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NATO–Russia Relations

Since the early 1990s, two key issues have dominated efforts to develop a stable and predictable relationship between NATO and Russia. The first has been the persistent Russian demand for some kind of ‘special’ institutional relationship with the Alliance, one that is demonstrably distinct from – and closer than – that enjoyed by any other non-member state. The second issue has been NATO enlargement, particularly as it has encroached upon Russia’s self-ascribed ‘near abroad’. More recently, other important issues have risen up the agenda, including missile defence, the stalled ratification of the amended CFE treaty, and NATO’s actual and potential roles in the Caucasus.

This chapter first provides an essentially narrative account of the evolution of NATO–Russia relations concentrating on its most important institutional manifestations – the Permanent Joint Council (PJC) and the NATO–Russia Council (NRC). These institution-building exercises, with their attendant failure to facilitate cooperation or mitigate conflict during the Kosovo and Georgian crises, provide the empirical foundation for the chapter’s second main concern, a theoretically informed assessment of the NATO–Russian relationship. The nexus of NATO–Russia policy conflict and institutional (in)capacity thus provides the foundation for addressing two core questions: has NATO followed a trajectory of regeneration or decline? And how critical is the evolution of the NATO–Russian relationship to NATO’s future viability as an alliance?

The evolution of NATO–Russia relations

The early years
There have been two main reasons for the persisting Russian demands for a special relationship with NATO. The first has been the desire – indeed the need – of Russian leaders to have overt recognition of their state as a great power, if no longer a superpower. The second has been more practically
focused on attempting to secure the structural means to prevent NATO from taking actions that impinge upon Russian interests. And if this has not been possible, then Russian leaders have at least wanted the opportunity, through special consultative rights, to make their voice clearly heard.

Russia, of course, has maintained normal diplomatic relations with each NATO member state individually. Bilateral discussions have been held through such channels on matters such as nuclear arms control (with the United States) and on arrangements for the final withdrawal of Russian troops from eastern Germany. However, the demand for a separate and concrete relationship with NATO suggests that Moscow has come to recognize the Alliance as a distinct security actor in its own right. But this has not meant a positive assessment of NATO. For all the talk of developing special relations, the fundamental concern in Moscow has been to promote a strategic balance in Europe favourable to Russia’s security interests. Above all, Russian leaders have been fixated with the danger of isolation and marginalization; it was for this reason that enlargement came to dominate NATO–Russian relations shortly after the conclusion of the Cold War.

In a commentary published in Segodnya in early September 1993, Foreign Ministry official Vyacheslav Yelagin set out the emerging position of the Russian government. Moscow opposed moves to enlarge NATO’s membership in the short or medium term, while recognizing that former Warsaw Pact states had the right to join eventually if they so chose. Yelagin stated that the preference was for ‘strengthening and improving’ institutions and structures within which Russia had a seat, such as the (then) CSCE. Implicit in the argument was that Russia, as a great power, should develop its special relationship with NATO before any enlargement into central Europe was considered.²

Shortly after Yelagin’s commentary was published, the then President Boris Yeltsin addressed a letter to leaders of the US, Germany, France and the UK setting out similar views. ‘Security must be indivisible and must rest on pan-European structures’, he argued. Otherwise there was a risk of ‘neo-isolation of [Russia] as opposed to its natural introduction into the Euro-Atlantic space’. Yeltsin’s letter suggested also that unique institutional links with NATO would form an essential part of a compensation strategy for Russia should its members decide to proceed with eastward enlargement:

> We favor a situation where the relations between our country and NATO would be by several degrees warmer than those between the Alliance and Eastern Europe. NATO–Russia rapprochement, including through their interaction in the peace-making arena, should proceed on a faster track. The East Europeans, too, could be involved in this process.³

1994 was the hinge year. On his first visit to Europe in January of that year, President Bill Clinton journeyed to Moscow for a meeting with Yeltsin.