

COUNTRY CHAPTER ON RUSSIA

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RUSSIA AND THE DIVISIVE DISCOURSE ON NATO

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THREAT PERCEPTION: A MIXED BAG – IN EVERY RESPECT

There is a seamless consensus among the Moscow political class, which has remained unaltered for years, namely that NATO poses a problem for Russia, that its expansion exacerbates this problem, and that Russian security interests in Europe are best served by a pan-European security system with Russia included on an equal footing.

This attitude took root as early as 1993/1994, when NATO began discussing the admission of new members from Central and Eastern Europe. In the course of a few months, all the arguments emerged that comprise the Russian critique, which even today determine the debate about NATO and its expansion plans. The complaint is that, in contrast to the Warsaw Pact, the West refused to dissolve its military alliance at the end of the Cold War. This reflects the fact that it does not appreciate Russia's decisive contribution to ending that war, but instead continues to celebrate its supposed victory. This arrogant attitude corresponds to the West's broken promises not to unilaterally expand the scope of its alliance, in line with the spirit of the 1990 CSCE Charter of Paris, to which it had committed itself in concrete terms within the framework of the Two Plus Four negotiations on German unification. Reference is also made to Russia's national interests, because with its expansion NATO deliberately marginalizes the Russian Federation politically, pushing it to the European periphery and building up a qualitatively new level of military capacity, even if the alliance does not yet pose an acute military threat (cf. Spanger 2012).

As in the past, Russia's confrontation with NATO therefore brings together all the fundamental problems and visions with which the Moscow political class was confronted after the end of the Soviet Union: from uncertainty about the country's place in the international community to the question of how and by what means Moscow could conceivably influence developments beyond its own borders, and also how – this was added with the gradual emergence of Putin's autocratic rule – it can shield itself from undue influence from outside, namely from the West.¹ This dilemma

¹ The latter came about in contrast to the beginning, when both sides »sought to develop cooperation based not only on common interests, but also on shared values« (Zagorsky 2017: 138). For then Russian

has produced a vast amount of analyses and commentaries, so only a concise summary of the debate can be presented here.

For about ten years the view has prevailed in the Moscow political class that Russia has established itself as an »independent centre of power« after its »geopolitical knockout« had been overcome (Lukyanov 2010).² However, from this basic attitude it does not necessarily follow how Russia can assume this role in the international system and what this means for the relationship with NATO, except for one thing: any thought of Russia joining NATO – and its transformation into a collective security organization, which would go hand in hand with it – is now obsolete.

This, however, is where the consensus ends, because the exact nature of the threat posed by NATO and, even more so, how NATO is to be dealt with, are judged very differently in the Russian security debate. Take, for instance, the basic question of whether NATO has a future at all and what it looks like. Donald Trump's disregard for the alliance in particular stimulated some optimism among some Russian think tankers. Timofei Bordachev of the Higher School of Economics (HSE), for example, came up with the bold claim that »NATO itself is already a historical relic« (Bordachev 2019), with which dialogue is no longer worthwhile for Russia. Yet, publishing on the same platform, the Valdai Club, Igor Istomin of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), counters: »Judging by

Foreign Minister Kozyrev this sounded like this: »It is quite possible that the now much-discussed question of NATO's eastward enlargement will become a less pressing problem through the dynamic further development of the partnership, as well as through cooperation within the CSCE and the NACC« (Kozyrev 1994: 6). For an early critic such as Sergei Karaganov, this was, in retrospect, an expression of the »desire to please the 'rich uncles' in the 1990s, lack of intelligence, i.e. stupidity, or simply weakness« and thus Russia's »co-responsibility for the resurgence of confrontation in Europe« (Karaganov 2019b). Vladimir Putin made it clear at the Valdai meeting in 2017 that he shares this view, because »our most serious mistake in relations with the West is that we trusted you too much« (Putin 2017).

² Or in the words of Dmitry Trenin (2009: 4f) of the Carnegie Center: »Russia has defined itself as a major power in its own right with global reach. Its current goal is to become a full-fledged world power, one of a handful of more or less equal players in the global system of the twenty-first century. The goal is to become a world power in the twenty-first century. (...) The goal is to create a less US/Western centered system«.

the steps it has taken rather than by rhetoric, NATO remains a completely vital organization« (Istomin 2019). Despite all its difficulties, »NATO will remain the central institution for Transatlantic coordination that also ensures the projection of the power to adjacent regions« and »[r]ecent apocalyptic expectations concerning disintegration of normative consensus seem exaggerated« (Istomin/Bolgova 2018: 5, 47). Andrey Kortunov of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) goes one step further, arguing that »simply going back to a world without NATO is not only impossible but also undesirable, since the world of the past has never been the ideal for the future«. This is all the more true since the alternatives to NATO need by no means be better for Russia:

Will it be better if Turkey or Germany start to think about acquiring their own nuclear weapons, while Poland attempts to create an anti-Russian »three seas« military and political alliance, uniting the states of Central Europe? Will it be better if another president of the United States turns out to be entirely free of all the obligations and restrictions imposed on him by NATO's multilateral rules and procedures? (Kortunov 2019a)

These diverging views of NATO express one thing above all: profound differences on the question of who owns the future. There are essentially two opposing standpoints. On one hand, an exuberant self-confidence that in the wake of the global power shift the world has already become multipolar and a few great powers – Russia included – will shape the future global order. Hence, Russia is back. In the words of Sergey Karaganov, whose mode of argument is often neatly timed and geared towards achieving a political impact: »the 2010s were probably the most successful period in terms of foreign and defence policy, at least since the 1970s when the USSR's foreign policy influence and military security were at their height«:

In the 2010s, Russia managed to halt the expansion of Western alliances which threatened vital interests of its security. In Syria, a series of imposed »colour revolutions« that destroyed entire regions was stopped. Russia has gained advantageous, including economically, positions in the Middle East. It has built a de facto allied relationship with China, which markedly strengthens the positions of both countries in the world system. (...) Having begun its turn to the East, Russia has significantly changed the balance of power in relations with the West, especially Europe, in its own favour. While Europe's periphery was willing to gravitate towards the centre and prepared to pay for this, Russia is now turning into the centre of a new vast Eurasian space and regaining Eurasian identity.

But »[u]nlike the Soviet Union, Russia this time took »the right side of history« (Karaganov 2017) because, in even more emphatic historical terms, »Russia, not even fully realising it yet, has finally knocked the foundation out of the West's five-hundred-year dominance in world politics, economy, and culture« (Karaganov 2019a).

This contrasts significantly with a much more sceptical assessment, which also admits Russia's foreign policy successes, especially in the Middle East, and concedes that the global balance is shifting to the detriment of the West. At the same time, it expresses serious reservations that, according to Andrey Kortunov, »the material foundation of Russia's foreign policy has not gotten any stronger, to say the least«. He also cautions that, despite all successes »the strategic risks here outweigh the tactical advantages« (Kortunov 2019b). Andrey Zagorsky, Institute for World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), adds that, especially with regard to European security, Russian options have not become better, but worse, »towards the possible isolation (or self-isolation) of Russia. The actual choice today is not between integrating Russia into a »political West« or a bipolar system, but between isolating Russia and agreeing to maintain a *modus vivendi*« as the best option (Zagorsky 2017: 138).

These differences reveal a peculiar paradox: Karaganov's diagnoses – or rather vision – of Russia's rise as an »Atlantic-Pacific power« to become the »centre of rising Eurasia« clearly strike a chord with the political class in Moscow, as the similar-sounding official pronouncements from the Kremlin and the Foreign Ministry in recent years demonstrate. The vast majority of think tanks, on the other hand, subscribe to the sceptical, cautious position of his critics – a difference that is also reflected in their recommendations on how to deal with NATO.

WHAT ABOUT THE MILITARY THREAT?

It is striking that in the assessment of the immediate military threat from NATO, there is again greater agreement – and composure dominates.³ The explanation, however, again differs in that some refer to Russian military capabilities, others to NATO's »relatively limited direct military deployments« (Istomin 2019) on Russia's western border: »the real level of pressure will most probably be limited [substantially below the Cold War level to which the modern situation is often compared]. The West relies more on other instruments in its rising tensions with Moscow« (Istomin/Bolgova 2018: 47). This, as well as the continued communications, allegedly signals that the alliance does not harbour very threatening military intentions. According to Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI) authors, however, this hybridisation only amounts to »an extended deterrence strategy that would encompass the military, political, information and economic spheres« (Kosarev 2020: 17). More generally, the issue of hybrid warfare has become a subject of mutual finger-pointing between NATO and Russia, each side referring to alleged doctrinal changes by its opponent.

³ With the notable exception of the worst-case analyses of NATO which are to be found in the works of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI) and which are a mirror image of the alarmism at NATO's eastern flank (see, for example, Kosarev 2020).

Karaganov agrees, irrespective of his basic assumption that NATO is inherently aggressive⁴ and can be neutralised only through effective deterrence: »Russia’s armed forces are quite efficient, and I do not think that NATO should expect anything more than a quick defeat in the event of a conflict, if, of course, Russia uses all the necessary means for that. But there are no signs indicating that the Alliance is preparing direct aggression. Russia does have sufficient deterrent forces« (Karaganov 2019b). Why, however, he believes that there is currently an »acute pre-war situation (...) comparable to the time right after the Cuban missile crisis« remains his secret (Karaganov 2019c).

In line with his last argument there is again agreement – and it is emphasised throughout – that the current climate of confrontation between Russia and the West harbours inherent dangers, namely of unintended military escalation and accidental war, which must be jointly contained (see, for example, Institute of Europe 2020). The same applies to the »emerging arms race« (see, for example, Zagorsky 2017: 139), although in Karaganov’s view this race is already over before it has really begun: »Russia has pre-emptively ruined the United States’ hopes to regain military superiority, and has so far won the arms race without getting involved in it« (Karaganov 2019a).

DIALOGUE WITH NATO?

RIAC and IMEMO in particular, but also the other academic institutes, have in recent years not tired of exploring options to forge a common understanding in all conceivable combinations with Western think tanks: from joint workshops to a myriad of joint policy proposals. Their minimum goal is to contain the dangers described above and stabilize the current standoff; their maximum goal is to establish something like a »modus vivendi« (Zagorsky 2017) or a »positive coexistence« in the sense of an »equilibrium founded on yet-to-be-agreed rules of behaviour« (Trenin 2018, 4) between Russia and NATO. The minimum goal can be tackled immediately and, with sufficient flexibility and foresight on both sides, can be achieved relatively quickly. The maximum goal, however, can be achieved only after the completely destroyed trust has been restored and after tensions have been reduced and the current crisis has been overcome. The restoration of a partnership, on the other hand, is ruled out by all for the foreseeable future.

With regard to the minimum goal, almost all think tanks advocate a resumption of the NATO-Russia Council, at least at ambassadorial level, better still at a higher level and in »a more predictable rhythm«, as stated in a joint paper by RIAC and the European Leadership Network (Kubiak 2019). A joint discussion group with Western academics initiated by academy institutes and the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Security at MGIMO in addition suggests that the 1997 NATO-Russia

Founding Act should be better utilized in the sense of »restraint, transparency and confidence-building measures« and, if necessary, expanded (Institute of Europe 2020).

Here, too, Karaganov, together with his colleagues at the HSE,⁵ takes an at first glance radical counter-position, demanding that »under no circumstances should Moscow agree to resume the hollow political dialogue within the framework of the Russian-NATO Council« (Karaganov 2019b):

The desire to maintain a political dialogue with NATO is completely incomprehensible. Didn’t we take our appeasement efforts a bit too far? With our willingness to maintain an empty dialogue in the past, we legitimised an irrelevant alliance that had outlived its usefulness, and helped it endure and expand. (Karaganov 2019c)⁶

Elsewhere, he concedes that *faute de mieux* the Cooperation Council, like the OSCE, could be used »instrumentally (...) wherever they can be useful – to regulate crises or prevent conflicts – but otherwise be pushed aside« (Karaganov/Suslov 2018: 79). His preferred alternative is »a modern active policy of peace or peace-saving (a new language is needed). It should combine strong deterrence with the rejection of direct threats and with the promotion of the slogan ›Russia is the main provider of peace, a defender of sovereignty and freedom of choice for all countries and civilizations, a guarantor of a new non-aligned movement and the prevention of hegemonism« (Karaganov 2019a).

A similar formation can be observed in the assessment of arms control. The RIAC in particular, frequently represented by its president Igor Ivanov (for example, Ivanov 2019), as well as the IMEMO as represented by Aleksey Arbatov in particular (for example, Arbatov 2019) spare no effort in defending the existing arms control regimes and pleading for negotiations on new ones. For Karaganov, on the other hand, this process is »practically dead now«, and that is to be commended, because »the arms control process was also used to militarise politics and thinking. It was based mostly on an artificial criterion, namely, the parity or numerical equality of the parties’ armaments and armed forces« (Karaganov 2019c). However, even this extravagant position cannot be that serious, because in a major report by the HSE, which he presented together with Dmitry Suslov in 2019 and which has evidently been well received in the Foreign Ministry, he advocates measures to secure strategic stability, which de facto represent nothing more than a partially redesigned negotiated arms control (Karaganov/Suslov 2019).

4 »When democracies are not militarily contained, they commit acts of aggression under the banner of protecting human rights, ethnic minorities and democracy itself« (Karaganov 2019b).

5 And in line with RISI authors who argue that NATO is willing to have dialogue with Russia only »from a position of strength« (Kosarev 2020: 16).

6 And he points out: »How can we now justify our hope for ›equal cooperation‹ with an alliance that has stained itself with bloody aggression? This line is not only morally flawed, but also impractical, for it encourages the worst in our partners« (Karaganov 2019c).

HOW TO COPE WITH FUTURE NATO EXPANSION?

Here, too, the basic disagreements outlined above prevail, whereby there is little doubt that NATO is not moving away from its axiomatic willingness to accept new members, even if, apart from the Balkans, no expansion is currently expected, especially not with regard to Georgia and Ukraine. While one side advocates taking the concerns of the NATO candidates seriously and finding acceptable solutions, especially for the countries between Russia and NATO, the other relies on a policy of strength. It is again Karaganov who formulates this latter position particularly succinctly, because in his view it was Russia's resolute and military-backed response in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 that unmistakably showed NATO its limits: »Russia's resolutely swift takeover of Crimea and support of the rebellion in the Donbass have prevented the further expansion of the Western bloc« (Karaganov/Suslov 2018). He thus supports the overwhelming majority of Moscow's political class who advocate a strategy of preventing further expansion of NATO through the existence – and, if necessary, intensification – of territorial conflicts among the accession candidates. This follows the logic of a great power policy which claims »special interests« in neighbouring regions but does not show much consideration for the concerns and needs articulated there.

Critics maintain that in order to counter NATO enlargement effectively, the »demand side« must be taken much more seriously and the motivation of the accession candidates carefully studied. These must be flexibly addressed and hence Russia's previous policy in its neighbourhood corrected, because the policy of recent decades of filling the »geopolitical vacuum« has in any case not proved »particularly successful« (Kortunov 2019a). According to Andrey Zagorsky, such flexibility presupposes resolving the »central contradiction in the current debate« and finding a »balance between the principle of freedom of choice of alliances and the need to take into account the legitimate security interests of other states (the principle of equal and indivisible security)«, as well as providing »security guarantees for countries caught between Russia and NATO-EU« (Zagorsky 2017: 139) that allow them to maintain a non-aligned status.

This is where the EU comes in. In the course of the confrontation, it has become customary in Moscow to equate the enlargement of NATO with that of the EU, especially because, with a few exceptions (Austria, Sweden, Finland), the former regularly preceded the latter. There are proposals to decouple the two again. Dmitry Trenin, for instance, proposes for the sake of his »stable equilibrium« a compromise involving »NATO stopping any further enlargement into the post-Soviet space and Russia dropping its objections to former Soviet republics' rapprochement with the EU« (Trenin 2018). Kortunov even sees conflict-dampening potential in the EU's debates on its »strategic autonomy«, which could reduce the »appeal of NATO membership for post-Soviet states«, but in return would require that Russia not view the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) programme in security and defence »in a solely negative light«, as it has

done so far. In the best case, this could even lay »the foundations of long-term defence cooperation between Russia and Europe outside the framework of the highly toxic Russia-NATO relations« (Kortunov 2019a). And even Karaganov, who around 2010 called for a »Union of Europe« as a »last chance« (Karaganov 2010), and who today considers the EU caught in a dead end, sees opportunities for cooperation beyond NATO – but »as part of the efforts to build a greater Eurasian space of development, cooperation, and security« (Karaganov 2019b). On the horizon, even more ambitious goals appear in the shape of »a China-Russia-Europe triangle of peace and development within which Russia would act as a link and as a balancing power« (Karaganov/Suslov 2018: 79).

WHAT ROLE FOR CHINA?

As far as China's role in the Russia-NATO equation is concerned, there is again greater agreement. Prosperous relations with China are indispensable not only for economic reasons – after all, China has been Russia's most important trading partner for years – but also as geostrategic reassurance, which China offers as a force multiplier. However, the accompanying balancing vis-à-vis the United States, which is desirable to both parties – albeit within variable limits – requires at least hedging, if not balancing vis-à-vis China as well. This is all the more true as the balance in the bilateral relationship is continuously shifting in China's favour; no one in Moscow makes any secret of this.

Against this background, it is understandable why the idea of a new bipolarism, which is becoming increasingly clear in the confrontation between Washington and Beijing, meets with little enthusiasm in the Russian strategic community, because this would entail the danger that Russia would switch from being a subject to an object. Because, as Andrey Gromyko of the Academy's Europe Institute notes, such »poles can have only one indisputable leader« and »China–Russia relations are largely asymmetrical in favour of China« (Gromyko 2020), there can only be one loser in this constellation.

This ambivalence can be found even with Karaganov, who has vigorously promoted Russia's »turn to the east« over many years. On one hand, he welcomes the »de facto strategic alliance with China« (Karaganov 2017), but on the other he too sees the risks resulting from the growing asymmetry between the two countries: »China needs us now. But as it becomes economically, and most importantly, militarily stronger, it may objectively become less inclined to take our interests into account. Beijing may start pursuing a tougher policy«. His solution: »integrate it into the system of balances and institutions within the Greater Eurasia concept« (Karaganov 2019a). This is one of the rare points of agreement with Andrey Kortunov, who also calls for »multilateralism« with China and considers the potential of the »multipolarism« jointly advocated so far to be exhausted in view of the bilateral power shift (Zhao/Kortunov 2020). The problem is that China has so far shown little inclination to allow itself to

be integrated multilaterally, which it perceives to be as much a Procrustean bed as Russia does, which is trying to shed it in its relationship with the West. At least there is some relief, on the part of some pundits: the transformation of NATO into a »global security organisation« is considered unlikely, hence the alarmism that is so popular in Moscow when it comes to NATO may be not well-founded (Istomin/Bolgova 2018: 4). But here again RISI authors disagree, positing that in its drive towards »destabilising hybridisation« NATO is intent on covering ever more regions of the world and more areas of activity (Kosarev 2020: 42).

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