing missiles in Belarus, which could provoke the US and lead to a stationing of Pershing II missiles.

In addition, some participants mentioned that Ukraine itself would be damaged from NATO accession because the very process could split Ukraine as the population is deeply divided on this issue with the majority opposing NATO accession but also because it would, in this sense, aggravate the complex of a 'divided nation' as it would hamper economic, humanitarian, and military cooperation with Russia.

As a solution, it was mentioned that Ukraine has to be a neutral country. Russia would respect Ukrainian territorial integrity and its accession to the EU as long as it remained neutral. This point was widely contested throughout the debate with many participants claiming that one should not see the Ukraine issue in the context of NATO wanting to enlarge but, instead, to see it as a sovereign nation wishing to join NATO. Nations have the right to choose their own paths and, in this vein, it was said that Ukraine should be independent and take a referendum on NATO. Others countered this view by stating that while sovereign nations have of course the right to do as they wish it does not mean that other nations have to be happy with that choice. Iran, with its right and determination to use nuclear energy was mentioned as a particular case in point. They continued that Russia has special interests in the region as there are many Russians living there and there are transparent borders. This does not mean that Russia wants to be a dominant power and subjugate everybody but they claimed that it shows that Russia has special interests and special vulnerabilities in this area.

Some participants questioned the zero-sum mentality asking why relations have to be exclusive and why Ukraine joining NATO would stop Russia from having a similar relationship with Ukraine. This line of thought was continued with several participants remarking that it boils down to the historical and emotional context as Russia would have no problem if Finland joined NATO and that therefore it might be useful to create a forum of historians or a NATO-Russia parliamentary assembly. In addition, it was mentioned that NATO is also at fault for the tension surrounding Ukraine as NATO has been unable to put across the logic of enlargement properly and that therefore many people have misunderstood NATO enlargement.

Co-operation with NATO and Conclusion

All participants agreed, however, that both actors need engagement and that there are a wide array of issues where they can co-operate such as on non-proliferation, Afghanistan, international terrorism, and ballistic missile defence. In this vein, some participants were surprised that Russia's new foreign policy concept, unveiled in July, did not make any mention of co-operation or partnership with the West or NATO, while others said that these papers should not be taken serious or at least not be given too much meaning as they change all the time and are written by different groups with different agendas.

The policy discussion finished with the question how NATO and Russia could start co-operating again and what basis would be needed for such co-operation. Here different proposals were made such as that NATO needs to stop being a military alliance designed to attack a common enemy and needs to fundamentally change its nature in order to provide the

cornerstone for genuine co-operation, while others said that NATO should inform Russia that it can join the alliance provided the membership criteria are met. It was said that the latter in particular would demonstrate that NATO is an open club and that nobody is excluded. While Russia would be suspicious, suspecting it of a bluff, it would at least get rid of the notion in Russia that NATO is expanding and thereby excluding Russia; it would therefore change the framework of the relationship.

The discussion was concluded with several statements on the need for an idea of common and shared security, the need for considering Russia NATO membership under certain conditions, and if the latter is too utopian then a real policy co-operation with Russia, which includes the development of a concrete decision-making mechanism and does not just create another space for communication.

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