

NATO-Russia Relations after the Georgian Conflict

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In August 2008 Russia fought and won a five-day war against Georgia.¹ This short conflict can be considered a case study of Moscow's foreign security policy of this decade. Russia's warfare against Georgia – considering that the foundations for this armed struggle had been visible for a longer time – was part and parcel of Moscow's security politics. The conflict did not only have an impact on Georgia and the remainder of the South Caucasus but also on the global level of international politics.

After a short description of the course of the conflict this article concentrates on the response of NATO to Russia's military action against Georgia and the subsequent consequences for Moscow's relationship with the Western alliance. Finally, some thoughts will be given on how NATO might proceed in cooperating with Russia in the years ahead.

Warfare and Moscow's Protracted Action

After days of shooting incidents between the *de facto* South Ossetian armed groupings and the Georgian armed forces, in the late evening of Thursday 7 August 2008 Georgian President Saakashvili ordered his troops to return law and order and Tbilisi's rule in the rebellious province of South Ossetia.² Considering the speed with which the armed forces of Georgia and Russia brought in troops, it was clear that both parties had prepared for an armed clash. Moscow sent reinforcements to South Ossetia but also to Abkhazia, and responded fire. Russia's air force carried out attacks on targets in Georgia proper – i.e. outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia – and its Black Sea Fleet started a maritime blockade of Georgian ports. On 11 August Russian forces invaded Georgia proper from South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Georgian armed forces were no match for the Russian superiority in troops and arms, and were forced to withdraw around Tbilisi.³

On 12 August Georgia and Russia agreed on a cease-fire, the so-called 'six point peace plan', drafted by French President Sarkozy, fulfilling

the EU Presidency, and his Russian counterpart Medvedev.⁴ However, in spite of the six point peace plan, Russian forces continued military operations to further destroy Georgia's arms, equipment and military infrastructure. On 22 August Russia withdrew its military forces from Georgia proper but not all territory was released. The Russian troops installed buffer zones south of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, effectively controlling Georgia on the whole.⁵ Russia justified the continued occupation of Georgian territory upon point five of the Medvedev-Sarkozy peace plan, which stated that "prior to the establishment of international mechanisms the Russian peacekeeping forces will take additional security measures." Not earlier than at the beginning of October Russia withdrew from the buffer zones in Georgia proper.

On 26 August Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A second agreement between Sarkozy and Medvedev on 8 September arranged for Russian forces to withdraw from Georgia proper within 10 days as of 1 October, and their replacement by at least 200 EU observers.⁶ Although the mandate of this EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) covered the entire territory of Georgia, Russia subsequently denied EU observers access to the separatist regions. Next, Russia decided that it would keep 7,600 troops permanently deployed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and intended to establish military bases accordingly. On 30 April 2009 Russia signed joint border protection agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, allowing Russian border troops to secure the borders of the regions. The EU and NATO



expressed their concern over these agreements, violating the six point peace agreement.⁷

A next move of Moscow was to get rid of the presence of the international community in the separatist regions. The OSCE, which maintained a mission in Georgia that included monitors for South Ossetia, saw its mandate expire on 31 December 2008 and not being prolonged, as a result of a Russian veto in May 2009. Furthermore, on 15 June 2009 Russia exercised its veto power to terminate the UN observer mission UNOMIG, created in 1993 to monitor a cease-fire between Georgia and its breakaway region of Abkhazia. The force was the only international observation body based in Abkhazia since the August 2008 Georgian war. In the case of both missions Russia demanded recognition of the independence of the separatist territories at the threat of vetoing the operation. As of July 2009 the EUMM was the only international mission left, with access to the separatist regions denied by Russia, however.

NATO's Response to Russia

After the conflict with Georgia, NATO froze most military and political cooperation with Moscow. On 19 August 2008 NATO's foreign ministers declared that Russia's military action had been disproportionate and inconsistent with its peacekeeping role, as well as incompatible with the principles of peaceful conflict resolution set out in the Helsinki

Final Act, and with the cooperation agreements with the Alliance. They called on Russia to take immediate action to withdraw its troops from the areas it was supposed to leave under the six principle agreement. Furthermore, the implications of Russia's military actions for the NATO-Russia relationship were that NATO could not continue doing 'business as usual', and that cooperation in the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was suspended until Russia would have withdrawn its armed forces from Georgia.

In response to NATO suspending talks with Moscow in the NRC, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov decided to stop military cooperation with the Alliance, whilst President Medvedev even threatened to cut ties with NATO completely. Moscow suspended all peacekeeping operations and exercises with NATO and its participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PPF) programme. However, cooperation with NATO on Afghanistan was continued.⁸

*NATO and Russia
should exchange
cadet officers*

Obviously, energy security will remain a crucial element of future NATO-Russia relations. A gas facility in Siberia, operated by Gazprom and BASF (Photo: BASF/Wintershall)

Towards Georgia, NATO decided different sorts of immediate relief and support, as well as forming a NATO-Georgia Commission, to strengthen cooperation. Convening a meeting of NATO's highest organ, the North Atlantic Council, in Tbilisi mid-September 2008, was a clear demonstration of moral support for Georgia. However, in December NATO's foreign ministers refrained from granting the Membership Action Plan status to Georgia and Ukraine, but instead brought them closer to that by encouraging political and military reforms via the NATO-Ukraine and NATO-Georgia Commissions. Russia's invasion of Georgia had alarmed Alliance members from the former Soviet sphere of influence. Poland, the Czech Republic and the Baltic States considered Moscow's military action a threat. They demanded that the Alliance again look seriously into its resources for collective defence, as based on Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, comprising military assistance upon attack. These countries were now in doubt whether the Alliance would live up to its commitments of collective defence in case of an attack on individual members.⁹

Development of the NATO-Russia Relationship after the Conflict

Already in September 2008, NATO members with close ties to Russia, such as France and Germany, instigated a gradual return to normal relations with Moscow. Moreover, in the format of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, talks with Russia had not been suspended.

At an informal meeting in September NATO defence ministers expressed their willingness to continue cooperation with Russia on subjects such as counterterrorism, Afghanistan, the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and nuclear weapons. However, this careful recovery of relations with Moscow was soon again disturbed, when NATO expressed grave concern after Medvedev in his parliamentary speech of 5 November threatened to deploy missiles in Kaliningrad to counter the U.S. missile defence shield.¹⁰ In December NATO's foreign ministers agreed to start informal sessions in the NRC format, whilst maintaining that the Alliance did not accept Russia's takeover of Abkhazia and South Ossetia nor Medvedev's threat to install missiles in Kaliningrad.

On 5 March 2009 NATO's foreign ministers decided to resume the formal dialogue with Russia in the NRC, even though Moscow had not complied with the 12 August 2008 armistice plan including the withdrawal of its forces. The reason of the decision seemed to be the feeling in the Alliance that NATO needed Russia to carry on with co-

Clearly, both Georgia and Russia had prepared for an armed clash

operation on issues of common interests, such as Afghanistan, counterterrorism, drugs trafficking, non-proliferation, arms control and the new threat of piracy. On 4 April, at the Strasbourg/Kehl Summit, NATO's declaration reiterated its dual position towards Moscow: on the one hand, demanding from Russia to meet its commitment of forces withdrawal from the Georgian separatist regions, and condemning Moscow's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; on the other hand, emphasising continued cooperation in the abovementioned areas, as well as proposing the linkage of U.S., NATO and Russia missile defence systems, and once more offering parallel actions aimed at resuming the CFE mechanism.¹¹

A NATO PfP exercise, conducted in Georgia from 6 May until 1 June 2009, caused another dispute between Russia and the West. The drills were planned long before the Russo-Georgian conflict, and NATO offered Moscow to send observers. Nevertheless, Medvedev condemned the drills and cancelled Moscow's participation in a NRC meeting at chiefs of defence level on 7 May as well as the first NRC session to be resumed at foreign ministers level with Sergey Lavrov on 18-19 May. A next clash occurred when NATO expelled two Russian diplomats from the Russian mission to NATO on the accusation of spying.

In spite of these series of confrontations, finally, on 27 June, nearly a year after the break-down of the NRC resulting from the Georgian conflict, Sergey Lavrov attended a NRC meeting at foreign ministers level at Corfu, at which parties decided that military cooperation between NATO and Russia be restarted. Cooperation was also being agreed on the war in Afghanistan, and action against drugs trafficking, Somali piracy, terrorism and nuclear proliferation. However, both parties acknowledged that they continued to disagree on the situation of Georgia and the separatist regions.¹²

Russia and NATO: How to Move on?

Although the relationship between Russia and the West after the Georgian conflict should not be regarded as a new 'Cold War', it was evident that the interaction between both parties had suffered considerably. In spite of the difficulties, options for a better relationship between the West and Russia remain. These opportunities can be found, for instance, in the fields of energy security, Afghanistan, and in political and military cooperation.

Energy Security

On first sight, the topic of energy security portrays an exclusively hostile attitude of both players towards each other, as a result of Russia's energy dominance and the West's energy dependence on Russia. Russia has used its 'energy weapon', i.e. cut-offs of energy supplies against pro-Western states in what it considers its sphere of influence, e.g. Georgia and Ukraine. These cut-offs have also affected energy deliveries to NATO/EU states.

The West tries to establish a diversity of supplies and consequently a decrease in dependence on Russia by creating alternative pipelines to obtain Central Asian energy sources via Azerbaijan and Georgia. Conversely, Moscow wants to get rid of its dependence on transit of its gas through the Ukrainian pipeline network and tries to get Western and Southern European states interested in constructing alternative pipelines through these regions. For NATO, energy security – due to the increasing global demand and the danger of crises from a decrease in supply levels – will gain further weight as a topic on its agenda.

Clearly, energy security is likely to remain a crucial element of future NATO-Russia relations, either positively or negatively, or even both at the same time. In diminishing its energy dependence from Russia by obtaining oil and gas from elsewhere and by replacing carbonate by alternative durable energy resources, NATO and the EU can also decrease tensions with Russia in this domain, because Russian opposition would then become less effective. Furthermore, international terrorism and piracy – such as off the coast of Somalia – is a threat to the Western but also to the Russian energy infrastructure. These international developments offer possibilities for joint action in energy security of both actors, which can also have a positive effect on their relationship.

Afghanistan

Around Afghanistan Russia and its Central Asian and Chinese allies – united in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – face the same threats as NATO: terrorism by Taliban and Al-Qaeda and drugs trafficking.¹³ Russia and its partners in CSTO/SCO could support NATO in Afghanistan. First of all, this could be achieved by a military contribution, by dispatching troop contingents, which would strengthen the military force in the war against the Taliban. However, actual military coopera-

tion between NATO and CSTO/SCO still seems to be out-of-the-way because of political sensitivities.

Alternatively, other options for political and socio-economic cooperation of CSTO/SCO with NATO, for instance in reconstruction projects in Afghanistan and in the fight against drugs, are also conceivable. By cooperating in and around Afghanistan, NATO and Russia, together with its allies, can improve stability and security in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Central Asian region. An example of this East-West cooperation on Afghanistan was Russia and other CSTO/SCO member states granting NATO transit rights to transport goods for its operation in Afghanistan through their territories.



Furthermore, Russia did not withdraw this permission during the deterioration of relations with NATO resulting from the Georgia conflict. This is a good example of structural and mutual beneficial cooperation on Afghanistan, which should be followed by other initiatives.

Political-strategic and Military-operational Cooperation

Russia and NATO can also make efforts to improve relations on the political-strategic level. From its side Russia should remove the anti-Western entries from its security documents and refrain from anti-NATO/USA statements. On the other side, unless there is a military necessity to continue this, NATO should withdraw its air protection over the Baltic states, after having trained and equipped these Allies to perform this task themselves. Furthermore, the U.S. and NATO should abstain from deploying forces near Russia.

However, such political-strategic decisions are difficult to achieve and if so, they will take considerable time. In the meantime military-operational cooperation comes forward as an option for improved relations which can be implemented easier, and is – e.g. in the case of arms control inspections – a proven confidence-building measure. Therefore, it would be helpful if Russia ended its suspension of the CFE Treaty, in order for mutual inspections to be restored, which will foster confidence and trust on both sides. With regard to military-operational opportunities, both parties share good experiences: Russia's contribution to NATO-led peacekeeping operations in Bosnia (SFOR) and Kosovo (KFOR) and in NATO's Article 5 maritime operation Active Endeavour – fighting international terrorism – as well as in joint theatre missile defence exercises.

These examples of military-operational cooperation could be expanded with other joint operations: e.g. cooperation between NATO (ISAF) and the Russian-led CSTO in Afghanistan against narcotics trade, as repeatedly proposed by Moscow; joint peacekeeping exercises; information exchanges by commanders and military-academic lecturers, for example on operational experiences, as well as exchanges of (cadet) officers in training modules and of military academic staff in lecture postings. In political talks as well as exchanges of military academies a very useful topic could be to discuss the statements in Russian security documents on threats from the West. To discuss these in public could clear the skies. Increased military cooperation

Obama and Rasmussen have sincerely created a rapprochement towards Russia

in due course might also encourage progress and the strengthening of political-strategic ties. Such cooperation in political-strategic and military-operational dimensions promotes international stability as well as a decrease in mutual suspicion and distrust.

Rapprochement as Onset of an Improved Relationship

Recently, the U.S. and NATO took steps towards a structural improvement of relations between Russia and the West. On 17 September 2009 U.S. President Obama annulled the plan of deploying a missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic.¹⁴ This missile shield had been a major obstacle in Western-Russian relations for a number of years. The next day NATO's new Secretary-General, Rasmussen, dedicated his first major speech to a new beginning in the relationship with Russia.¹⁵ With this gesture he clearly expressed the intention to stop the 'time of troubles' with Moscow.

These two policy initiatives could be considered a genuine breakthrough in Western-Russian relations, certainly since Moscow has responded to them in a similarly constructive way. However, that does not mean that all related problems now have been solved. The missile defence system will not be built in Eastern Europe but will be replaced by a mobile system on ships. In addition to this, by 2015 corresponding land-based missiles will be deployed in Europe, possibly also in Poland and the Czech Republic. Rasmussen's plan for improved relations with Russia was aimed at reinforcing practical cooperation, rejuvenating the NATO-Russia Council and jointly reviewing the security challenges of the 21st century.

Although improving cooperation in these areas is laudable, matters of dispute remain. For instance, concerning the joint fight against terrorism, the West considers the Palestinian movement Hamas a terrorist group, whereas Moscow receives its representatives at the Kremlin. Another example would be if U.S., NATO and Russian missile defence systems could technically be linked, would NATO be able to launch a Russian missile against an Iranian nuclear missile heading for the U.S.? Nevertheless, Obama and Rasmussen have sincerely created a rapprochement towards Russia which does depart from the confrontational path of the last years.

A primary prerequisite for better relations is that Russia and the West should well consider the sensitivities of the other side and take each other seriously. Furthermore, Russia should realise that U.S. policy is not necessarily the same as NATO policy. Conversely, the West should accept the fact that Russia is 'back in business' in the international arena, whether it likes it or not. Also, the U.S., EU and NATO should carefully consider their actions in the East to avoid unnecessary conflicts with Russia. Yet at the same time, the West should continue guarding its own values and interests, regardless whether they are rejected by the Kremlin. The best way to achieve results in improving

the relationship between NATO and Russia is to concentrate on mutual beneficial, non-politically sensitive and practical projects.

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1. For a detailed description of the causes, warfare and aftermath of the Georgian conflict, see: M. de Haas, 'The Georgia Conflict of August 2008: Exponent of Russia's Assertive Security Policy', *Carré*, January 2009, pp. 46-49.
2. There are also claims that the other side started the conflict. Georgia's invasion was allegedly in response to South Ossetian attacks on Georgian villages, which triggered the conflict. Another source claims that Russian reinforcements were already in South Ossetia on 7 August 2008. See: De Haas, 'The Georgia Conflict of August 2008: Exponent of Russia's Assertive Security Policy'.
3. A. Nicoll, 'Russia's Rapid Reaction', *IJSS Strategic Comments* Vol. 14, No. 7, September 2008.
4. The Medvedev-Sarkozy 6 points armistice plan comprised: (1) No resort to the use of force; (2) The absolute cessation of all hostilities; (3) Free access to humanitarian assistance; (4) The Georgian Army must withdraw to their permanent positions; (5) The Russian Armed Forces must withdraw to the line where they were stationed prior to the beginning of hostilities. Prior to the establishment of international mechanisms the Russian peace-keeping forces will take additional security measures; (6) An international debate on the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and ways to ensure their lasting security.
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13. See also: De Haas, 'De NAVO en de *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*: natuurlijke partners in het Oosten?', *Atlantisch Perspectief* Vol. 32, No. 6, October 2008, pp. 25-30.
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