Russia-NATO: A difficult relationship

NATO-Russia relations have never been easy, but hit a new low in 2014 following Russian annexation of Crimea. Since then both sides have stepped up military activity in their shared eastern European neighbourhood. A return to cooperation in the near future seems unlikely.

Ups and downs in the NATO-Russia relationship

The relationship is based on the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. Before 2014, the two sides cooperated in numerous fields, including counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics training and support for the Afghan Armed Forces through helicopter maintenance. Russia was supportive of the NATO-led ISAF force in Afghanistan, allowing non-military equipment for the operation to transit through Russian territory. Over the years, it participated in NATO-led peacekeeping forces in the Balkans as well as in various joint exercises.

However, the relationship has often been difficult. In 1999 Russia withdrew from contacts with NATO over the latter's air strikes in Yugoslavia. In 2008, it was NATO's turn to pull out after Russia attacked Georgia. Cooperation resumed in March 2009 but ended again in April 2014 due to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. All cooperation has been suspended, and contacts are limited to ambassadorial level and above.

Russia upset by NATO's presence in eastern Europe and missile defence

In 2007 Vladimir Putin claimed that NATO had promised in 1990 'not to place a NATO army outside German territory' (evidence suggests that NATO only committed not to station troops in the former German Democratic Republic). However, Russia has grudgingly accepted enlargement of the Alliance to include former Warsaw Pact members such as Poland; despite vague threats of 'retaliatory actions' if Montenegro joins, NATO expansion into the western Balkans also seems unlikely to trigger Russian aggression. On the other hand, Moscow feels that NATO membership for countries in its immediate neighbourhood (Ukraine, Georgia) would encroach into its legitimate sphere of influence while containing and isolating Russia.

Russia also sees the current upgrading of NATO's forces in eastern Europe as a violation of the spirit, if not the letter of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which excludes 'permanent stationing of substantial combat forces' in the region (technically, as US troops will rotate in and out of the region, they are not permanently stationed there, but the fact remains that there will be a continuous US presence).

For its part, NATO contends that Russia already violated the terms of the Founding Act through its aggressive acts in Ukraine. At its 2014 Wales Summit it also insisted on 'the right of partners to make independent and sovereign choices on ... security policy, free from external pressure'. At the same time, it noted that Georgia was moving forward 'towards eventual membership'. However, NATO has refrained from actions that would further inflame tensions with Russia, for example by holding out definite membership prospects for Georgia and Ukraine. At the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, NATO intends to offer the two countries 'Associate Partner' status – a disappointment for Georgia, which had hoped to begin the NATO accession process.

In addition to enlargement, NATO missile defence is another long-standing bone of contention. Despite US assurances that the recently activated missile shield in Romania is targeted at countries such as Iran, Russia sees it as a threat. Although Russia says it will not be drawn into a new arms race, it is upgrading its own defences; it also claims that its new RS-26 missile can circumvent the shield to hit targets in the US.

A new Cold War following Russia's annexation of Crimea?

Since Crimea, NATO-Russia relations have entered their 'deepest crisis since the end of the Cold War', according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Russia's latest (December 2014) Military Doctrine names the 'build-up of NATO ... bringing the military infrastructure of NATO member countries near the borders of the Russian Federation, including by further expansion of the alliance' as the number one external military risk facing the country; US Defense Secretary, Ash Carter, reciprocated in February 2016 by putting 'Russian aggression' in Europe as the first of the challenges faced by his department.

Russia has stepped up defence spending to record post-Soviet levels – US$66 billion in 2015, 5.4% of GDP – while most NATO member states struggle to reach the 2% GDP target. According to NATO, between 2013 and 2015 Russia 'conducted at least 18 large-scale snap exercises, some of which have involved more than 100 000 troops'. These exercises included simulated nuclear attacks on NATO countries. Meanwhile, Russia has threatened to deploy nuclear weapons to Crimea, and it may have deployed nuclear-capable Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad, giving it the capability to strike targets as far away as Berlin.

Incursions by Russian planes and submarines into the airspace and territorial waters of NATO countries and partners tripled from 2013 to 2014 and have remained frequent since then; the shooting down of a Russian plane over Turkey in November 2015 highlighted the risks of such events. In international airspace, there were also incidents involving aggressive manoeuvres against NATO targets – in two separate incidents in April 2016, Russian planes came within metres of a US destroyer and a reconnaissance plane in the Baltic Sea. Such incidents may be intended to intimidate NATO forces and deter them from operating in areas of strategic importance for Russia (such as the Baltic Sea) while testing NATO defences.

At its September 2014 summit in Wales, NATO decided to respond by adopting a Readiness Action Plan, involving among other things an increased number of air and maritime patrols over frontline areas and a tripling in size of NATO's Response Force, to 40 000 troops capable of rapid deployment to a crisis area. In autumn 2015 NATO carried out its largest drill in over a decade, involving 36 000 troops. The alliance has also stepped up its presence in eastern and central Europe: in June 2015 the US announced plans to station heavy military equipment in the region. In February 2016, just weeks after war games showed that Russia could overrun the Baltic states in just three days, the US announced a quadrupling of US military expenditure in Europe, and the deployment of not just weapons but also up to 4 000 troops to NATO's eastern members.

While both sides are talking of a 'new Cold War', there are differences between the situation now and in the mid-1980s. Despite an ambitious rearmament programme, Russia's armed forces are manned at just one-fifth of Soviet levels, and less well-equipped than their NATO counterparts – in 2015, only 32% of Russian weapons were modern, compared to 70% in NATO. Belarus and Kazakhstan – fellow members of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation military alliance – have distanced themselves from Russian aggression in Ukraine, meaning that Russia stands alone in its confrontation with NATO. For these reasons, NATO sees Russia as a regional trouble maker rather than an equal adversary.

Undermining the foundations of Euro-Atlantic security architecture
NATO-Russian tensions have affected several of the post-Cold War agreements underpinning Euro-Atlantic security architecture. One of these is the 1988 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty which reduces the threat of missile strikes on European targets by eliminating ground-launched missiles with a range of 500-5 500 km; since 2014, the US has repeatedly accused Russia of testing a banned missile. For its part, Russia denies the charges and argues that, among other things, the US missile shield violates the Treaty. Another treaty whose future is in doubt is the 1992 Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty assigning arms limits to Russia and NATO; Russia had already stopped applying treaty ceilings in 2007 in protest over US plans for a missile defence system, and in March 2015 it pulled out of CFE dialogue altogether.

Two confidence and security-building measures flanking the CFE Treaty remain in force: the 2011 Vienna Document, providing for the exchange of information and mutual inspections, and the 1992 Open Skies Treaty allowing observation flights over one another's territory. However, NATO accuses Russia of selectively implementing both; for example, Russia has misreported or failed to report troop movements near Ukraine and Georgia, and imposed unjustified airspace restrictions on Open Skies observation flights.

Dialogue resumes, but with no prospect of a return to business as usual
On 20 April 2016 the NATO-Russia Council met for the first time in two years. The two sides were not able to reach agreement on specific issues, such as better communication on Russian military exercises or measures to reduce the risks arising from close encounters between Russian and NATO planes; no further meetings have been scheduled for the time being and a return to business as usual is not on the table. Nevertheless, a resumption of communication is a step forward, given the urgent need to reduce tensions and tackle shared security challenges, whether in eastern Europe, the Middle East or Afghanistan.

In its resolutions, the European Parliament has welcomed NATO's Wales Summit decision 'to increase the security level of the eastern allies', condemned 'the irresponsible actions of Russian jet fighters' near EU and NATO airspace, and noted that annexation of Crimea has 'shifted the military balance in the Black Sea'.