

## WHY NATO-RUSSIA COUNCIL HAS FAILED AFTER 20 YEARS OF EXISTENCE

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**Abstract:** At the end of 2021, Russia mobilised over a hundred thousand soldiers along its border with Ukraine constituting a permanent threat to Ukraine and a concern for the West and the whole world. On February 24, 2022, Russia initiated a military intervention in Ukraine. The Kremlin has decided to reconstitute its border lines of the former USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) and its spheres of influence in Central and Eastern Europe.

After the end of the Cold War, Russia, a nuclear power, has constantly expressed its desire to have a special status in relation to the North Atlantic Alliance different from that of former communist countries, members of the Warsaw Pact. The NATO-Russia Council (NRC) is the structure in which Russia had that special and unique relationship with NATO. NRC was established in 2002 to resolve any inconsistencies in the NATO-Russia relations, to facilitate a more flexible dialogue, and understanding between the parties and to open new areas of collaboration. However, it could not change the perceptions created during the Cold War, and most importantly, it could not resolve Russia's place and role in Europe's security issues.

From February 24, 2022, the NRC lost its credibility, the policy of dialogue was no longer relevant and NATO switched to the policy of deterrence and collective defense of the entire Eastern flank of NATO.

The study presents the evolution of relations between NATO and Russia, the phases they went through in the last twenty years since the creation of the NRC and explained the failure of NATO-Russia cooperation in NRC.

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### Introduction

The end of the Cold War has brought substantial changes to world geopolitics. Following the disintegration of the USSR in December 1990 (resulting in 15 independent states, of which Russia: the Russian Federation, was considered the successor of the Soviet Union), in place of two antagonistic superpowers, the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), USA continued to hold a dominant position. The military alliance between the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellite states, the Warsaw Pact, was dissolved on July 1, 1991. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in which the United States has a major contribution, has remained the only and the most powerful military organisation to defend democracy in the world. In this context, NATO had to undergo a politico-military restructuring to respond to the new global security challenges.

Although it retained the USSR's atomic arsenal, the Russian Federation experienced a decline in the initial years after 1991, both internally (in an attempt to make the transition from a socialist to an incipient capitalist economy) and externally (changing from the superpower to that of the secondary power). Consequently, the architecture of regional and global security changed and became unipolar (Monticone, 2008). This was difficult for Russia.

During this period, NATO initiated the dialogue with Russia and the former communist states, all ex-members of the Warsaw Pact, proposing and building cooperation structures between 1991 and 1999 to create a larger area of security and stability in Europe. However, Russia has constantly expressed its desire to have a special status against NATO, that would be different from the one granted to the ex-communist countries. The main reason for this was that Russia possessed the atomic military arsenal of the former USSR.

Given the circumstances, a chain of institutions has been created for developing cooperation between NATO and Russia and the ex-communist countries. For the special NATO-Russia relationship, the most important achievement was the creation of NATO-Russia Council (NRC), which was intended to be a solid bridge between NATO and Russia, and to create a "qualitatively new relationship" between the two partners (NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality, 2002, April). The NRC was formed to deal with and overcome the most sensitive and difficult issues between NATO and Russia and to foster more sustained collaboration.

Although the NRC has maintained peace in Europe for twenty years, it has not fully met its original expectations due to the suspicions and mistrust that have developed between the two sides. The NRC has failed to achieve an equal and effective partnership, equally dissatisfying both parties. The NRC's imperfection and the international context in recent years have led Russia to use its gaps in an

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expansionist policy in Georgia (2008), Crimea and Donbas (2014), Syria (2015), and Ukraine (February 2022). These facts have resulted in the adjournment of the NRC for certain periods, and now, due to war against Ukraine, it has become irrelevant.

The present study aims to discuss NATO-Russia relations after the creation of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), and the events that happened approximately twenty years of its existence. The study answers the following question: what are the reasons for the failure of NATO-Russia cooperation in NRC, especially regarding the issue of security in Europe?

The study is based on Process tracing, a fundamental tool of qualitative analysis, which gives greater attention to the description as a key contribution (Collier, 2011). The method follows the description of the political and social phenomena and establishes possible causal relationships.

### **A Short history of the NATO-Russia Council establishment**

From the first year after the end of the Cold War, the heads of state of the USSR (later of the Russian Federation) and the United States expressed their bilateral desire to cooperate in the new world configuration. Consequently, NATO paid close attention to the relations with Russia because it was aware that a strong security system for European and global could not be developed without Russia's participation. Thus, the relations between Russia and NATO saw an upward evolution in the following period, giving special importance to the reconstruction of the European and world security architecture in these years.

In early 1990s, when the West no longer considered Russia as great power as the former USSR, Moscow's answer to it was that this was impossible: "Russia must be a great power, or (it) will be nothing" (Rutskoi, 1992). This is an axiom in Russian identity politics, and it has been so throughout history (Neumann & Nygren, 2005). Russia, as a nuclear power, expressed its desire to have a special status against the North Atlantic Alliance, a position that should be different from that of the ex-communist countries.

After 1991, a number of institutions were set up to bring Russia closer to NATO like the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in 1991, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) in 1997, the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1994 that developed as an "Enhanced and More Operational Partnership for Peace" in 1999, the Permanent Joint Council (PJC) in 1997 and the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2002. Among these, the first initiatives focused on NATO's relationship with Central and Eastern European countries, including Russia, and the last two on the NATO-Russia relationship.

The first forms of cooperation were intermediate steps to strengthen the relationship between NATO and Russia, while, subsequently, the NRC was created as an operational form of communication. Thus, The Partnership for Peace (PfP) was the first stage in which NATO members agreed, for the first time, not to make important decisions without first consulting Moscow and Russia agreed not to veto the Alliance's decisions. The agreement was called "no vetoes, no surprises" (Soloviev, 2000).

The beginning of the special NATO-Russia relationship is represented by the "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation" signed on 27 May 1997, at the NATO-Russia Summit held in Paris. There, the Permanent Joint Council (PJC) which later became the NRC was set up. Later, the Rome Declaration of May 2002, entitled "NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality" based on the objectives and principles of the 1997 Founding Act, created the NRC.

NATO demonstrated a pragmatic attitude towards the reality of that time, as Russia has remained a power that must be considered in the security issues in Europe and the world. Russia is a nuclear power and has gained a special status in its relations with NATO. As William Perry, the former United States Secretary of Defense, affirmed at that moment: "[We] expect and hope that Russia will play a major role in this super-partnership, depending on its status as a high power" (Garamone, 1996). In this way, a new institution for NATO-Russia relations was founded to comprise a new consultative mechanism that differs from its predecessor in several respects. The most important thing is that Moscow has an equal partnership with NATO members in the NATO-Russia Council. Thus, the issues were discussed in a "20" format instead of the previous "19 + 1". In this way, Russia had an equal position with the other members, sharing the same responsibilities with the NATO countries (Danilov, 2013). In the NRC, the member states are partner with Russia, there is no alliance "NATO states" +

Russia (Lunn, 2013). However, Russia failed to obtain the veto right on the Atlantic Alliance's decisions, although it constantly tried to get it. Its relations with NATO remained controversial and inconsistent. The parties have problems and large differences of opinion. Although there were some achievements of the NRC, but there was a lack of "transparency" between NATO and Russia (Ivanov, 2005).

Another aspect is that the structure and the schedule of the NRC meetings differ from those of the PJC. The NATO Secretary General chair the NRC meetings. Meetings between foreign and defense ministers were scheduled twice a year, and the meetings between ambassadors were held monthly. Also, the NRC significantly expanded the number of issues that NATO and Russia had to address jointly, creating 17 commissions and expert groups to allow NATO and Russia to discuss and respond to a wide range of issues of international interest (Adomeit, 2007). The NATO-Russia Council was designed as a forum for dialogue, cooperation, and developing NATO-Russia relations.

The opinion was that the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council did not bring "anything new", and no positive development in the NATO-Russia security relationship. Russia has not obtained a security guarantee because Article 5 of the Washington Treaty was not mentioned in the founding documents of the NRC. Despite these shortcomings, NATO hoped that the newly established cooperation could produce a beneficial effect at that time, a *spillover effect* on Russia's domestic policy (which the Allies had been observing with growing concern), and possibly facilitate the resolution of the frozen conflicts on Russia's borders.

### **Stages in the evolution of the NATO-Russia Council**

Since the creation of the NRC to the present, the collaboration between NATO and Russia has various stages: May 2002-August 2008, August 2008-November 2010, November 2010-April 2014, and April 2014 until February 24, 2022.

The period from May 28, 2002-August 2008 was characterised by cooperation in the fight against international terrorism and drug trafficking, crisis management, arms control, and missile defense. Russia offered its Central Asian military bases to air transport USA military equipment to Afghanistan. However, there were not only moments of collaboration. Thus, at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, Russia intervened, and in consequence, for economic reasons, Germany and France opposed the accession of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO. A.F. Rasmussen, former NATO Secretary General, appreciated that "this failure had sent *wrong signal* to Russian President Vladimir Putin and may have contributed to the decision to attack Georgia in August 2008" (Rasmussen, 2018). Later, he pointed out: "I think we made our first mistake in 2008 when we didn't have a particular way forward for Georgia and Ukraine" (Rasmussen, 2022).

In August 2008, Russia had military intervention in Georgia by creating and recognising two independent states, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (NATO Press Fact Sheets and Backgrounders: NATO-Russia Relations: The Background, March 2020) thus preventing Georgia from joining NATO in the future. Russia's military action in Georgia sparked a crisis in NATO-Russia relations, with the suspension of the official NRC meetings and cooperation in some areas.

An uncertain period in the relations followed while the West protested unconvincingly and without any concrete results. However, NATO-Russia relations and the operation of the NRC resumed progressively, gradually and measurably as established by the NATO foreign ministers in December 2008 and March 2009, as stated at the NATO Summit in Strasbourg and Kehl on April 4, 2009 when it was decided to restart the practical cooperation with Russia and recommence the formal NRC meetings. Although a disagreement over Georgia was acknowledged, cooperation with Russia was restarted so that Europe would not face a cold war due to Russia's action in Georgia. The NRC ambassadorial level meeting in Corfu on June 27, 2009, decided "to resume NATO-Russia military cooperation in parallel with the reform of cooperation structures under the auspices of the NATO-Russia Council, in order to streamline their activities" (NATO partnerships, 2021, June).

The period from November 2010 to April 1, 2014, was declared a "new stage of cooperation towards a true strategic partnership" by NATO leaders and Russian President Medvedev at the Lisbon Summit in November 2010. It was as per the acts signed by NATO and Russia in 1997, the NATO-Russia Founding Act, and the Rome Declaration in 2002. Throughout this period, NATO and Russia collaborated on common security issues like supporting the Afghan army's helicopter fleet, and

fighting against terrorism, drug trafficking, and piracy. In addition to the previous agreements, the fight against piracy off the coast of Somalia was included, and a joint mission was discussed to help eliminate Syria's chemical weapons.

In March 2014, Russia violated the principles of the NRC's Founding Act. Russia illegally annexed Crimea, part of an independent and sovereign state of Ukraine whose borders had been secured in Budapest in 1992 by the United States, England, and Russia, in exchange for Ukraine's renunciation of the remaining USSR military nuclear potential. As a result, NATO suspended all cooperation, civilian, and military practices with Russia, including the NRC, but maintained an open political dialogue with Russia (NATO Press Fact Sheets and Backgrounders: NATO-Russia Relations: The Background, March 2020). This attitude of NATO was due to the desire of not to start a new cold war. However, Russia considered it a NATO weakness and continued its aggressive policy through an atypical war in the Donbas. This was "the second mistake (...) that occurred in 2014 when NATO was too weak in its response to the Russian annexation of Crimea" (Rasmussen, 2022). Without these mistakes, the current war in Ukraine with dramatic consequences, with reverberations at the European and world level that could have been avoided. The NATO summit in Wales (September 3-4, 2014), Warsaw (July 8-9, 2016), and Brussels (July 11-12, 2018) confirmed and maintained the line previously adopted by NATO. At the Brussels Summit in July 2018, it was stated that "under current circumstances, we regret that despite repeated calls by Allies and the international community for Russia to change course, the conditions for that relationship do not exist. There can be no return to "business as usual" until there is a clear, constructive change in Russia's actions that demonstrates compliance with international law and its international obligations and responsibilities" (Brussels Summit Declaration, 2018, July, para. 9).

Although officially suspended after 2014, the NRC met several times a year, three times in 2016 and 2017, and twice in 2018 and 2019, hoping to restore peace and cooperation in the Eastern European region. At the NRC meetings after 2014, Ukraine has always been at the forefront of the NRC agenda. Unfortunately, as of February 2020, "Russia has repeatedly turned down any NATO offer for another NRC meeting" (NATO Press, Factsheet: NATO-Russia Relations, 2022, January). However, at the convocation of the NATO Secretary General, due to "Russia's hostilities and increased military build-up in and around Ukraine", an NRC meeting was held on January 12, 2022.

The last NRC (January 2022) had no effect on preventing and stopping military conflict.

Russia demands "legally binding guarantees from NATO that it will not expand and give up any military activity in Eastern Europe and Ukraine" (NATO-Russia Council in Brussels, Agerpress, 2022). NATO affirms that Russia's security is not in danger because the organization is purely defensive and each nation has the right to make its own security policy.

### **The end of the NATO-Russia Council**

During the evolution of the NATO-Russia cooperation in the NRC, dissatisfaction from both partners, especially from Russia, appeared and manifested. It mainly concerned the various forms of cooperation established at NATO's proposal that did not meet Russia's requirements to be a privileged partner especially the issue of NATO's enlargement to the East, which Russia affirmed threatens its national security. In this way, the relations between the two international players had distanced themselves.

After 1991, Russia repeatedly called for the abolition of NATO, arguing that its existence is useless since the Warsaw Pact had been disbanded (March 1991), and considered that this military organisation threatened its national security. In response, NATO justified that, to face the new challenges of the moment, this organisation was needed to combat international terrorism, drug trafficking, and the proliferation of atomic, chemical, and bacteriological weapons. In this context, NATO had to reorganise itself from a defensive military alliance into a defensive political-military alliance. "We have to stay further together, let's make the peace we have enjoyed in these four decades continue" declared the members of the Alliance since July 1990 at the London Summit (The London Declaration, 1990).

Russia affirms that in 1990, NATO promised that it would not expand beyond the territory of the former GDR (German Democratic Republic or East Germany), would not build infrastructure elements and would not bring troops near Russia's borders, and on the territory of ex-communist

countries. Russia accuses that by expanding NATO borders to the East, the latter is threatening its national security.

According to the Russian military doctrine, there must be a buffer zone between Russia and the West. There is no document testifying to Russia's assertion that in 1990 the USA and Germany representatives would have promised that NATO would not expand to the East (NATO Press Fact Sheets and Backgrounders: Russia's accusations - let's put things right, 2014). In fact, at that time, the existence of the Warsaw Pact did not allow member countries to have another option and the USSR had not yet disintegrated. In a 2014 interview, Gorbachev said: "The topic of 'NATO expansion' was never discussed. It was not raised in those years" (as cited in Masters, 2022). Subsequently, with the abolition of this Pact (March 1991), the ex-communist countries were left without a security umbrella. The accession to NATO took place by the will of the citizens of these countries with the ultimate goal of expanding the area of security and democracy in Europe. It should be noted that the NATO Book does not provide the refusal of any country wishing to join if it meets the conditions laid down in Article 10 of the Treaty. The countries of Eastern Europe expressed the desire to join NATO because of their past experience (Roache, 2019).

After the end of the Cold War, Russia agreed to these aspirations by signing the 1997 Founding Act. It pledged to "create a space of security and stability in Europe, without dividing lines or spheres of influence" and to "respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states and their intrinsic right to choose their own paths through which to ensure their own security" (Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation, Paris, France, 1997, May, 27). As the US promised not to bring troops and military equipment near Russia's borders referred to the former GDR's territory. The Americans kept their promise until the aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Until Russia's aggression in Ukraine, NATO's presence in the newly acceded countries has been symbolic: the existing military units belonged only to that country. Before the Ukraine crisis, the only NATO forces in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were the aircraft of these countries that constituted the service of the NATO air police without Western involvement. The two anti-missile shields built in Poland and Romania have a purely defensive character (Geoană, 2022).

Russia intervened with its military in Georgia (2008), Crimea, Donbas (2014), and Syria (2015) and the West remained passive, limiting itself to declarations. After the military action in Ukraine (2022) one can notice the prompt response of the West, the strengthening of the Eastern flank of NATO to deter Russian aggression. NATO pursued a policy of deterrence by strengthening the Eastern flank.

Consequently, Russia knowingly ignored the Founding Act, which provides for the parties' cooperation and mutual information on major issues of international security. The act states that "Russia will show a similar restraint regarding the conventional deployment of its forces in Europe" (as cited in NATO Press Fact Sheets and Backgrounders: Russia's accusations - let's put things right, April 2014).

Among other allegations made by Russia against NATO is that after 1991, the Russian Federation has been permanently marginalised internationally. The Russian Federation was the successor to the USSR, but no longer possessed the former's economic, military and political potential, as it was one of the 15 former union republics and was a secondary regional pole of power at that time. However, NATO, in return took an interest in creating various forms of cooperation on regional and global security and offered it a privileged position compared with the other ex-communist countries. Russia has achieved a *unique* role in Euro-Atlantic security by signing the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security and the creation of the PJC in 1997, followed by the NRC in 2002.

Although the intention to create the NRC was good, correct, and constructive, this international instrument for peace and cooperation has failed to achieve its goal. The NRC has been unable to resolve key inconsistencies that existed or subsequently arose in the NATO-Russia relations, "the more sensitive and controversial issues which challenge the NATO-Russia relationship" (Lunn, 2013). The NRC could not overcome the "mistrust and suspicion that permeate and continue to define the relationship" and, most importantly, could not resolve the issue of "Russia's place in the Euro-Atlantic structures" (Lunn, 2013).

The events after 2014 show that the NRC has not been able to fulfill its mission due to increasing difficult geopolitical problems, a set of factors of which the most important is the maintenance of an

asymmetry of power between the United States of America and Russia during this period. This imbalance did not allow the existence of fair opinions regarding the challenges of that moment. The two partners do not share common interests. From the beginning, the NRC did not have a "showcase project" (Klein & Kaim, 2014).

However, on an international scale, the cooperation between Russia and NATO has been satisfactory in counter-terrorism, disarmament, arms control and crisis management (especially in Afghanistan).

Lack of mutual understanding has manifested itself in European security issues, especially for the neighbouring countries of Russia, the countries of the former union republics, and even the ex-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. A conflict over the European political order gradually emerged, especially during President Putin's third term. As a result, it was not possible to agree on a common ground on the security of Europe, nor on a common concept on the development of bilateral relations. Also, the bilateral missile defense agreement could not be finalised because the two parties had opposed points of view, so there were no conditions to ensure its continuity.

Although in the position of a secondary polar power then, Moscow demanded equal rights and weight in all key areas of the European security.

Moscow wants the space that constituted the former Soviet republics (*near abroad*) to be recognised as its exclusive sphere of influence, it wants to exercise the protective power of all Russian-speaking people. Moscow wants the former Central and Eastern Communist countries to return exclusively to its sphere of influence. It wants NATO to consider its aspirations and the "red lines" it set. The Russian Federation urges that its security interests take precedence over Europe's security interests. In all of this, Russia relies on the use of force: politically, economically, and militarily.

This conception does not take into account the desire of these countries. Small and medium sized countries have no say on independence, the security of their borders, the right to democratic life, and prosperity. This conception is inadmissible for the 21st century, after the long history of the European states' constant fight for some basic principles that would allow them to apply human rights, build a peaceful life, and secure borders.

## Conclusion

The NRC maintained security and stability for twenty years in Europe. It survived in a fragile balance, but it could no longer withstand the realities of the moment because the interests and conceptions of the two parties proved diametrically opposite and incompatible economically, politically, and diplomatically. In these conditions, the attempt to collaborate within the NRC was not supported by the existence of common interests and concepts regarding Euro-Atlantic security and stability. A common ground was not foreseen. Russia has an authoritarian regime, while NATO countries are democratic.

At the NATO initiative, the NRC was created to offer Russia a new relationship, greater flexibility and practical cooperation between the members for security and stability. However, it did not solve the problem of Russia's place in the European security structures and did not give Russia the possibility to intervene in NATO's decision-making process. After the dissolution of the USSR, the Russian Federation expressed the desire to be treated as a superpower, and to have a special status compared to other countries.

Russia wants to redefine its spheres of influence, reconstruct the Soviet space, and return of Central and Eastern Europe to the situation of 1997, before any expansion of NATO. Russia resented the persistence of NATO after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and its expansion towards its borders. Suspicion and mistrust were the basis of the relationship between the two parties.

For NRC to be successful, it would have been necessary for both partners to have common values and standards. This would have implied a democratic approach in post-1991 Russia instead of authoritarianism.

Let's still hope that reason and the desire for security and stability in Europe, which animated the first attempts of collaboration between these two international actors will return and human civilisation will not self-destruct.

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