

## MADRID SUMMIT 2022 · NATO FACES A CHANGE OF ERA



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### **Russia-NATO relations: perceptions from behind the hill**

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The Ukrainian crisis has given a strong transformative boost to geopolitics, global governance and the economy. It is unclear whether these fast-moving events are planting the seeds for a more dangerous era of international affairs.

This article attempts to describe Russia's key assumptions about the risks it believes stem from NATO. It briefly illustrates the most important interests that Moscow seeks to promote and secure. The findings are derived from official Russian documents, statements by high-ranking officials, analytical reports from Russian think tanks and some interviews.

Without pretending to be exhaustive, the author suggests that various frames of perception could outline the contours of the approaches of the Russian establishment. The first framework of perception describes changes in the international security architecture and Europe's place in it. The Russian establishment believes that Europe is transforming itself from one of the most stable regions into an area of heightened tension and confrontation. In the development of the system of international relations that took shape in the 90s, the point of no return has been surpassed. One of the key reasons is the serious deterioration of relations between Russia and NATO, which are at the lowest point since the end of the Cold War.

The general perception is that members of the alliance in Europe prefer lasting military confrontation to dialogue and confidence-building measures. NATO is increasing the number of high-prepared forces, creating the routes for the operational deployment of troops on the borders of Russia and its allies. The Alliance's military exercises focus on offensive operations on the eastern flank. Military activity in the Arctic is increasing. Member states' defense spending is rising. NATO's nuclear deterrence potential is improving.

Russian policymakers believe that the European Union's strategic subordination diminishes interest in political cooperation. A belt of self-proclaimed frontline states has emerged. They build their historical identity on Russo-phobia, portraying themselves as eternal victims of Russian imperialism and Soviet communism. The struggle of historical narratives has replaced reconciliation processes.

The entry of the Scandinavian countries into NATO does not change Moscow's view of the importance of creating a system of collective security in Europe. Still, the possibility of Sweden and Finland joining NATO is a source of concern for the Kremlin. To a large extent, it is related to the prospect of changes in the military-strategic balance in the Arctic region, the transformation of established economic ties, as well as the deterioration of relations between Russia, Sweden and, especially, Finland, in the political sphere.

The Russian establishment is well aware that the entry of Finland and Sweden could strengthen the bloc. Both countries have a developed economy, a high standard of living, an effective public administration, modern armed forces (and Sweden also has a large military industry) and a good international reputation.

Russia attaches great importance to maintaining an acceptable level of relations with the Scandinavian states. At the same time, it is clear to Moscow that, at least in the political sphere, the situation for Russia will be less favorable should Sweden and Finland become members of the alliance. Russia has no territorial disputes with both countries, and for the foreseeable future, Finland is unlikely to seek a review of the border established by the 1947 peace treaty and confirmed by the 1992 treaty. However, Russia will become the only Non-NATO State in the Baltic Sea and Arctic Ocean. A narrow margin of maneuver is almost inevitable for Moscow.

There seems to be a consensus in the Russian establishment that NATO is transforming from a regional to a global political-military alliance, with the main task of containing Russia and China. Several states, even in the EU's strategic environment, will carefully analyze the pros and cons of joining the alliance. Further expansion of NATO is perceived as possible.

Regarding the European Union's security paradigm, the prevailing view is that the NATO-centric model has no alternatives today. Reforms aimed at increasing the EU's strategic autonomy will continue to be on the political agenda. However, its implementation is not feasible in the foreseeable future. The support of the Eastern members of the European Union for the United States as a guarantor of European security is likely to slow down these initiatives.

The second framework describes NATO's perceived policies toward the Kremlin. Russian policymakers believe NATO has not paid due attention to the signals Moscow has been sending for years. The repetition of two decades of "NATO expansion is an expansion of democracy" and statements of "no threat to Russia" have alienated the Russian establishment. Russian policymakers argue that in the last quarter of the 20th century, the European security architecture based on the Helsinki principles was constantly evolving. However, a free interpretation of international law derailed the Helsinki process. The West stopped using the term "international law," which is incorporated in the Charter of the United Nations, and invented the term "rules-based world order." A small number of Western politicians wrote those rules.

The prevailing view is that in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, Russia did not take any action that would jeopardize the security interests of the United States and its allies in Europe. Russia was open to cooperation with NATO, and proved that after 9/11. The accession of the three Baltic States bordering Russia did not involve a strong reaction from Moscow. Although Russian ruling circles criticized the policy of the alliance movement to the east, there was no reason to dramatize the situation that time.

Obviously, Russia could not stop NATO's expansion. Instead, Moscow launched a negotiation process on a new European security architecture that could replace the confrontational Cold War policy in the Euro-Atlantic region.

Russian policymakers and the community of experts believe that Western capitals interpreted Moscow's intention for a dialogue as a sign of weakness. They argue that without proper explanation, in 2002 the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty, in 2003, along with its allies, it unleashed a war in Iraq and increased activity along the perimeter of The Russian borders. Russian President Putin talked about it during the Munich Security Conference in 2007.

Russian experts and the academic community often refer to the views of Western experts, who believe that they tend to present things in such a way that all the problems between Russia and NATO began after South Ossetia in 2008 and the political crisis in Ukraine in 2014. A prevailing view is that such conflicts could have been avoided, or at least prevented from

entering the military phase, had it not been for the deliberate policies of the United States and its allies to destroy the fragile foundations of Russia-NATO relations. "NATO states know well that Moscow did not provoke such conflicts, in both cases there was an attempt to present Russia with a *fait accompli*."

Russian policymakers argue that, instead of a "cooperative" security system, a "NATO-centric" architecture was established in Europe. Support for Ukraine and Georgia's accession to NATO, and the absence of substantive discussion on other issues, such as the deployment of the missile defense system in Europe, have worsened relations between Russia and NATO before the Ukrainian crisis. The prospect of the deployment of NATO's military infrastructure in Ukraine has become a red line for Moscow.

The deployment of short- and intermediate-range missiles in Europe, as well as the extensive deployment of missile defense systems and their integration with attack weapons is a very serious concern for the Kremlin and is perceived as one of the fundamental problems of European security<sup>1</sup>.

The Russian establishment adheres to the view that the deployment of intermediate- and short-range missiles, as well as missile defense systems in the European theater, is a direct threat to Russia's eastern regions. Statements of "no direction" are strongly condemned and seen as mockery, at best.

A common view is that the situation with the deployment of missile systems worsened after the United States withdrew from the INF Treaty. The Russian military establishment argues that attack missiles along with missile defense systems can change the balance of power not only in the region, but around the world. Russian experts argue that Moscow could mitigate the threat by increasing the number of attack missiles on its territory, improving their technical characteristics and adopting the relevant operating procedures. These measures, however, could increase the viability of Europeans being held hostage again to the confrontation that took place during the Cold War.

The Russian expert community believes that NATO sees Moscow's initiatives on missile limits as an attempt to divide alliance partners and eliminate NATO's advanced nuclear forces, non-strategic nuclear weapons of the United States. It seems to be clear to Moscow that there is little chance of a formal agreement on these issues today, even though the assessment of the inevitable need for strategic partnership with NATO and the United States in particular remains in place.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with former Defense Minister Official.

It is obvious to the Russian establishment that it is impossible to simply "abolish" nuclear deterrence. It is seen as an integral element of the current world order. "Nuclear deterrence cannot be abandoned without radically changing the world order, and the world order cannot be fundamentally improved because of the severe restrictions of self-generated nuclear deterrence."

Another important perspective concerns the conventional arms control regime in Europe. Moscow is unwilling to ignore this issue and might consider returning to the agenda the implementation of the special security and confidence-building and status-neutral measures previously developed by the OSCE.

The development of NATO hypersonic systems and offensive cyber capabilities is a serious cause of concern for the Russian military and political establishment. Russian policymakers believe that the lack of formal agreements on the development of cyber weapons could inevitably become a problem of strategic stability.<sup>2</sup>

The third framework offers some prospective perspectives. The Russian establishment believes that a new configuration of the European security architecture could prevent the emergence of a deeper crisis and contribute to the resolution of the current one.

A common view is that the policies of Washington and US' allies have led to the most dangerous security crisis in decades, and Russia has to answer the same question it had in the mid-1990s: how to respond to NATO policies on the eastern flank. For now, the choice of options remains the same as it was 30 years ago: a political-diplomatic or military response.

Russian experts argue that normalization of European security is impossible without a constructive dialogue between Russia and NATO. The same logic is behind the widespread assumption that an effective and reliable security system in Europe is impossible without the involvement of both NATO and Russia. "It would be better for everyone if Russia's national security finally becomes an integral part of European security in the 21st century."

A part of the Russian expert community argues that in Moscow and Washington there are political factions that see the crisis in Russia-NATO relations as an opportunity to achieve specific political objectives of the group. The United States needs to maintain the viability of the alliance and have the upper hand in restructuring the European security architecture. For that, an "Eastern threat" narrative is reinforced. In Russia there are forces that prefer a

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<sup>2</sup> Arbatov A.G. The Ten Aporias of Our Time, Theory and Practice of Nuclear Deterrence – Polish, Political Studies 2021. No. 4 P. 88 – 111.

rhetoric of confrontation with the West and the revival of "the psychology of the besieged" to strengthen internal power.

The intensification of US cooperation with European Union Member States under the PESCO Project on Military Mobility, in particular, is perceived as an attempt to increase control over the activity of European partners while putting pressure on the interests of US producers in terms of supplies for the Western European armed forces. The United States is strengthening positions in global arms markets and thinking that it indirectly establishes the desired framework for the European Union's strategic autonomy.<sup>3</sup>

Moscow should not be expected to continue a dialogue with the West on the CBM or the reduction of the TNW unless Washington indicates its willingness to discuss security issues that are priorities for Moscow. However, it is of the view in the Russian expert community that US policymakers will not engage in a substantive discussion on the issues of mutual assurances regarding the deployment of strategic weapons without first reaching agreement with the European side on the nature of US involvement in the European security system. In the short to medium term, Washington is perceived to be focusing more on shaping the so-called "restoration of the transatlantic partnership", as well as on the role of the United States in shaping the new energy balance and redistributing spheres of influence in the global energy market.

In 2022, there are still no visible factors or signs of improvement of Moscow's relationship with the West, where Russia is highly distrustful. The sanctions regime is likely to continue to function fully. However, selective cooperation with Washington is possible, including issues of strategic stability.

There seems to be a consensus in the Russian expert community that NATO will likely continue to shift its center of gravity to Eastern European countries with the possibility of major military supply contracts being signed with regional states, mainly Poland and Romania. In the context of the U.S.-Norway agreement, an increase in the military presence of the United States and its allies in the Arctic, and North Atlantic airspace, is likely.

The European Union's "strategic compass" and NATO's Strategic Concept are expected to reflect a strictly critical view of Russia's foreign policy. New incidents and disagreements, mainly in the area of "common neighborhood", will continue to affect the European Union's relations with Russia.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with former Defense Ministry Official.

Moscow will have to act in Eurasia in an unusual role for itself as a minority shareholder, achieving goals as part of coalitions with the participation of stronger partners. Russian experts are well aware that in the near future any large-scale foreign policy initiative coming from Moscow will be perceived by a significant portion of NATO members with great skepticism.

Logic suggests that there should be political agreements. However, the mutual distrust, suspicion and inertia of confrontation cannot be overcome quickly. The situation in Europe is now even more complicated than it was in the 1990s, and much needs to be started from scratch.

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