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The
elephant in
the room:

Russia's
absence
from the
Summit

NATO Watch Chicago Summit Media Briefings Series

No.1 NATO-Russia relations: managing the balance between cooperation and confrontation

Anticipated outcomes

More conciliatory mood music from NATO towards Russia in the final communiqué, but few, if any, new concrete measures of mechanisms for drawing Moscow into a closer partnership. No concessions on Russia's core security concerns: missile defence and further NATO enlargement.

The back story

At NATO's Lisbon Summit in 2010, [the NATO-Russia Council](#) (NRC) endorsed a Joint Review of 21st Century Common Security Challenges, which include Afghanistan, terrorism, piracy, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, and natural and man-made disasters. NRC leaders agreed to keep open the dialogue on missile defence.

At the [NRC meeting in Brussels](#) on 19 April 2012, there were discussions on cooperating on counter-terrorism, counter-piracy, counter-narcotics, developing early detection technology on explosive devices, training Afghan Air Force technicians and the two-way transit arrangements for the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan. Russia was invited to send a representative to the extended Afghanistan meeting at NATO's Chicago Summit. Missile Defence cooperation was discussed. The Secretary General said that as a way to further build confidence and trust, the ministers agreed to conduct talks and plan activities related to defence reform, nuclear doctrines and strategies and force development and posture. They also discussed improving transparency, including on military exercises.

NATO Watch has separate briefings on Afghanistan, Missile Defence and the Defence and Deterrence Postures Review. This briefing considers the big picture of NATO-Russia relations, and the prospect of avoiding conflict, which primarily stem from Russia's antipathy to NATO enlargement and differing perceptions of security interests going back to German reunification.

NATO's expansion eastwards

The steady incorporation of countries formerly considered to be within the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union may be seen as them merely exercising their democratic will but from Russia it looks more like an encirclement of their sovereign territory. Agreeing or disagreeing with this understanding is irrelevant. What is important is assessing whether NATO enlargement has been detrimental or beneficial to building a constructive relationship with Russia.

[President-elect Vladimir Putin](#) obviously thinks it is detrimental. He said this in a foreign policy statement in late February:

We are worried that although the outlines of our 'new' relations with NATO are not yet final, the alliance is already providing us with 'facts on the ground' that are counterproductive to confidence building. At the same time, this approach will backfire with respect to global objectives, making it more difficult to cooperate on a positive agenda in international relations and will impede any constructive flexibility.

Speaking at a news conference after the NRC meeting in Brussels in December 2011, [Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov](#) said that he had warned NATO foreign ministers against "pushing the current Georgian regime towards a repetition of their August 2008 gamble." This reflects [President Medvedev's statement](#) of November 2011 in which he claimed at a meeting with the military in Vladikavkaz that the 2008 Georgian war prevented NATO expansion.

Nezavisimaya Gazeta points out that:

NATO is already in Georgia, with Turkish and U.S. troops unofficially deployed there while NATO countries help Georgia. In addition, Georgia routinely dispatches troops for NATO operations. In short, NATO has already advanced to Russia's southern border without formalizing the expansion. This strategy is supported by European heavyweights like Germany and France who do not want to formalize a military alliance with Georgia burdened by territorial issues.

On 18 April Russian Defence Minister Serdyukov said that NATO's expansion eastwards has shifted the balance of forces in the alliance's favour and the development of NATO's infrastructure on the territories of its new member-states has significantly increased the possibility of using military weapons. Pointing out that [attempts to strengthen one's security at the expense of others' undermine the foundations of cooperation](#), he said, "we are deeply convinced that security can only be indivisible and equal."

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Further future expansion at the expense of cooperation with Russia?

Working cooperatively with Russia, a favoured theme of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, seems somewhat absent from his colleague's statement in March on this latest round of NATO enlargement. James Appathurai, NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, said, [Georgia is getting closer to the Alliance](#), "regardless of what other parties might say." This was confirmed by [Anders Fogh Rasmussen](#) as he welcomed President Mikheil Saakashvili to the NATO HQ on 3 April, "Georgia is a special partner for NATO. You are committed to our operations, to NATO accession, and committed to reforms ... In all, Georgia is a model partner."

Enthusiasm for the enlargement project continues unabated in the United States. Senator Dick Lugar's [NATO Enlargement Bill](#) and Congressman Mike Turner's [NATO Enhancement Act](#) were submitted to the US Congress in early March and were designed at speeding up the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Georgia into the orbit of NATO. They called on President Obama 'to provide a clear roadmap' at the Chicago Summit. Later that month the [Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#) unanimously supported Lugar's bill.

On 30 March, [54 members of Congress](#) sent a letter to President Obama urging the administration to "make sure that NATO finally offers the Republic of Macedonia its well-deserved formal invitation to join the Alliance" during next month's Chicago summit:

It is our strong belief that an invitation to Macedonia to join the Alliance will benefit U.S. national security interests and NATO's global mission. Recently, your Administration outlined America's new global posture. As we expand our resources away from Europe we must ensure that NATO is capable as ever to deter foreign and regional threats.

NATO expansion appears to have complete endorsement on Capitol Hill and voices questioning its overall effect on NATO-Russian relations seem muted. However, managing the balance between cooperation and confrontation is more complex in reality, as indicated by [Stephen F. Cohen, Professor of Russian Studies at New York University](#). In February he wrote that there is no real American-Russian partnership today:

Twenty years after the end of the Soviet Union, the relationship features more elements of cold-war conflict than of stable cooperation. [The Clinton Administration] moved the U.S.-led military alliance, NATO, into Russia's former security zone. Now, since 2008, the Obama administration is squandering the third opportunity, its own "reset," by refusing to respond to Moscow's concessions on Afghanistan and Iran with reciprocal agreements on Russia's top priorities, NATO expansion and missile defense. Presumably on the assumption that Russia's interests abroad are less legitimate than America's, Washington has acted on a double-standard in relations with Moscow. The unmistakable example is that while creating a vast U.S.-NATO sphere of military and political influence around Russia, Washington adamantly denounces Moscow's quest for any zone of security, even on its own borders.



NATO Watch conclusion

Not surprisingly, Russia has shown lukewarm interest in attending NATO's Chicago Summit. It has been confirmed that there will be no NRC meeting. If NATO Secretary General Rasmussen is truly interested in ways to further build confidence and trust he needs to build on the positive and constructive efforts on the periphery and be more responsive to Russia's central concerns. Professor Cohen has suggested the way forward:

The thirteen-year expansion of NATO to Russia's borders has already institutionalized the worst geo-political, and potentially military, U.S.-Russian conflict. The new NATO members cannot be expelled, but Washington should now honor its promise, also broken, that those countries would not host any NATO or U.S. military installations. Honoring that pledge would, in effect, de-militarize NATO expansion and considerably lessen Moscow's anxieties, resentments and resistance to new forms of security cooperation, including on missile defense and deeper nuclear reductions on both sides.

A key difficulty, however, is that some of NATO's eastern members are specifically calling for exactly the opposite: for NATO and the US to deploy military assets on their territories as a visible sign of reassurance. Unfortunately, unless wiser heads prevail, when push comes to shove, confrontation is likely to trump cooperation.

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