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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Arbeitspapier / working paper

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
SSG Sozialwissenschaften, USB Köln

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Isic, M. (2009). *Seeking the reset button: Russia's role in NATO's new Strategic Concept*. (CAPerspectives, 5/2009). München: Universität München, Sozialwissenschaftliche Fakultät, Centrum für angewandte Politikforschung (C.A.P).
<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-349848>

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Mirela Isic

Seeking the reset button – Russia’s role in NATO’s new Strategic Concept

On 7 July 2009, NATO officially opened the debate over the alliance’s new Strategic Concept. Over the course of its history, the military alliance has evolved from a coalition of states, aligned together against the threat posed by the Soviet Union, into a truly global entity, affiliated with other organisations and international actors and faced with new threats in the areas of security and defence. Seeking a new raison d’être, NATO is going back to its roots; working more closely with Russia is one of the most important goals for NATO in the near future. But what role will Russia play in NATO’s search for a new identity – enemy or “frenemy”? Now is the time to re-define the NATO-Russia relationship and to create a new set of regulations in order to promote the cooperation needed in today’s world security order.

It was quite the event when the soon-to-be-retired Secretary General of NATO, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, opened the public discussion over the new Strategic Concept on 7 July 2009. More than 400 representatives from politics, academia, the military and the media participated in the effort to help define NATO’s new road map for the next decade. By August 2009, some changes will already be evident: the alliance is modernizing by appointing Anders Fogh Rasmussen as the new Secretary General and modifying the Strategic Concept, the authoritative statement of the Alliance’s political and military objectives. In doing so, the alliance is acting on the maxim: “renewal through re-opening”. But as it seeks to define a new sphere of influence in the international security environment, NATO cannot ignore Russia’s military reinvigoration and its presence in the realm of global security. And indeed, NATO-Russia relations were an important topic at the anniversary summit in April 2009. In his closing address at the seminar, De Hoop Scheffer pointed out that the alliance intends to collaborate intensively with Russia. Making NATO-Russia cooperation a priority in the new Strategic Concept could be symbolic of a new era, helping to leave the past behind and make the former foe a partner. As U.S. President Barack Obama has said, it’s time to “reset” the relationship and work together.

The NATO-Russia relationship suffered after the outbreak of hostilities in the Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in August 2008. The peacekeeping model for South Ossetia, in which Russia had the role of a negotiator in the region, col-

lapsed with the entry of the Russian army into the province. Strenuous efforts, led by the European Union, to establish peace in the secessionist regions resulted in the six-principle agreement, signed by the Georgian President Saakashvili and the Russian President Medvedev. Nevertheless, the Russian decision to extend recognition to South Ossetia and Abkhazia showed that there is still a lack of understanding between Russia and NATO. They are playing the same game, trying to define their role in this newly defined area of international security, but the rules are not clear.

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In essence, NATO’s new Strategic Concept is all about making new rules. While relations with Russia have affected NATO’s strategy since the inception of the alliance, it was the end of the Cold War era and

the changing political situation in Europe that led to the publishing of the first official Strategic Concept in 1991 and to the staging of a new public debate over the future of the military alliance. In 1999, when a renewed Strategic Concept was presented, it was ostensibly NATO’s engagement in Kosovo – NATO’s first military operation outside the traditional sphere of action – and the need for a new understanding of enemies, combat fields, threats and risks that provided the impetus. Behind the scenes, the Kosovo War led to intense strains in NATO-Russia relations, underscored by Russia’s implementation of a plan to push its own forces into Kosovo. Later that year, Russian participation in the Permanent Joint Council (PJC), a precursor of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), was suspended. In the same year, NATO began the process of Eastern

Enlargement. With Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary becoming NATO members, Russia's view of NATO changed. NATO was no longer seen as a potential partner, but as an enemy. Finally, the NATO-Russia founding act, established in 1997, failed to meet expectations and became obsolete.

Boosting cooperation in the NRC

After 9/11, the international security environment fundamentally changed and led to a revival of NATO-Russia relations. With the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2002, a new quality of relationship has been reached between the military alliance and the Russian Federation. Unfortunately, the NRC never became an important forum for discussion it was intended to be. The NRC's agenda covered only the issues over which NATO and Russia did not really disagree. The situation in Georgia, NATO membership of Georgia and Ukraine, the dispute about the American missile defence systems in Poland and the Czech Republic, the conventional arms control in Europe, the awkward situation in Afghanistan and Iraq and the nuclear threat posed Iran were and are still not topics of priority in the NRC, as they undoubtedly should be. For two reasons, the NRC is the primary instrument through which better mutual understanding between Russia and NATO can be achieved. Firstly, the forum is intended to be a zone where NATO and Russia meet as equal partners, each bearing equal responsibility for the decisions made in the council. Secondly, the NRC is designed to focus on all areas of interest to both parties. Since 2002, these areas have expanded. As a result, the NRC not only provides the mechanisms to promote cooperation between NATO and Russia on topics where interests coincide, but also offers ways to confront new threats and challenges, where NATO and the Russian Federation may not share broad agreement.

At this point, NATO will have to decide whether its new Strategic Concept will regard Russia as a partner or a "frenemy". The signs of the times point towards the first option. Having overcome the suspension of the NRC cooperation after the Russian military action in Georgia in early August 2008, the NATO foreign ministers met in June 2009 in Corfu and decided to review the current state of NATO-Russia relations by reviving the NRC and

pointing out the strategic importance of the NRC for security in the Euro-Atlantic area. In the beginning of June 2009, American President Barack Obama embraced the opportunity and emphasised his high expectations for renewed relations between Russia and the West. In his introductory remarks at the opening of the Strategic Concept seminar in the beginning of July 2009, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer stressed the importance of defining NATO's essential interests and objectives with respect to Russia and of seeing the NATO-Russia Council as a body to articulate not only common differences but also common interests. These include key issues like non-proliferation, cooperation in the maritime security environment and the struggle against global terrorism. It's time for the NRC to reach adulthood.

Handle Russia means handle Russia with care

One should not expect the new Strategic Concept to be completely reworked—it is more likely that only some crucial points will be modified. NATO's global sphere of action could finally be established legitimately, supplementing the territorial limits defined in the Article 6 of the NATO treaty. To assist in this regard, NATO could define its openness not only to new members but also to new organisations as cooperation partners. This would require a level of cohesion among NATO members well above the amount exhibited in the current alliance, which is operating disjointedly. To combat this trend, the idea of NATO à la carte should be downplayed. Solidarity is the new morality and will have to be highlighted in the new Strategic Concept. Finally, the financial crisis has not left NATO unaffected. Acting on a more and more global scale and inventing more and more extensive and therefore expensive operations requires a higher financial commitment from the member states. Even if one disregards the impact of the global financial crisis, the drawn-out, ongoing security and development mission in Afghanistan shows the need for extensive capabilities today and in the future.

It is undeniable that Russia could be a helpful partner in meeting these challenges. Russia may have a lot to offer, from military transit support for Afghanistan to involvement in negotiations with Iran, but its cooperation would come at high cost. There are two crucial points that NATO should

always consider as it attempts to build a cooperative relationship with Russia: Russia's view of the world and Russia's view of NATO.

Russia's view of the world differs from NATO's view, as Russia considers itself an equal of the United States on the world stage, a nation on its way to becoming a great power again. As a result, the country claims a sort of influence in those regions that it regards as areas of "national interest". Respecting this issue is the first step to rebuilding ties with Russia. Expounding the popular view that the Russian influence ends at its doorstep is counterproductive and intensifies tensions between Russia and NATO.

Russia's view of NATO is ambivalent. From Russia's side, NATO has not done much in the past to support the country. For the Russian government, a military confrontation with NATO was always a realistic option. The suspicion of NATO has been increased by the eastward expansion of the alliance, which clashed with Russia's conception of its own power. Russia also fears that NATO is pressuring post-Soviet countries to become involved in the international (military) mission of the alliance and is therefore gaining influence in the immediate Russian neighbourhood.

In good and in bad times – NATO-Russia relations as they should be

Only with an understanding of common cooperative interests can NATO act appropriately. The most urgent ground for cooperation today is in security and economic issues. To date, NATO's focus has been centred on Afghanistan and Iran. Moscow cultivates a strong dialogue with Teheran and Kabul and, although the Russian influence in these countries is limited, NATO can only benefit from Russian support when trying to begin talks with the moderate Taliban or with the Iranian government. Furthermore, the ability to transport material across the Russian territory is extremely valuable to NATO. While unlikely to send troops to Afghanistan in the near future, Russia could intensify its efforts with combating drug traffic and securing borders. The other huge field of common interests is the economic cooperation. The financial crisis impacted Russia to an unexpected degree. Russia is suffering from numerous bailout appeals, bank failures and, most

of all, declining earnings from exports. Oil and gas make up a large percentage of Russian exports, but following the financial crisis the record-high energy prices have plummeted and with them the huge financial reserves of the Russian government. NATO is devoting considerable attention to ensuring energy supplies, especially in Western Europe, in order to avoid the security issues that are often triggered by disputes over energy sources. With Russia as one of the main gas and oil suppliers for many NATO member states, a dialogue with Russia in these financially troubled times could not only help Russia to break the bottleneck, but also secure the energy supply for the Western European countries for decades.

"'Speak less, do more' has been the NATO strategy of choice in the NRC until today. 'Speak more, achieve more' would be a better motto."

If NATO plans to work with Russia in a respectful and friendly manner, it should not send ambiguous signals. While the Russian government does

not help improve NATO-Russia relations by launching threats every time NATO violates Russian "national security interests", NATO should set a good example and speak clearly about its claims and expectations. Promising membership to Ukraine and Georgia but then suspending the membership negotiations is one example of unreliability. Likewise, initiating diplomatic overtures but then undermining efforts by recalling past disagreements, as Vice-President Joseph R. Biden did at the end of July 2009 during a trip to Georgia and Ukraine, does not lead to better relations between NATO and the Russian Federation.

Reinvigorating cooperation within the NRC is crucial for effective cooperation with Russia. The NRC should become a forum for official and unofficial debates about the current hot-button issues. It presents a unique opportunity for NATO and Russia to develop new projects from current disputes, such as missile defence. Since the United States, Europe and Russia all have an interest in missile defence due to the potential nuclear threat from Iran, the NRC could be the forum for developing and implementing such a huge military project. "Speak less, do more" has been the NATO strategy of choice in the NRC until today. "Speak more, achieve more" would be a better motto.

Throughout all this, NATO should avoid adopting a carrot-and-stick policy towards Russia. Accepting Russia as a partner in good and bad times is the best way to eliminate prejudices. Establishing a new Strategic Concept presents an exceptional opportunity to provide Russia with validation and to push a reset button which, expressed in a future-oriented strategic paper, could ultimately benefit all parties. The new Strategic Concept should not be based on what happened in 1989 or in 1999, but what is happening in 2009. Today, we have a multilateral NATO that matters. In order to maintain this importance and to prepare the alliance for the unpredictabilities of the next decade, some things must be made predictable. The NATO-Russia relationship is one of them.

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