



Squaring the Circle: Is a Balanced Deterrence and Dialogue Approach toward Russia Workable?¹

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Dialogue between Russia and NATO is indispensable to limit the risk of unintended military confrontation amid increased tension. Without dialogue, Alliance cohesion is also at stake. To develop a balance between deterrence and dialogue, it is necessary to understand how the two actions relate to each other, what lessons the West can learn from the past, and what goals it wants to achieve apart from limiting the risk of confrontation.

Dialogue is an essential element of crisis prevention and conflict resolution. The security dilemma, a term well understood in international relations theories, indicates that attempts to reinforce one's own security can be seen as threatening by others and dialogue is necessary to limit the risk of confrontation.² There also are numerous examples from game theory that indicate that without dialogue, perfectly rational players can get into a spiral of escalation that can lead to a clash.³

But conflict usually reflects a broader strategic situation in which the players are determined to achieve incompatible strategic goals. Both the theory of negotiations and theory of deterrence indicate that dialogue can be an effective instrument in achieving one's goals without confrontation if supported by the ability to resist pressure from the opponent. Such pressure can be neutralised by the ability to prevent the adversary from achieving his objectives or by threatening him with such significant potential costs that his aggression would prove not beneficial.⁴ At the same time, channels of communication are necessary to message the rival about red lines for the defender and the consequences if crossed. Both theory and practice also indicate that insisting on dialogue at all costs can be considered by an opponent as a sign of weakness, as appeasement, and increases rather than minimises the risk of conflict. An actor who wants to

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² R. Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1978, pp. 167–214.

³ T.C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Harvard University Press, 1980.

⁴ T.C. Morgan, *Untying the Knot of War: A Bargaining Theory of International Crises*, The University of Michigan Press, 1994; G.H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defence: Toward a Theory of National Security*, Princeton University Press, 1961; P.M. Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis*, Sage Library of Social Research, 1977.

improve its position in the international system usually tests the resolve of its opponents, and if the response is perceived to be weak, or worse, sees it as appeasement, may try further to maximise its gains.

Dialogue also can be used to manipulate rivals and undermine their determination. This can be effective especially against alliances, mainly by sowing discord among the members. Agreeing common goals and strategy is usually a time-consuming and politically complicated process, and hence manipulation can be effective.

The threat of suspending dialogue can be exploited by both sides of the conflict. In some situations, one or both parties may want to break off the dialogue to demonstrate their readiness to increase the risk of conflict, and by doing so, to coerce the other side to make concessions or change behaviour.

Maintaining Institutional Memory: Dialogue during the Cold War

In the Cold War, dialogue with the Soviet Union was the subject of serious controversy in NATO, and finding a balance in policy between detente and deterrence was a constant challenge that strained Alliance cohesion.⁵ The USSR, which imposed control over Eastern and Central Europe, refused any discussion about the subjugation of neighbouring states but was interested in talks about regional security architecture that would have removed the United States from Europe. If successful, the Soviet Union's dominance in military power would have given it the ability to intimidate Western Europe and further the expansion of communism.

Since European NATO members were unable (and sometimes unwilling) to develop conventional forces large enough to balance the Soviet power, they had to rely on the nuclear deterrence provided by the United States. At the same time, they were afraid that bilateral contacts between the U.S. and the USSR on limitations of strategic nuclear weapons and arms control could lead to a weakening of American security guarantees for Europe and erosion of deterrence. To avoid total dependence on the U.S., they pursued dialogue with the USSR as a means of lowering the tensions and promoting their own interests. For the Federal Republic of Germany, the channels of communication were crucial to increasing the chances of reunification of the German state in the future.⁶ For Norway and Denmark, it was important to balance their membership in NATO and gain additional room for political manoeuvre with the USSR. Both countries self-imposed several restrictions on the stationing of conventional and nuclear forces of the Alliance on their territories, which raised concern about their readiness to participate in a collective defence mission should Article 5 of the Washington Treaty be invoked.⁷ A number of other states had their own national attitudes towards deterrence and dialogue with the Soviet Union.

Such uncoordinated policies threatened the cohesion of NATO and the credibility of deterrence policy. The extreme example was France, which withdrew from the NATO military structures, opening new opportunities for the Kremlin to sow division among the Western states.⁸ NATO decided to limit the risk of such detrimental developments by approving the Harmel report in 1967, which recommended that deterrence and dialogue become the two pillars of NATO policy. There were still differences, though. The U.S. wanted concrete talks on hard military security, which could lead to the reduction of armed forces in Europe,⁹ whereas Europeans and the USSR were more interested in political dialogue.

⁵ A. Locher, C. Nuenlist, "What role for Nato? Conflicting western perceptions of détente, 1963–65," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, no. 2, 2002, pp. 185–208.

⁶ G. Niedhart, "The East West Problem as seen from Berlin: Willy Brandt's Early Ostpolitik," in: W. Loth (ed.) *Europe, Cold War and Coexistence 1953–1965*, Frank Cass, 2004, pp. 281–289.

⁷ M. Petersson, H.L. Saxi, "Shifted Roles: Explaining Danish and Norwegian Alliance Strategy 1949–2009," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 36, no. 6, 2013, pp. 761–788.

⁸ A. Stent, *Franco Soviet Relations from de Gaulle to Mitterand. Report to National Council for Soviet and East European Research*, Harvard University, March 1989.

⁹ P.T. Hopmann, "The US and the CSCE/OSCE," *Helsinki Monitor*, no. 2, 2000, pp. 20–36.

Different visions were reconciled when the U.S. managed to convince the USSR to start negotiations on force reductions (Mutual Balanced Force Reductions, or MBFR) in exchange for the international security conference (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, or CSCE). For the Soviets, the major aim of the conference was to get international recognition of its post-war sphere of influence but it also provided an opportunity to test the unity and resolve of democratic states. The conference also provided a framework for coordinated negotiations with the USSR. Although NATO had to put a lot of effort into developing a single negotiating position, the effort paid off. The Allies managed to negotiate from a position of strength and widened the scope of the talks to human rights.¹⁰ In the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, all participants of the CSCE committed themselves to, i.a., the inviolability of frontiers, sovereignty of states, peaceful settlement of disputes, refraining from threatening the use of force, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.¹¹ Not only did dialogue with the USSR prove necessary for NATO to maintain cohesion but it also opened the way for the post-Cold War European security architecture.

Dialogue with Russia as a Pillar of Post-Cold War Strategy

Since the collapse of the USSR, dialogue with Russia has become even more important for NATO cohesion. Initially, the primary goal for the U.S. and many other NATO members was to support or at least not to derail the reforms in Russia. When NATO decided to admit new members, it also agreed that the open-door policy would be only one of the pillars of the new security architecture in Europe based on CSCE principles approved in the Helsinki Final Act and confirmed in the Paris Charter in 1990.¹² The other would be a military transformation of the Alliance so it could provide security outside its own territory and building a partnership with Russia. The three elements—open-door policy, military transformation of the Alliance, and new relations with Russia—were closely interlinked. NATO moved away from a strategy based on forward defence towards one based on the ability to deploy troops to a threatened region. It decided not to station permanently significant combat units and military infrastructure on the territory of the new members, a principle that was agreed in the NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security signed in 1997, before the first candidates were invited by the Alliance. The same document also established the Permanent Joint Council (PJC) for regular political dialogue between Russia and NATO. Although representatives of NATO states and Russia were sitting at the same table, Russia was mainly informed about NATO's decisions. In 2002, the Alliance decided to grant Russia a special status by replacing the PJC with the NATO-Russia Council. This time, Russia could participate in the decision-making process in areas of common interest. The NRC became an important forum for discussions of non-proliferation and arms control, missile defence, nuclear doctrine and strategy, military-to-military cooperation, scientific cooperation, and defence industrial cooperation. A number of practical forms of cooperation were established, such as on combating terrorism, countering piracy, submarine crew search and rescue, exchanging information on suspicious civilian aircraft activities, and developing the capacity for joint action during civil emergencies.

However, from Moscow's perspective, developing cooperation and building partnership with NATO served different interests. Russia consistently opposed NATO enlargement and presented the Alliance as its main strategic challenge, rival, and even threat. Although Moscow was ready to cooperate with NATO in some areas, Vladimir Putin revealed as early as in 2001 that such cooperation should enable Russia to gain influence over the Alliance's decisions.¹³ The Russian approach to cooperation with the West in the aftermath of the attacks on the U.S. on 11 September 2001 was a clear example of the implementation of

¹⁰ J.G. Kerr, *The Road to Helsinki: An Analysis of European International Relations Leading to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe*, iUniverse, 2015.

¹¹ *Helsinki Final Act*, OSCE, 1 August 1975, www.osce.org.

¹² *Charter of Paris for a New Europe*, OSCE, 21 November 1990, www.osce.org.

¹³ *Speech and Answers to Questions at Rice University*, Houston, 14 November 2001, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21400>.

this policy of seeking influence through cooperation.¹⁴ Since NATO was ready to treat the country as a partner but not to give Kremlin the right to veto its decisions, the then-president Dmitry Medvedev submitted in 2008 the proposal of a European security treaty that would effectively give Russia the power to block the sovereign decisions of states close to its borders.¹⁵ Following NATO's announcement that Ukraine and Georgia "will one day become members of the Alliance," Russia fought a war with Georgia, which resulted in the strengthening of Russian control of the separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In response to the Russian attack on Georgia, NATO froze most political and military cooperation with Russia and contacts within the NRC. However, after nine months, the Alliance returned to "business as usual" in relations with Moscow. This was caused by a number of factors. Russia's offensive was generally perceived as disproportionate but was also believed to have been provoked by a Georgian attack on separatists and Russian troops in South Ossetia, which led to disagreements among NATO members over the strategic consequences of the conflict. France and Germany, which had close ties to Russia, were pressing for normalisation of relations with Moscow. At the end of 2008, Barack Obama won the presidential election in the U.S. and the new administration was determined to pursue a new opening (the "reset") with Russia. NATO needed Russia's help in delivering supplies to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. Last but not least, the Alliance was also determined to maintain cooperation on counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and combating piracy and drug trafficking.

At the Lisbon summit in 2010, the Alliance adopted a new strategic concept that maintained collective defence as one of three alliance missions, in addition to building collective security and deepening partnerships.¹⁶ NATO declared its readiness to build a strategic partnership with Russia on the basis of reciprocity. The document stressed that deterrence remains the core element of the overall strategy, but the Alliance does not perceive any country as its adversary.¹⁷ Such a statement was a clear signal that NATO's deterrence posture still will be based on the ability to send reinforcements, with limited planning and almost non-existent training to perform such a mission. At the same time, two out of three missions—collective security and partnerships—were to stimulate the development of relations with Russia, which clearly remained a strategic priority for the Alliance.

In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and provided support to separatists in eastern Ukraine while President Putin repeatedly stressed the need to create a new security architecture based on a balance of power between the major powers.¹⁸ The Alliance once again suspended practical cooperation with Russia and contacts at the ambassadorial level within the NRC ceased. The suspension of cooperation was a political signal that NATO was ready to defend the order based on the principles established in Helsinki. Although the NRC was never suspended formally, it was difficult to agree a shared agenda.¹⁹

At the Wales summit in 2014, NATO signalled that the policy of deterrence will be supported with the improved ability to move troops to the most exposed and vulnerable regions.²⁰ Since Russia used threats against NATO members and did not respect the confidence- and security-building measures, e.g., by

¹⁴ See, for instance: J.M. Godzimirski, *11 September 2001 and the shift in Russia's policy towards NATO*, The Norwegian Atlantic Committee, 2002, www.atlanterhavskomiteen.no; J.M. Godzimirski, "Russia and NATO. Community of values or community of interests?," in: J. Hedenskog et al. (eds), *Russia as a Great Power: Dimensions of Russian Security*, Routledge, 2005, pp. 57–80.

¹⁵ "The Draft of the European Security Treaty," 29 November 2009, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6152>; Y. Fedorov, "Medvedev's Initiative: A Trap for Europe?," *Research Paper*, no. 2, 2009, Association for International Affairs, www.amo.cz.

¹⁶ *Active Engagement, Modern Defence. Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon*, 19–20 November 2010, www.nato.int.

¹⁷ In fact, NATO's capability to perform the collective defence mission in that period was constantly eroding. See: M. Terlikowski (ed.), "Trends in Force Posture in Europe," *PISM Strategic File*, no. 1 (85), June 2017, www.pism.pl.

¹⁸ *Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club*, 24 October 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>; Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, 27 October 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53151>.

¹⁹ A. Monaghan, *No Going Back to Business as Usual for NATO and Russia*, Chatham House, 25 April 2016, www.chathamhouse.org.

²⁰ *Wales Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales*, 5 September 2014, www.nato.int.

organising unannounced exercises without observers (four “snap” exercises in 2013, eight in 2014, and 20 in 2015),²¹ NATO decided to deploy small battlegroups (of about 1,000 soldiers each) to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.²² Even assuming the low probability of open aggression, the Allies could not completely exclude that Russia would resort to military force, either as a consequence of some military incident or just out of a calculation that NATO does not have the political will to defend its territory.

But dialogue with Russia once again proved to be an indispensable element of NATO cohesion when a number of the Allies wanted to demonstrate that they were ready to invest in deterrence but also to use all possible mechanisms to lower the tensions and avoid conflict. Before the summit in Warsaw, NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg used the Munich Conference in February 2016 to disclose that the Alliance was developing a combined response of “deterrence and dialogue.”²³ The latter was necessary, according to Stoltenberg, to “promote strategic stability,” “clarify intentions and expectations,” “reduce the risks of incidents and accidents,” and “avoid escalation.” During the meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Stoltenberg stressed that the agenda for a possible NRC meeting must include Russia’s actions in Ukraine and mechanisms for military transparency and risk limitation. A meeting at the ambassadorial level was subsequently held on 20 April 2016. While Stoltenberg underlined that the meeting did not “mean that we are back to business as usual,”²⁴ the Russian ambassador to NATO, Alexander Grushko, suggested that returning to confidence-building measures between NATO and Russia was impossible as long as NATO was continuing its “build-up” on the Russian border.²⁵

This first meeting of the NRC since the outbreak of war in Ukraine brought rather meagre results, but the political contacts in NRC were resumed and the talks continued even after the NATO Summit in Warsaw in July 2016. Two additional NRC meetings were held in 2016, one in the first half of 2017, and another one on 13 July 2017. The main focus of this dialogue was the conflict in Ukraine, risk limitation, and the situation in Afghanistan. When commenting on the recent NRC meeting, the NATO Secretary General underlined the importance of dialogue in the current situation, characterised by the relatively high level of tension in relations between the two. He expressed satisfaction that both parties decided to increase the level of transparency by providing in advance more information on upcoming military exercises—*Zapad 2017* in the case of Russia, and *Trident Javelin 2017* in the case of NATO. He also reiterated that Russia and NATO hold different views on the causes of the crisis and ways to solve the disagreements but underlined that the need for dialogue was therefore even greater, as this was the best way to avoid the risk of misunderstanding, miscalculation, and unintended escalation.

National Approaches towards Russia: Poland and Norway

With NATO-Russia tensions flying high, bilateral relations may offer an important avenue of communication and de-escalation. Poland and Norway offer two different approaches to the risks and opportunities associated with bilateral relations and cooperation. There are at least two common factors influencing the strategic thinking in both countries, which are very similar in the size of their territory and economic potential. The first is their membership of NATO, which provides them with a higher level of security; the second is that they both have a land border with Russia, a country that over the past decade has improved its military capabilities and shown a willingness to use military instruments in pursuit of its strategic goals. What makes the border question in the case of Norway even more challenging is that Russia has more than 60% of its sea-based nuclear arsenal deployed only slightly more than 100 km from the Norwegian border. From the perspective of Warsaw, the situation is also challenging. On the one hand, there is the Russian

²¹ D.P. Jankowski, T.K. Kowalik, “The Dangerous Tool of Russian Military Exercises,” CEPA, 9 May 2017, <http://cepa.org>.

²² *Warsaw Summit Communiqué Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8–9 July 2016*, www.nato.int.

²³ *Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Munich Security Conference*, 13 February 2016, www.nato.int.

²⁴ J. Stoltenberg, *Doorstep statement by NATO Secretary General following the NATO-Russia Council meeting*, 20 April 2016, www.nato.int.

²⁵ Aleksander Grushko Interview with *Ria Novosti* 20 April 2016, <https://ria.ru/world/20160420/1415742107.html>.

presence, including a military presence, in the Kaliningrad region, where Russia has also recently deployed part of its very effective military capabilities; on the other hand, Poland feels exposed along its border with Belarus, which serves as a common border of the Russia-Belarus Union State and part of Russia's external strategic perimeter. The so-called Suwalki Gap has replaced the Fulda Gap²⁶ as the main concern of NATO military planners and the recent deployment of NATO troops in the region is to help the Alliance address this regional strategic challenge.²⁷

It is, however, their historical experience and perceptions of Russia that play a major part in shaping their relations with the big neighbour in this period of high tension. When Poland was a member of the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War, it could closely watch the Kremlin's tactics of exploiting divisions among the western powers to strengthen its political and military potential. Today, Warsaw is weary of Moscow using the same tactics and using the dialogue with NATO for putting a wedge between the Allies. Hence, after Russia's annexation of Crimea, Warsaw has emphasised that dialogue in the NATO-Russia Council should be possible on the condition that it is based on reciprocity, which meant that the discussion should not only include Russian complaints about NATO policies but also Russia's role in the ongoing war in Ukraine. On the bilateral level, relations are at a historical low. Polish policy of limiting Russian political, energy, and military influence over Central Europe and support for the closer integration of Georgia and Ukraine with NATO and the EU has traditionally formed the main areas of disagreement. Poland also irked Russia by agreeing to host elements of the U.S. ballistic missile defence system. Some new issues have appeared in recent years. Russia has not returned the wreckage of the presidential plane that crashed in Smolensk in 2010. In July 2016, Poland suspended a small border traffic agreement with the Russian enclave Kaliningrad, which remains suspended due to the militarisation of the enclave, narrowing the channels of political, business, and people-to-people communication. Poland also adopted legislation that allows for the removal of Soviet-era monuments that present Soviet troops as liberators.²⁸ Although Poland has tried to maintain the dialogue on difficult issues by sending officials for talks to Moscow, these efforts have not been reciprocated yet.²⁹

Norway, in turn, perceives bilateral contacts as an essential part of a strategy of maintaining interdependencies, which can offer Russia an incentive to adhere to the status quo and limit the risk of confrontation.

The need to find the balance between deterrence and reassurance was one of the fundamentals of Norwegian policy towards Russia prior to the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine. In the aftermath of the crisis, Norway decided to rebalance these two key elements of its strategy. More attention is paid today to the element of deterrence, which is epitomised by the Norwegian decision taken in 2016 to allow a quasi-permanent deployment of U.S. troops on Norwegian soil and by the Norwegian policy of upgrading the country's military capabilities. As to the policy of reassurance, today it is mostly about reassuring not Russia but rather Norway's NATO allies that they can count on Norway as a reliable partner that will meet its commitments.

However, Norway has also decided to keep some communication lines with Russia open to minimise the risk of accidental conflict. Norway has also decided not to withdraw from the small border traffic agreement with Russia to facilitate people-to-people contacts and lower the level of tension along the 196 km-long border. Keeping communication with Russia open can be interpreted as an extension of the policy of reassurance while the decision on the continuation of small border traffic may be viewed as keeping in place the policy of engagement that has been a characteristic feature of the Norwegian approach towards Russia in the post-Cold war period. Also, that Norway has re-embarked on the policy of direct contacts

²⁶ The area running from Leipzig toward Frankfurt am Main along the Fulda River. Due to its geographical conditions, the land corridor could have been exploited during the Cold War by Warsaw Pact forces for a surprise offensive operation against Western Europe.

²⁷ A. Sytas, "NATO war game defends Baltic weak spot for first time," *Reuters*, 18 June 2017, www.reuters.com.

²⁸ The legislation does not affect memorials at cemeteries or religious sites.

²⁹ "Minister Witold Waszczykowski's Interview for Russian Daily *Kommersant*," 7 August 2017, www.msz.gov.pl.

between Norwegian and Russian policymakers, symbolised, for instance, by the visits of Russian high-ranking politicians to Norway (Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's visit in October 2014, the head of the Foreign Policy Committee of the Federation Council Konstantin Kosachev's visit in June 2016, or Minister of Natural Resources Sergey Donskoy's visit in 2016) and Norwegian high-ranking politicians to Russia (Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs' visit to Arkhangelsk in March 2017, where he also held talks with his Russian counterpart), can be viewed as an important reassurance and engagement measure rooted deeply in the traditional Norwegian approach to its eastern neighbour.

Widening the Scope of Pragmatic Dialogue in the NATO-Russia Council

Theory, history, and an empirical assessment of the current strategic situation offer guidance for NATO on how to shape deterrence and dialogue with Russia. It seems obvious that despite NATO's efforts to build partnership with Russia, both sides have different visions of the European security architecture. Russia's opposition to NATO enlargement and wars with Georgia and Ukraine indicate that the Russian priority is to regain control over the former USSR and maintain regional military superiority over the former Warsaw Pact states. As long as NATO adheres to its strategy, which includes the open-door policy, while Russia tries to re-impose its sphere of influence against the will of neighbouring countries, both sides will have conflicting strategic goals.

As Russia moved from threats to military force to subjugate its neighbours and demonstrated the ability for quick offensive operations, NATO decided to strengthen deterrence. By deploying battlegroups to Poland and the Baltic States, the Alliance demonstrated that aggression would be too costly for Russia. It also limited the Russian ability to exert concessions, e.g., intimidation tactics to limit Alliance support for Ukraine.

Russian policymakers and media presented, however, these defensive moves instead as aggressive measures that should be met by defensive countermeasures. These, in turn, were interpreted in the West as an aggressive response from Russia to what NATO was doing to improve the security of its members.

This is an almost classic example of how security dilemma logic may operate in a situation when the level of trust between the parties involved is very low and there is no working verification mechanism in place. There are various ways to break the downward spiral of this vicious circle. Improving communication and re-entering dialogue on questions of strategic importance to both parties is one possible option. Although there are many remaining unresolved problems in relations between NATO and Russia, that they have restarted their dialogue has to be viewed as a positive development that may be an important step towards limiting the risk of conflict by accident. However, as Russia's ambassador to NATO Alexander Grushko indicated, Russia is still ready to limit the transparency of its actions to exert pressure on NATO and enforce a change in its deterrence policy. Hence, it will be crucial for NATO to run a coordinated policy within OSCE, which will remain the main forum for discussions on confidence-building, transparency, and verification measures.

There is another dimension of dialogue connected with cooperation. During the Cold War, dialogue and cooperation with the USSR carried potential risks of divisions within the Alliance, but once it became official NATO policy it helped limit disagreements that could undermine the credibility of deterrence. In the post-Cold War strategic situation, dialogue became even more important. As an existential threat for the U.S. and major NATO powers disappeared, the Alliance maintained its relevance mainly because it was able to adjust to the security needs of its members. Although they were interested in maintaining collective defence commitments as an insurance policy for the future, developing the partnership with Russia was generally perceived as a major element of the new security architecture. The NATO-Russia Council provided both players with an institutional mechanism for dialogue and cooperation absent during the Cold War. Although there have been major differences between Russia and NATO, the NRC increased in strategic importance for both players.

The NATO declaration that since the annexation of Crimea there will be no return to "business as usual" with Russia until it respects international law may indicate that the Alliance learned the lesson from the

Russia-Georgia war and is determined to defend the rule-based international order. The return to “business as usual” in 2009 when Russia did not meet its obligations of a troop withdrawal from Georgia could have been interpreted as a sign of weakness, which might have emboldened Putin to move into Ukraine in 2014. The demonstration of resolve in such a situation is crucial to deter Russia from further aggressive moves, but NATO should also make sure that the NRC remains a relevant platform of dialogue and one that offers something more than a venue for a blame game and confrontation. Should the NRC become irrelevant to NATO members, there would be a serious risk that they would pursue bilateral contacts with Russia to balance deterrence policy. This would be a major threat to NATO cohesion and the credibility of deterrence. NATO made an important step to keep the NRC alive by putting Afghanistan on the agenda of the latest meeting. Both NATO and Russia are increasing their presence in Afghanistan, which is gradually falling back into Taliban hands. While keeping cooperation suspended, NATO and Russia can still use the NRC to organise briefings and exchange information on terrorist threats and broaden the areas of such consultations to other security areas. Such pragmatic dialogue might indicate that there is an alternative to adversarial relations and an incentive to avoid military confrontation, which could irreversibly damage the relations.

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