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Conference Report

Russia, West and Security in Europe at the Beginning of the 21st Century

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October 2010

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Introduction

The International Roundtable Seminar *Russia, West and Security in Europe at the Beginning of the 21st Century* took place in the Černín Palace of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic on 18 October 2010. It was organized jointly by the Association for International Affairs and the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) with the kind support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Prague under the auspices of H.E. Karel Schwarzenberg, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

The conference focused on three specific issues. Firstly, the panellists shared their views on the relationship between Russia and NATO, its future potential and possible pitfalls and the prospects for cooperation against the backdrop of the unveiling of new strategic documents. The conference tried to explain to what extent the mutual tensions were grounded in reality, or rather rhetorically constructed. Secondly, the conference assessed the 2008 Russian proposal for a new security architecture in Europe, evaluated its relevance, contemplated possible implications for NATO and other European security organizations, and discussed possible alternatives. Finally, participants focused on the contemporary security environment, the threats it generates and the potential for cooperation between Russia and the West in countering them.

The conference programme was divided into three panels according to the logic of issues outlined above, an opening session (including a speech by the first deputy foreign minister) and a closing panel which summed up the findings of the panel presentations and discussions. The speakers included experts from Brussels, Britain, the Czech Republic, Poland, and, naturally, Russia.

Conference Conclusions

The basic point of departure for the conference debates concerned alleged “reset” of the relations between Russia and NATO, first proclaimed by president Obama and later adopted as a concept by other Western statesmen and Russia itself. Indeed, following the recent history of relations between Russia and the West, it is clear certain progress has been made on the way to closer cooperation. However, experts participating in the conference tended to view the current rapprochement rather as a déjà-vu effect in the history of NATO-Russia relations which witnessed many ups and downs. Since the beginning of 1990s, Russia made several proposals for closer cooperation with the West which, however, have not yet resulted in a new quality of mutual relations. In this light, even President Medvedev’s grand initiative to rearrange the European security together with the West was viewed as not a quite sincere attempt lacking the necessary political will for a serious change.

Mutual distrust and suspicion is considered one of the major obstacles to a full-fledged partnership between Russia and the West. Repeatedly, it has proved to be difficult to change the mindset based on the mentality of confrontation. The relics of the Cold War rhetoric on both sides still overshadow the way to closer cooperation. While Russia sees NATO



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enlargement in CIS countries as a security threat, for some European states Russia itself still represents a potential trouble.

On the other hand, there have been signals that the understanding that Russia and the West do not challenge the security of each other has been deepening on both sides. An institutionalized expression of this understanding was the creation of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2002. However, experts participating at the conference pointed out that this form of the dialogue failed to fulfil the expectations and to prove itself as an effective working mechanism. First and foremost, the critique refers to the lack of results from the Council. Simultaneously, some experts saw a need of a joint decision-making mechanism as a key point to achieve a new quality of cooperation.

The most serious issue which undermined the attempts to “reset” the NATO-Russia relations was the Russia-Georgia war in 2008. This conflict once more underlined the differences in values, principles and interests between Russia and the members of the Alliance. In the aftermath of the conflict, the relations became more sober and pragmatic, based only on a cross-section of both actors’ self-interest – which, on the other hand, may in itself not have been an entirely negative development.

Conference participants frequently mentioned a step-by-step approach to the development of mutual relations as an alternative to the grand schemes of the past. A partnership between Russia and the Alliance could be mutually beneficial in many areas of common security interests, such as instability in Afghanistan, fight against drugs, international terrorism, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, local conflicts, dealing with failed states, NATO ballistic missile defence system, etc. Additionally, there are several challenges which are new for Russia, such as climate change or cyber security threats. The Western assistance in these areas is what Russia could take an advantage of. The emergence of new global players is another issue of concern for both Russia and the West which they could address together.

Although there are many fields where Russia and NATO could assist each other, the participating experts did not foresee a major breakthrough in their relations. Beyond the lack of trust, there is another serious obstacle: the concepts of the European security architecture proposed by Russia and NATO diverge significantly. Medvedev’s proposal stressed the increasing role of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe as the main guarantor of European security, and the diminishing role of NATO. This concept corresponds to the Russian strategic goal of limiting the European engagement of the United States and preventing U.S. military presence in Central and Eastern Europe. This is also the main reason why Russia cannot agree with some technical and geographical points in NATO’s vision of European security architecture (such as the deployment of missile systems in Poland or the Czech Republic).

Another vital interest of Russia is to ensure its strategic control over the CIS area. Especially when it comes to Ukraine, which is one of the major priorities on the Russian foreign policy agenda, Russia will be strongly opposed to NATO strengthening its role in the region and the Alliance’s enlargement.



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Finally, according to the experts Russia will not accept the role of a “junior partner” of NATO (or the European Union) and will insist on constructing the relationship on the basis of equality and on maintaining its special position.

Taking into account all these asymmetries of interests and perceptions, according to the participating experts the most likely optimistic scenario for the development of NATO-Russia relations in the near future is not a comprehensive cooperation, but rather a lengthy process of increasing transparency, gradually building up the trust and confidence and defining the real but not constructed challenges and threats to the future of European security which both actors might tackle together.

Recommendations

Based on the conference presentations and discussions, the prospects of a rapid and deep improvement of NATO-Russia relations are dim. Continuing differences in the perception of security and lingering mutual distrust prevent a development of a truly strategic partnership.

This does not mean, however, that progress is impossible. In fact, the conference debates hinted at a number of possible steps to be taken in the direction of improving the frail relationship and making the “reset” a reality:

The recommendations can be summed as follows:

- Forget grand visions. Differences in strategic outlooks are too deep and too widespread to be overcome by a single, groundbreaking initiative. Such a step would risk imminent failure and, as a result, would only strengthen mutual suspicion.
- ‘Realistic’, ‘interest-based’ and ‘sober’ should be understood as positive characteristics of the relationship. The moment of ‘agreeing to disagree’ can in fact serve as a fresh start for actively searching for specific issues where an agreement and even common action is possible.
- Develop existing and seek new cooperation in various agendas of mutual interest: stability in Afghanistan, fight against drugs, naval cooperation in the fight against piracy, dealing with terrorism. As these topics develop and mature, try linking them with each other and gradually build on the existing successes and achievements. Potentially, one or several of these issues could be used as a test case for possible innovations in mutual relations, e.g. a truly joint decision-making.
- Step forward carefully with the debate on cooperation in ballistic missile defence. Genuine partnership in this area would be highly desirable, but both sides should avoid putting too much emphasis on this issue. Political, strategic and even technological differences are evident and widely known, so representatives on both sides should tread warily and not invest too much political capital into this subset of mutual relations.



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