

A NATO-Russia Contingency Command

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The time may be opportune to consider establishing a tangible, combined NATO and Russian military entity to jointly face the challenges of the post-9/11 world. The global geostrategic and political landscape has dramatically changed since al Qaeda's surprise attack on 11 September 2001, the United States and NATO's subsequent dismantling of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the total defeat and liberation of Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Diplomatically, Europe—to include Russia—appears to be looking to repair and evolve its damaged US-transatlantic link in the wake of the Iraq War, while US rhetoric pillorying “old Europe” has subsided. All recognize a common threat in transnational terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the need to commonly face a wide range of 21st-century security issues. Additionally, a catalyst for such a NATO-Russia initiative is presenting itself with NATO's break from prior strictures limiting out-of-area deployments and the prospect of substantial US ground forces being repositioned from their bases in Germany to new locations in Eastern Europe. These recent factors, coupled with a steady if uneven improvement in relations between NATO and Russia over the last decade, make consideration of such an initiative both feasible and timely.

The concept of a formal NATO-Russia, headquarters-focused, military relationship was informally raised in December 1996 within the Pentagon's Joint Staff. Titled the “NATO-Russia Contingency Command” (NRCC), the concept was then briefly reviewed within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in January 1997. Shortly afterward it went stillborn within the Department of Defense while a hybrid of this initiative, a “NATO-Russia Brigade” for peacekeeping operations in Europe, was publicly floated

by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in February 1997.¹ No official Russian reaction was noted.

Five years later, in March 2002, the former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International and Security Affairs, Franklin Kramer, resurrected the concept of a joint NATO-Russia Brigade “that could be part of the NATO Allied Expeditionary Force.”² He recognized that much had changed since 1997 within the multilateral NATO and Russian relationship and, equally importantly, in the bilateral US-Russia relationship.

Despite Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov’s assertion in early 2001 that there was “no reason, whatsoever, even hypothetical,” for Western forces to operate from Central Asia,³ NATO-associated forces are continuing to prosecute the war against terrorism in Afghanistan with grudging Russian approval from bases within three of the former Soviet Union’s five Central Asian Republics. This includes the unprecedented rail transport of non-combat logistics from Eastern Europe through Russia and Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan for coalition forces in Afghanistan. The groundwork for this extraordinary geostrategic development was the low-key but assiduous leveraging of a network of contacts and benefits derived from NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, which has been promoting interoperability and transparent civil-military relationships within the region since 1995.

These operations simultaneously crossed two major thresholds that had fettered the prior evolution of NATO-Russian military initiatives. First, the prospect of NATO-linked forces operating out-of-area, especially in Russia’s declared sphere of influence (the so-called “Near Abroad”), and second, Russia’s tacit approval to let US-led coalition forces do so, even assisting the operation with overflight permission and limited information-sharing. These unanticipated events have increasingly merged NATO and Russian security interests, ripening conditions for the development of a substantive combined NATO-Russia headquarters and unit-based initiative.

Lending additional weight to such a concept was Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s statement in September 2002 that “one of the transformational things NATO could do” would be to establish a 15,000- to 20,000-member quick reaction force consisting of troops drawn from the standing NATO force structure, which “would be able to respond to a problem

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in a matter of days rather than weeks or months, and have the kind of agility to deal with the types of problems that exist today.” He added that such an entity could operate as a NATO force, or “with a NATO command structure that then *brings in other countries besides NATO countries*, as we have in Bosnia or Kosovo.”⁴

Distinct from the European Union’s planned 60,000-member Rapid Reaction Force (RRF), this NATO force would be relatively small and designed primarily for rapid out-of-NATO-area deployments of importance to the alliance.⁵ Though Russia was not mentioned in Secretary Rumsfeld’s brief, why not consider inviting Russia to join in the establishment of such a NATO RRF, and to lend substance, credibility, and relevance to the initiative, station its headquarters on Russian soil?

Designing an NRCC

Keeping the title consistent with the original, now dated, 1996-97 concept, this prospective combined military element could be called the NATO-Russia Contingency Command (NRCC). Very simply, as force structure is secondary for this concept, the NRCC’s heart should be a leanly staffed headquarters element capable of rapid augmentation by pre-selected staff personnel to command and control up to a tailorable corps-sized element for exercises and deployments. As the NATO and Russian militaries are already personnel- and resource-stretched, few standing assets should be permanently assigned to the organization, though a wide mix of national dual-hatted and multi-function military and peace support units and detachments could be designated for the NRCC. Select forces from the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps could be slated for the NRCC, as well as forces from other willing and capable NATO-Partner (PfP) nations including those of the European Union. Command of the NRCC could periodically be rotated between NATO and Russia. While one can argue the details, essentially the NRCC could comprise anything its designers and force planners design it to be and the forces and capabilities its members are willing to provide. A key determinant for its early establishment should be the envisioned purpose of the headquarters and whether it should be focused on aggressive and highly mobile conventional military operations or more heavily on supporting sustained, civil-focused humanitarian and peace support missions. The best balance is probably somewhere in-between. Paramount is that the NRCC should be able to tackle the wide range of missions supporting common NATO and Russian security interests across the spectrum of both peace and military operations.

While a NATO-Russia Brigade would be a major step forward both symbolically and functionally for NATO and Russia, a standing headquarter-

ters, or a “command” in NATO parlance, with slated forces and capabilities, would be essential to providing NATO and Russian planners a truly sustainable, flexible asset, responsive to multiple missions across a wide range of peace and military operations. A headquarters of this scale would also provide important planning and logistical “legs,” giving the NRCC the ability to conduct sustained operations, if required, though clearly the preference for such a unit would be to get in, stabilize, and get out as rapidly as possible.

If NATO and Russia were receptive to a more robust standing force, perhaps this is where a combined Russia-NATO Brigade could be established, collocated with the NRCC headquarters near a large Russian airbase capable of accommodating heavy-lift aircraft. The sole requirement for such a brigade’s standing force composition should be that it is entirely air-transportable and, with a small organic air element, capable of putting an initial light infantry battalion on the ground with tactical air support anywhere in south-central Eurasia within 24 hours. As a strawman, such a standing force structure could comprise a light US infantry battalion (airborne or air assault) or possibly a wheeled Stryker battalion, a combined European-NATO light battalion, a light Russian infantry battalion, a mixed NATO-PfP battalion, and a heavier but still air-transportable Russian armor/mechanized battalion with a complement of artillery, engineers, air defense, intelligence, signal, and logistics elements. A larger standing force contribution is unfeasible, particularly for US and NATO forces, due to heavy troop commitments in postwar Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans. The rest of the force structure (non-standing) would consist of a task-organizable menu of dual-mission NATO, Russian, and PfP Partner conventional and special operations units from existing military establishments that periodically train and exercise together.

One specific US wild card and possible catalyst for establishing an NRCC in Russia is the ongoing discussion resulting from the statements of NATO and US European Commander, Marine General James L. Jones, after Operation Iraqi Freedom concerning the possible streamlining and repositioning of US forces within the alliance to include Eastern Europe.⁶ General Jones’s far-reaching statement opens an unprecedented but fleeting opportunity to possibly free some small US force structure to help establish such an NRCC in Russia. It may be more stabilizing and palatable to the Russians if such a stationing in Russia was proposed as part of any overall repositioning of US forces to Eastern Europe. Even if Russia were to reject the proposal, at least they would have been consulted and the United States could continue on with whatever Eastern European repositioning plan is developed. The US standing force for an NRCC could be as small as a company-sized Forward Logistic Element and supporting air element, plus some staff officers assigned to the NRCC headquarters. More robustly, the US contribution could

conceivably include a combat battalion rotated every six months, as in the Balkans, to flesh out a standing Russia-NATO Brigade.

To round out the NRCC would be on-call specialty detachments of experts and personnel well-versed in counterterrorism; counternarcotics; WMD; and environmental, humanitarian, and public health issues in keeping with the work plan of the recently established NATO-Russia Council. For example, specialists representing Minatom (the Russian Atomic Agency) would work in close cooperation with the US Department of Energy, the French Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique, Britain's Atomic Energy Agency, and other NATO equivalents, while Emerkom (the Russian Civilian Emergency Relief Agency) did the same with organizations such as the US Federal Emergency Management Agency and the German Technical Disaster Relief Agency. Such a concept is not beyond the realm of possibility, as indicated by the NATO-Russia disaster relief exercise in September 2002 at Noginsk (near Moscow) which involved over 1,000 NATO, Russian, and PfP Partner personnel.⁷ Furthermore, with the increasing linkages detected between transnational crime and terrorism, the multinational NRCC could credibly support entities such as the prospective Anticrime Group being formed in the sensitive Caucasus region and Central Asia.⁸ Undoubtedly these non-combat but important security and humanitarian missions would be a valuable component of the NRCC's inherently stabilizing mission. Where international interests converge, potentially the NRCC with this wide range of capabilities could, as authorized, support United Nations resolutions requiring a rapidly deployable force to aggressively respond to crises, fulfilling at least partially the UN's vision for a standing contingency force.

Positioning the NRCC in Russia would be important for several reasons. First, it would give Russia—the most critical Eurasian nation affecting the NATO alliance—a tangible, credible international institution on its soil. The fact that it would be a concrete, prestigious military institution, rather than a more conceptual and less-visible economic or political institution, could give its political viability added weight. It also would provide the regional Russian community an infusion of much-needed capital. Further, such a robust international military institution might offer the Russian populace the realization of a strong Western-linked security reassurance—an unorthodox “confidence-building measure”—in a colossal country assailed by many external and internal security issues. With its built-in transparency, the NRCC also would reduce the possibility of a destabilizing and potentially dangerous major-power, 21st-century “great game” focused on the energy resources of south-central Eurasia.

Several broad options exist regarding where to station the NRCC. The details would have to be worked out between Russian and NATO staffs.

Options could include centrally located, southern-oriented Russian cities with good infrastructure such as Volgograd, Ekaterinaburg, or Novosibirsk. Possibly it could be located in Kazakhstan, which has a generally pro-Russian population, or more aggressively in Kyrgyzstan, where separate coalition and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) bases already exist that could conceivably be combined into the NRCC, or could host NRCC-related forward (tactical) headquarters. The drawbacks to Central Asian stationing would be that it would not be in Russia, and it would be closer to regional terrorist hot-spots.

As NATO-Russian interests converge in Eurasia, the presence of such a combined unit in Russia would be an important, tangible multinational brace supporting President Vladimir Putin's declaration of Russia as "an Arch of Stability"⁹ over the so-called Eurasian "Arc of Instability" to Russia's south. Locating the NRCC in Russia also would provide NATO a geographically important jumping-off position toward the bulk of likely south-Eurasian crisis areas. Finally, the presence of a credible over-the-horizon NRCC capability would give strong notice to aggressive regional states and transnational terrorist groups to think twice about fomenting security and economic problems in regionally sensitive areas. These reasons for stationing an NRCC in Russia may resonate in a proud but beleaguered state with few substantial international institutions within its borders.

By any measure, NATO and Russian political-military relations have come a long way since the Cold War. To be sure, there are remaining pressures in the relationship. Since 1997, however, the Russian government has recognized that stability with the West, including enhanced cooperation with NATO, is essential for Russia's development and security. After 9/11, President Putin confirmed this evolving view in a speech at Rice University, stating: "There is no reason whatsoever why we shouldn't pool our efforts together, the Russian Federation and NATO, why we shouldn't do it today. NATO has become a reality of today, and this organization bears serious responsibility for maintaining stability in the world." Acutely aware of the array of emerging transnational WMD threats facing Russia even before 9/11, Putin observed that the NATO alliance was not created to deal with these new, out-of-area threats and that NATO leaders were increasingly cognizant that "if there is a country that can contribute largely to these efforts it is Russia." He then firmly stated, "For our part, we are prepared to expand our cooperation with NATO. And we are prepared to go as far as the Northern Alliance itself is prepared—taking into account, of course, the national interest of the Russian Federation."¹⁰

We must remember that Russia has had a working and increasingly substantive relationship with NATO as an institution since its reluctant entry

into NATO's Partnership for Peace in June 1995. Notwithstanding early command structure challenges, Russia's active military participation with NATO in Bosnia and Kosovo, the landmark signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act in March 1997, and the May 2002 establishment of the NATO-Russia Council in Brussels with a NATO liaison office in Moscow significantly increased the substance and credibility of day-to-day contact between NATO and Russia. This increase in transparency enabled NATO and Russia to weather the friction leading up to the first round of NATO enlargement and, more critically, the tensions that surfaced during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and the resultant brinkmanship at Pristina Airport in 1999.

Building on this growing trust, an NRCC would substantively deepen Russia's military relations with NATO and help establish the conditions for a stable and prosperous greater European community while also strengthening Russia's military links with the United States. It may not be too optimistic to speculate that the pragmatic Putin government, having discerned the convergence of NATO and Russian security interests in Eurasia, might be willing to take the next big step in the NATO-Russian relationship by co-founding the establishment of something resembling the NRCC.

Converging Concerns

The stability of south-central Eurasia—which comprises the Middle East, Caspian Basin, Central Asia, Caucasus, and the Near East—is of vital interest to Russia, NATO, and most of the oil-dependent global community. Central Asia in particular, and the overall Caspian Basin, have become Eurasian “key terrain.” It will be imperative in the future that the current and envisioned ground and inland-sea oil and natural gas pipelines which crisscross Central Asia into Europe, the Middle East, and Asia remain open and unconstrained. Much as a strong naval presence is needed to cover commerce-bearing sea-lanes, a capable, quick-response ground and air element must be ready to respond to potential threats against important Central Asian land routes that traverse different and potentially competing states, which do not always have full control of their internal boundaries, and in which significant and potentially disruptive transnational influences abound. While Russian policy will retain primacy in the five former Soviet Central Asian Republics, the fact remains that these are now sovereign states that will deal with matters as their perceived national interests dictate. As Russian, US, and NATO-member energy companies continue to develop the region, and as both Russian and international dependence on the region's production grows, converging interests will knit their security imperatives even further, enhancing the need for a reliable multilateral security entity to protect the region and its oil transport routes. None exists in the region today.

Additionally, south-central Eurasia is a culturally diverse, overpopulated, desperately poor region. These negative drivers make it a core breeding ground for opportunistic, resource-hungry states, and for malignant transnational religious fundamentalism, the growth of which would be inimical to regional order and stability. Furthermore, parts of the vast region are an ecological disaster zone, with growing populations and limited water resources that contribute to the fundamental instability of the area. Until 9/11, Russia predominantly faced this daunting security and stabilization task alone—and, indeed, did not want any outside interference in the region. Today the security environment for Russia has changed. Despite protestations from a loud and vocal Russian minority, and while Russia may not officially embrace foreign security involvement in her traditional sphere of influence, the Putin government may cautiously welcome some security-linked burden-sharing from mostly like-minded states that simply desire stability in order to ensure uninterrupted commerce. After all, Russia, with the largest energy stake in Central Asia, would benefit most from this stability.

Another area of convergence is that both NATO and Russian military strategies and doctrine are evolving. While NATO's official *raison d'être* is as an Article 5 collective defense organization, in reality the current peace operations in the Balkans and involvement in the anti-terrorist war in south-central Eurasia clearly show NATO's increasing commitment to out-of-area operations deemed important to maintain alliance stability, relevance, and prosperity. The key change is that this includes regional security far from NATO's geographical borders, a huge psychological shift by the alliance toward 21st-century relevance. Former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson punctuated this thought by broadly defining defense against terrorism as committing forces "as and where required" to be able to "deter, defend, disrupt, and protect against terrorist attack, or threats of attack directed from abroad, and to act against such terrorism." Acknowledging in May 2003 the changed world in which NATO provides 95 percent of the forces constituting the International Security and Augmentation Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan,¹¹ he stated, "This is NATO taking on a multinational operation a continent and a half away from where it was previously restricted by its neighbors."¹² Concerning NATO's former focus on the Cold War border-oriented Article 5 (common defense) mission, the Secretary General declared:

So much for the sterile "out of area" debate that, as many of you will remember, hamstrung NATO throughout much of the early 1990s. . . . Countering terrorism is at the heart of NATO's new relationship with Russia. September 11th confirmed what we already knew. That the Cold War alignment of adversaries is dead and buried. We need Russia to face new and common threats, just as

much as Russia needs us. Russia is now willing to play an honest, cooperative role in working with us. . . . *Perhaps the most striking scenario would be future operations involving NATO, its Partners including Russia, and other members of a grand coalition.*¹³

Russian strategy and doctrine are also evolving toward the same general conclusion but along a different path. One must not forget that the Russians have been involved in an uninterrupted series of nasty wars, conflicts and anti-terrorist actions since their 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. The 1991 breakup of the Soviet empire offered no respite; in fact, their commitments since then toward fighting these “small wars,” especially complex, controversial Chechnya, and conducting other peace and stability operations such as those in Tajikistan and Abkhazia, have multiplied. They’ve done this with a much reduced but still desperately under-resourced military, ruthlessly cut out of the bloated corpus that was the Cold War Soviet military. While costs and the Soviet breakup were the primary reason for its defense cuts, Russia deems as essential its planned move toward a new strategic posture meeting the need for “collective rapid deployment forces,”¹⁴ capable of conducting smaller-scale, highly mobile counterterrorist and peace support operations, while maintaining a still-credible strategic nuclear deterrence.

Hurdles to Overcome

Establishing this proposed NATO-Russia Contingency Command won’t be politically easy either in a NATO-Russia or, alternatively, in a Russia-US context. We don’t know how the Russian security establishment would respond to any major NATO-Russia military initiative, especially with substantial US forces now in Iraq and Afghanistan. While the Putin government has made significant strides toward fully normalized relations with NATO and the United States, there is still considerable drag to the process by an entrenched Russian foreign policy and security elite, most of whom grew up and prospered as Cold Warriors in the former USSR. Some are linked to the more radical and shrill hard-right “Red/Brown” factions associated with Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Communist Party leader Gennadi Zyuganov. In November 2002, Zyuganov attacked Putin’s policy toward the United States, and by association NATO, declaring, “Putin has no policy toward the north, south, east, or west—he just goes with the flow [of Washington].”¹⁵ Such critics tend to drown out the more moderate, open-minded Russians who could support an NRCC in Russia.

Another vocal paladin of the opposition is Colonel General Leonid Ivashov, who at a May 2002 press conference commented that statements after 9/11 regarding a possible strategic alliance between Russia and the United

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States were “over optimistic” and that the strategic goals of the two nations were in some instances fundamentally different. While acknowledging that the war against terrorism “seems to be a unifying and integrative task,” he added that the United States “is using the struggle against terrorism to establish—and let us be frank—its world domination.” Expressing the deep-rooted skepticism held by many senior Russian officers toward NATO, Ivashov stated that the alliance is “an instrument of US policy,” and then rhetorically asked how would NATO generals with their mismatched military “instrument” deal competently with threats such as terrorism, drugs, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. About NATO enlargement he ominously stated, “This is quite a powerful military organization moving toward the Russian borders,” adding his opinion that because NATO-linked military contingents were located next to Russia, “Russia’s geopolitical situation has deteriorated after September 11, after the unchecked support for US policy.”¹⁶

Seemingly reinforcing Ivashov’s views was an Agence France Press poll conducted in May 2002 which revealed that 54 percent of Russians thought NATO still harbored “aggression” toward Russia while 24 percent believed it was only a defensive alliance.¹⁷ Another survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Foundation in December 2002—significant in that it was conducted after the NATO decision to invite seven nations to become new members, including the former Baltic Republics—indicated that 56 percent of Russians supported closer relations with NATO while 32 percent were opposed. Even so, 48 percent still thought that NATO was an aggressive military block, with elderly Russians, not surprisingly, being the most distrustful.¹⁸ Although these are narrow samplings, these polls indicate that there would be considerable disagreement within Russia regarding any establishment of a NATO-Russia operational headquarters. Not fully reflected in the polls is the probable receptiveness of an entire new generation of young military officers, however. Along with a growing and more moderate middle class in Russia, they would likely embrace closer relations with NATO as long as it was perceived to be in Russia’s national interest.

It is important to distinguish between the potential creation of a Russia-US military entity rather than a NATO-Russia construct. The security relationship between the United States and Russia seems to have shifted somewhat since the unifying days after 9/11, although it is still substantially better than after the confrontation over Kosovo in 1999. The long-term US-Russian fallout, if any, after the Iraq War is still to be fully discerned. The paradox is that Russia appears to have recognized NATO as an increasingly important bridge to the West and an important moderating influence on US security policy since the Bush Administration's advocacy of a preemptive, and if necessary, unilateral strategy, as demonstrated by Operation Iraqi Freedom and the internationally enervating diplomatic chaos that preceded America's justified action.

The influential Russian defense analyst Alexander Konovalov buttressed this thought by writing in *RIA Novosti*: "The future of NATO depends not upon the number of new member states but upon a new model of relationship with Russia," adding that the United States "tends to act unilaterally in the world and is sure that the state has all necessary military and economic power and political will to act without NATO's assistance." In his view, NATO was no longer obsessively and negatively perceived by Russians as "the only player" in the world and "had moved from the central scene of political debates" due to improving Russian stability and the changes in the post 9/11 world.¹⁹

In sum, while Russia may feel compelled to enhance its security relationship with the United States, it may prefer to do so in a NATO context, which may make any proposed bilateral Russia-US unit initiative problematic and a NATO-Russia link more attractive. While not ideal, this still would benefit the United States because it would positively and constructively bind most of the nations comprising a stronger, more independent-minded European Union with the United States. It would thereby prevent fragmentation within NATO, and prevent further EU and US polarization that would be counterproductive for both. This is especially important after the hard feelings evinced by some European allies over the Iraq War. An even stronger linkage between Russia and NATO, provided by an NRCC on Russian soil, with the prospect of an eventual invitation to join the alliance, would bring Russia a more constructive and integrated approach to Eurasian security while ensuring that the important transatlantic link with the United States is maintained. It would build on the already functioning and increasingly substantive NATO-Russia relationship in existence since 1995.

Establishing and staffing an NRCC would undoubtedly present challenges. As already noted, however, the biggest obstacles would be primarily psychological, mostly linked to Cold War and Great Power ideological baggage. The operational NRCC hurdles, once one gets past perceptions

and politics, would be those linked to NATO and Russian military interoperability, especially in regard to language, communications and equipment compatibility, intelligence-sharing, and developing common tactical techniques and procedures. Addressing these problems would require meshing doctrines and a robust on-site and distance-learning training program, coupled with periodic deployment exercises. The heartening fact is that many of these operational and tactical issues have been successfully tackled in the Balkans and by PfP exercises and information exchanges.

Funding for an NRCC ideally would come from all nations involved, including NATO infrastructure funds. Russia could fund the bulk of its NRCC contribution by providing the installation, physical plant, and lift for the NRCC's stationing in Russia. Clearly the headquarters and housing facilities would have to be improved up to NATO standards, especially if some NATO dependents accompany longer-term NATO service members to Russia, which would add permanence to the endeavor. The strategic importance of establishing an NRCC should warrant a robust NATO and Russian budget; however, the flexible nature of the command, with few standing assets, should not pose an excessive fiscal burden.

The NRCC's command structure, arguably the most important operational aspect of this concept, would have to be carefully built on a mutual NATO-Russian consensus, while remaining sensitive but not hostage to direction from capitals. As we learned in the Balkans, this command link would evolve based on experience and lessons-learned to determine the right combination of Russian, NATO-member, and NATO organizational components to make it work efficiently.

There undoubtedly would be times when the political or military realities of a proposed intervention would preclude NATO or Russia from using the combined NRCC for a proposed contingency operation. It would be naïve to assume otherwise, especially with Russia's sensitivity to operations in her geographical backyard, and the reluctance by some NATO members to become involved in operations deemed politically sensitive—for example, in a country or region where there may be disagreement about whether factions represent an internal independence movement or terrorists.

Former US Secretary of State James Baker summarized this consideration best in his thought-provoking article "Russia in NATO?" in the Winter 2002 issue of *The Washington Quarterly*:

As an aside, at some point consideration should be given to amending the NATO charter (1) to provide that one accepted or agreed goal or purpose of the alliance would be "the maintenance of peace and stability on the *Eurasian* continent" and (2) to provide that the alliance could act with less-than-unanimous

consent—that is, a stated percentage might be required, but *nations could opt out of actions in which they did not want to participate.*”²⁰

This is an important concept. If specific NATO countries and Russia were to disagree over the appropriateness of a proposed deployment, conceivably national components of the NRCC could still act as a “coalition of the willing” as long as Russia was involved and the mission supported general UN principles. This is uncharted territory.

The Future

Some might ask, Why not formally invite Russia now to join the NATO alliance, especially if a NATO-Russia command were to be established on Russian soil? The simple answer is that neither NATO nor Russia is yet ready for this huge political leap. It would be difficult in the near term for NATO to develop the consensus to commit to an Article 5 obligation which, while unlikely, could conceivably flash inside, along, or nearby numerous points on Russia’s vast southern-southeastern periphery. While the United States, Britain, or France, each with worldwide global interests, could possibly step up one day to support inclusion of Russia into the alliance, it will be a particularly hard sell in the near term for the smaller, Eurocentric NATO members—which now include three prior Warsaw Pact members and, soon, seven states from territory behind the former Iron Curtain—to sign up for the collective defense of the Russian colossus. Additionally, Russia’s first-generation, post-Cold-War culture is not yet psychologically prepared for such a major political step. It is not impossible to surmise, however, that the establishment of a credible and robust NRCC, with the resultant deepening of military and political relations between NATO and Russia, could gradually help soften both NATO-member and Russian opposition to Russia’s full inclusion in the alliance.

Another spin-off of establishing an NRCC and locating it on Russian soil is that it would bring a Russian-blended NATO tangibly closer to China and Northeast Asia—areas with regionally powerful and polarized nation-states desperately in need of links with, and influence from, an international military security institution with democratic principles, bureaucracy, doctrine, and resources. Some might argue that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) would feel strategically encircled by placing NATO forces on Russian soil. Such a stationing, however, could conceivably someday assist in steadying parts of the PRC’s unstable western periphery and the overall region, especially if Chinese forces were invited to participate in select NRCC exercises and, later, possibly in specific regional missions. This intriguing thought is borne out by Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan’s November 2002 state-

ment to Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov that “NATO must make greater efforts to fight terrorism, since only this can help support peace and stability,” to which an unidentified NATO official replied that Tang “basically said they’d like to have a dialogue about what NATO’s philosophy is, how you see common threats and what NATO is up to in Central Asia.”²¹

There would doubtless be numerous arguments against the establishment of an NRCC. Foremost would be the standard assumption still held by many in Russia and in NATO that the majority of the Russian leadership and people remain reflexively against any robust military link with NATO. This doctrinaire view has changed substantially since the USSR’s breakup, however, and it will continue to positively evolve despite inevitable “tactical” diplomatic setbacks. The current Iraq imbroglio and Chechnya-Georgia sensitivities in the Caucasus remain troubling—starkly exacerbated for Russia by grisly terrorist suicide attacks in Moscow—but that is all the more reason to have as much NATO-Russian military engagement and concomitant dialog as possible. By any measure, the NATO-Russia political relationship has matured substantially. Evidence is provided by the overall NATO-Russia military cooperation in the Balkans, the new NATO-Russia Council, and, most critically, in the global war on terrorism.

Another argument will be that creating the NRCC would be redundant, adding yet another rapid reaction force to the several in existence or being contemplated. Establishing the headquarters in isolation would indeed be redundant; however, Secretary Rumsfeld’s proposed NATO Rapid Reaction Force could include the NRCC, perhaps as a forward-located headquarters, using dual-hatted elements from the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps and possibly parts of the European Union’s RRF to flesh it out during a crisis or commitment. The possible repositioning of US forces to Eastern Europe also presents a unique and fleeting opportunity to truly transform the alliance’s relationship with Russia by including Russia—if she accepts—as part of this repositioning. Furthermore, the NRCC, with its strong international and expeditionary flavor, location, and heavy Russian involvement, could mitigate somewhat the oft-stated desire to develop a standing UN contingency unit by being responsive to UN-sanctioned missions, reinforcing the credibility and solvency of the world’s troubled but still primary international security and humanitarian organization.

Finally, it will certainly be argued that an NRCC would be seen as a NATO (read US) initiative designed to impinge on Russian sovereignty by controlling Russia’s ability to unilaterally commit its military to protect its vital interests. The Russians would still maintain their unattached forces in support of their own national interests, however, and with full transparency and fair burden-sharing could possibly see such an organization on Russian soil as

useful and reassuring because it would clearly bring the prosperous West and its military capability closer to a Russia that is plagued by a plethora of nontraditional and, to a lesser extent, conventional threats along its periphery.

President Putin clearly, despite a loud vocal minority, has aligned Russia with the West for now—as revealed by Russia’s carefully balanced and non-strident opposition to Operation Iraqi Freedom, quiet acquiescence to NATO forces in Central Asia, and acceptance of a second round of NATO enlargement. It is also evident that both Russia and NATO will continue to face a multitude of related security threats—ranging from terrorist, military, and WMD threats to ecological and humanitarian concerns. Rather than facing them alone, why shouldn’t the first major military responders to a Eurasian regional crisis be a mixed NATO-Russia military and civil force, as long as the intervention is militarily relevant and politically defensible?

Once committed forces are reduced in Southwest Asia, the ground will be set for NATO and Russia to consider taking the next major military step in their fundamentally stabilizing relationship: the establishment of a NATO-Russia Contingency Command based in Russia.

NOTES

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4. CNN interview, “Rumsfeld Plans to Propose NATO Rapid Reaction Force,” 21 September 2002, http://www.usembassy.it/file2002_09/alia/a2092001.htm. Italics added.
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