

Special Section: Analysis

No progress in NATO-Russia relations without US leadership

Tony van der Togt

This article examines the US-Russia relationship and its consequences for NATO. It also explores “European alternatives” to address the lack of US leadership vis-à-vis Russia.

Moscow’s high hopes for an early deal squashed

After Donald Trump’s surprise election to the US Presidency, Russian Duma members celebrated with champagne. Expectations in official circles in Moscow were high and some pundits were already predicting a possible US-Russian “Grand Bargain”, including on Ukraine. An anti-terrorist coalition of Russia, the US and possibly other (Western) powers against ISIS/Daesh in Syria also seemed to be just around the corner. This would somehow resemble the earlier “Re-set” under President Obama, but this time on Russian preconditions and taking the form of some “Yalta/Potsdam-2” arrangement: a multi-polar world with Great Powers working in tandem and respecting each other as equals, including in their respective “spheres of influence/interests”. Trump’s remarks on Putin’s leadership and his own image as a “deal maker” working on the basis of mutual (business) interests only strengthened Moscow’s positive views. The only Russian concern at the time was that Trump could be too tough on Russia’s new-found friend and partner China.

Half a year later, any such high hopes have been shattered. Washington still seems to be unable to get its political act together, including on NATO, as Trump’s dismal performance at the recent mini-summit in Brussels underlined. Moscow seems to be as surprised as Western capitals and just as uncertain about who really calls the shots in Washington and what policies to expect.

Although some high-level political visits have taken place, including by Secretary Tillerson to Moscow and Foreign Minister Lavrov to Washington, no early summit between Presidents Trump and Putin has taken place. Furthermore, Trump’s first foreign tour to the Middle East and Europe has failed to open up any new opportunities for dialogue or cooperation with Russia:

On Ukraine any talk coming out of Washington or from the US in the UN Security Council has toughened and the possibility of an early lifting of sanctions is off the table. There is no deal on Crimea and Russia remains under pressure to fully implement the Minsk agreements on Donbas.

The bilateral agreement on the prevention of incidents in Syrian airspace had been frozen by Moscow after President Trump ordered a cruise missile attack on a Syrian airbase in response to the use of chemical weapons, supposedly by Syrian armed forces, although informal contacts seem to have been restored. And President Trump’s efforts to forge a broad Arab/Sunni coalition against Iran and its allies runs counter to Russia’s own agenda, which is partly built on cooperation with Tehran.

In this context, it was interesting to note a debate organized by the Valdai Discussion Club in Moscow after the recent NATO mini-summit in Brussels. The main take-away for the Russian side was not the fact that Trump had deliberately refrained from referring to Article 5, but what its Permanent Representative to NATO, Ambassador Grushko, called NATO's ongoing "identity crisis" and the continuing build-up of NATO military forces and infrastructure in the Baltic and Black Sea regions. Against this background, he warned against a new arms race threatening European security, as Russia would feel obliged to react to NATO's actions.¹ Therefore, the Pentagon's recent increase in its budget for reassuring the Central and Eastern European NATO allies (above the amount already allotted for that purpose by the Obama Administration) was a more important signal to the Kremlin than Trump's possible lack of commitment.²

After the recent NATO summit a number of questions have been raised about the future of security relations with Russia:

- What is the future for NATO-Russia relations against the background of continuing uncertainty in US-Russia relations?
- Could Germany (and possibly France) provide alternative Western leadership in improving European security and effectively countering terrorism in the Wider Middle East, if possible in dialogue and cooperation with Russia?

Future of NATO-Russia relations

Russian views on NATO have remained rather consistent. Even before NATO's recent return to territorial defense in Europe and its reassurance of Central and Eastern European allies, Russian policy statements and documents depicted NATO enlargement and extension of US ballistic missile defense efforts in Europe as threatening fundamental Russian security interests, including in its "Near Abroad". Cooperation would only be possible if Russia were considered by the US as an equal (great) power whose security interests are fully taken into account.³

From a Russian perspective, the present European security architecture, as constructed after the end of the Cold War, is still dominated by a unipolar hegemon, the US, and should be replaced by a multipolar order and preferably a condominium of great powers. The EU is not viewed by Moscow as a political player in this respect. Moscow prefers to speak directly to Washington, on which EU/NATO member states ultimately depend for their hard security interests.⁴

After the Ukraine crisis NATO-Russia cooperation with Russia was frozen, originally even contacts in the context of the NATO-Russia Council, although the NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security was not suspended. It was not until 2016 that the Council started periodically meeting again, but so far there have been only very limited results. Military contacts remained completely frozen until the recent high-level US-Russian military meeting in Baku in February 2017. Over time especially the prolonged absence of military-military contacts has been questioned, as numerous incidents have been reported which could easily have led to a bigger crisis in the Baltic area, for example. A lack of transparency around military exercises on the Russian side has added to such fears.

However, even the relaunch of meetings of the NATO-Russia Council has hardly contributed to fostering new negotiations on confidence and security building measures aimed at enhanced transparency in Central and Eastern Europe. A lack of transparency in Russian intentions towards the Baltic states and threats emanating from Moscow against closer cooperation between NATO and its partners Sweden and Finland have only made the situation worse. This is also the case with continued Russian efforts to militarize Kaliningrad in the north and annexed Crimea in the south with the aim of increasing Russian options for Anti-Area/Access Denial to possible NATO reinforcements in a crisis situation. "War by accident" suddenly becomes a real possibility.

In a recent report for the US Council on Foreign Relations Kimberly Marten pointed out a number of possible measures to reduce tensions between Russia and NATO, including by strengthening deterrence on the one hand and simultaneously entering into dialogue with Moscow to reassure Russia that its legitimate security interests will be taken into account.⁵ However, any such action would imply US leadership within NATO and in a bilateral framework with Russia in working towards more transparency and eventually towards a new arms control regime in Europe.

Similar recommendations for future US-Russia cooperation were offered in a recent report by CSIS in Washington, presenting as possible actions: 1) improving crisis communications and transparency measures; 2) maintaining nuclear non-proliferation and arms control talks; 3) working together in the Arctic.⁶ But here too the US government is called upon to develop a comprehensive Russia strategy and act upon it in close cooperation with NATO Allies. So, once again, Washington has to take the lead.

Unfortunately, such leadership cannot currently be expected from a White House where every move towards Russia is highly scrutinized, both in Congress and by the media, as long as investigations into possible collusion between the Trump team and Russian authorities in the election and transition periods continue. And although the National Security Council now has Fiona Hill, an eminent Russia specialist, as director for Russian and Eurasia affairs, all the important top positions in the State Department still have to be filled, which at present is seriously hampering its role in foreign policy decision making. At the same time one could state that for the moment, not only on Russia but also on every other major subject, there is no real foreign policy strategy coming out of the Trump Administration. And as long as the internal infighting in Washington continues, nor is there any prospect of such a strategy.

Counter-terrorism and efforts to forge a broad international coalition against ISIS/Daesh in Iraq and Syria also now seem to be a highly unlikely topic for NATO-Russia cooperation, particularly after the recent inclusion of NATO as an organization in the US-led alliance against ISIS. Russia's policy of unconditional support for the Assad regime and its air strikes against all opposition groups, including those supported by the West, may have turned Russia into one of the most important power brokers in the Middle East. But recent moves by the US to return to the Middle East by forging an alliance of mainly Sunni powers around Saudi Arabia do not enhance the potential to find common ground with Russia and its Middle Eastern partners, including Iran. Moreover, Turkey's present policies in Syria and Iraq make it more difficult to shape any common NATO position on Syria, which almost disqualifies this topic from any real discussion with Russia in the NATO-Russia Council.

In this situation, the prospects for the NATO-Russia Council in the near future are rather bleak and will most probably consist mainly of “muddling through” in the absence of US leadership within NATO.

A “European alternative” for security dialogue with Russia?

Remarks by Chancellor Merkel after the recent NATO and G7 summits suggested once again that the EU should take a stronger leading role in international affairs, as the US under President Trump (and the UK after Brexit) could no longer be fully relied upon. President Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement has only strengthened calls for an alternative Western leadership, for which some experts (although certainly not everyone⁷) have identified Germany as the most important candidate. Together with the new French President Macron, the German Chancellor is promising new initiatives to strengthen European integration. In this context, German-French cooperation takes EU security and defense cooperation another step forward, as already indicated by the EU Global Strategy adopted in June 2016. However, a European Army (in the event acting autonomously from NATO) is a very remote option, if only for financial reasons. But could such closer EU cooperation in security and defense lead to new initiatives for security dialogue with Russia as well?

In the present political situation this hardly seems to be a realistic option for a number of reasons:

- Russia’s aggressive and partly revisionist policies, which have caused the Ukraine crisis by questioning the post-Cold War security order, have been continued, as have Russian efforts aimed at spreading disinformation and propaganda and targeting elections in several NATO and EU member states.
- In this context, Russia is looking first and foremost to the US for recognition of its Great Power status and views NATO as part of a US strategy to dominate the European continent. Any discussion about future European security architecture, confidence and security building measures around NATO force levels in Central and Eastern Europe, measures to prevent “war by accident” and arms control regimes will have to include the US as the main security provider on the Western side.
- Russia would certainly use any opportunity in the present conflict to divide the EU and NATO, especially if it could drive a wedge between the EU and the US. For the EU this provides a strong argument against any European “*Alleingang*”, as the EU lacks the military, hard security options, which only NATO and the US can provide. After all, a resurgent and more aggressive Russia can only be deterred by strengthening the West’s defensive posture on which NATO relies. Without the US the European NATO members would not be able to defend their territory against a full-blown Russian attack. Thus the presence of American trip-wire forces in Eastern Europe and the US contribution to NATO’s deterrence and defense posture remain essential.

However, this does not imply that the EU could simply await the outcome of a strategic foreign policy review in the US and future initiatives from Washington:

- First of all, the EU should underline that as far as European NATO members are concerned the NATO Alliance remains based both on common and undivided security interests and on shared liberal-democratic values. Any notion that fundamental European security interests could be negotiated away in some “Grand Bargain” between Great Powers should be firmly rejected.
- In the context of closer EU-NATO cooperation and in line with the EU’s own Global Security Strategy, the EU could undertake efforts aimed at strengthening the resilience of EU member states, accession partners and Eastern Partnership countries, countering Russian disinformation, propaganda and efforts to influence internal democratic processes. The Western Balkans deserve special attention in this respect, in view of a recent surge in Russian “information operations”. A possible revival of the Eurogroup within NATO could also be considered.
- Keeping the EU united in its policies towards Russia would furthermore enhance its credibility as a partner for dialogue and eventually security cooperation with Russia, including on energy security. Here Germany can play a leading role as an extension of its role as the most important Western power broker in the Ukraine crisis in the “Normandy format”.
- The EU or leading member states, such as Germany, could test the waters for future initiatives in an OSCE context aimed at enhancing transparency and stability in Central/Eastern Europe or preventing militarization of the Arctic. A good example is the recent Finnish initiative to prevent military incidents over the Baltic Sea.
- Finally, the EU could develop stronger cooperation on counter-terrorism and demand stronger involvement in conflict settlement efforts in Syria and Libya (possibly linked to an enhanced European role in managing migration flows from Africa and the Wider Middle East). Testing the feasibility of cooperation with Russia on these issues could and should be undertaken, even when no leadership role is forthcoming from the US.

Conclusion

A strong US leadership role in relations with Russia, including in NATO, cannot be expected as long as internal infighting in Washington about any foreign policy strategy continues. Therefore, NATO-Russia relations will most probably be hampered for quite some time by a lack of US leadership, although this should not imply any lack of initiative from European NATO members.

The EU or leading member states, such as Germany, cannot offer a realistic alternative to US leadership in hard security matters. Therefore, a more fundamental dialogue with Russia on the European security architecture — and what that entails in terms of arms control — and most confidence and security building measures will have to wait. However, the EU can play an important role particularly in the soft security sphere or in economic/energy security matters, as long as it is able to keep its own act together and stay united in its policies towards Russia.

As a credible partner the EU would be able to explore both short-term and longer-term options for security dialogue with Russia, including on some confidence and security building measures, prevention of military incidents, cooperation on Arctic issues and

possibly on counter-terrorism and managing migration. In developing such policies the EU should continue to strive for close cooperation and dialogue with NATO and NATO partners.

Tony van der Togt is a Senior Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute.

¹ <http://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/nato-crisis-of-identity/>.

² <http://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/opinion/beyond-the-article-5-backlash-what-really-happened-with-trump-and-nato/>.

³ Andrew Radin/Clint Reach, 'Russian Views of the International Order', RAND, Santa Monica, California, 2017: www.rand.org/t/RR1826.

⁴ See also the recent Russian anti-NATO speeches (including by the Chief of Defense Staff, General Gerasimov, during the VI Moscow Conference on International Security:

<http://eng.mil.ru/en/mcis/index.htm>.

⁵ Kimberly Martin, 'Reducing Tensions Between Russia and NATO', Council on Foreign Relations, Council Special Report 79, New York, March 2017.

⁶ 'Recalibrating U.S. Strategy Toward Russia. A New Time for Choosing', CSIS, Washington D.C., March 2017.

⁷ Dissenting view offered by Stanley Sloan in his recent comment:

<https://warontherocks.com/2017/06/dont-count-on-germany-to-save-the-west/>.