

Chapter 19

Russia and NATO Enlargement: An Insider's Account

Andrei Kozyrev

Russia versus NATO

When, led by the United States, European nations founded NATO on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law, they made a major multinational political pivot in modern history. Parting from centuries-old efforts to gain territory and domination, they found their national interests in peaceful cooperation and prosperity. That's why emerging democracies want to join NATO. And that's why the totalitarian Soviet Union opposed it, and now authoritarian Russia along with undemocratic politicians elsewhere try to subvert it.

When in April 1992 the president of Czechoslovakia Vaclav Havel came to Moscow on an official visit, he had a brief chat with me away from the main action of the summit and explained the reason for joining NATO in his distinctive concise, simple, but insightful way: "I am not a fan of the military. We just want to join the Western democracies full-scale. Don't you?" That was the driving force behind the NATO enlargement, culminating in the first instance with the admission of Poland, Check Republic and Hungary in 1999: a process that has continued and is continuing ever since.

The Promise of the New Era

In December of 1991 the Russian Federation emerged not only as one of fifteen successor states to the collapsed USSR, but also as the continuation state that inherited membership in the U.N. Security Council and in all treaties, including Russian-American and multilateral treaties concerning nuclear weapons, most importantly in the Non-proliferation Treaty as one of the five nuclear states. America and other

Western powers helped us to achieve that outcome. But despite this Great Power status, the new Russia had to make a determined effort to overcome its isolation from the most prosperous democratic countries, which was not determined by any treaty and simply represented the bad legacy of the Soviet past. And the inherited Russian hostility towards NATO was a key political barrier on its way to join the club of great nations to which it belonged by dint of its size, economic potential, history and culture. That hostility could be removed only together with the entire Soviet heritage that reformers in the Yeltsin government tried to replace with political democracy and a socially conscious capitalism. My own credo was—and still is—that a democratic Russia would be as natural an ally of the United States and NATO as the tyrannical Soviet—or post-Soviet—system had been an enemy of the Western Alliance.

Already in December of 1991, the first popularly elected president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, sent an open letter to the North Atlantic Coordination Council that reflected the Russian leadership's view that NATO could turn from being an aggressive military machine to an alliance of peaceful nations based on common values. "On this basis of deep reforms and common values," he wrote, Russia was eager to develop cooperation with NATO both in political and military fields. "Today we do not ask for Russian membership in NATO." But, Yeltsin's letter continued, he regarded it "as our long-term political objective."

There is a Russian saying that misfortune leads to fortune. Unfortunately, the text of the letter given to the press had a typo. The word "not" was absent. So, it read as "Today we ask for Russian membership in NATO, but regard it as our long-term objective." The next day we issued a correction. Fortunately, this drew additional attention to the meaning of the document that in essence was the same with or without "not." At that time no one except the bunch of discredited Communists challenged the concept directly. Some doubts were expressed only about the ability and good will of NATO to welcome Russia to the club.

Were we—the reformists around Yeltsin—delusional in our attempt to radically change the course of Russia? No. The mass movement representing our base was called "Democratic Russia" and we counted on a number of fundamental factors summarized below.

The Russian nation is based on European culture. Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is partly written in French. The first attempt to establish a European style democracy had been undertaken in 1917 after the collapse of the tsarist rule, but it failed mostly because the provisional government inherited the backbreaking burden of World War I. When the second effort came, in 1992, the situation was radically different. No country was at war or even in conflict with Russia. Moreover, we counted on support from the West, particularly from the United States—politically, economically and strategically.

This bet was neither unprecedented nor unrealistic. Less than 50 years earlier Winston Churchill had called on the West to stand up to the challenge of the “Iron Curtain” of Stalin’s domination, and America generously helped fragile democracies in Europe to survive and grow. Why couldn’t similar efforts be undertaken as Russia tried to get rid of the “Iron Curtain” once and for all? It would have been not only in best interest of America and its Allies, but existentially important for them. Behind the Curtain sat a nuclear-missile force able to destroy America that also could have been demolished had democracy taken hold in Russia.

Apparently, George H.W. Bush realized that. Welcoming Yeltsin in Washington DC in June 1992, Bush said he was “totally convinced” of Russia’s commitment to democracy and hoped to assist “in any way possible.” He appeared to have bipartisan support. Democrat Richard A. Gephardt, the House majority leader, said that Mr. Yeltsin “delivered a loud, clear message that if there’s going to be help, it needs to come now.”

Yeltsin, too, was straightforward. “I didn’t come here just to stretch out my hand and ask for help. No, we’re calling for cooperation ... because if the reform in Russia goes under, that means there will be a cold war.” Unfortunately that warning became an omen and today it’s the reality.

To be sure, in 1992 tangible results were achieved in reducing the nuclear threat. The two presidents put Secretary of State Jim Baker and me in charge of that job. It was tough but rewarding, due to the professionalism, dedication and integrity of my counterpart. Not only were the numbers of nukes allowed for each party by the START II treaty 2-3 times lower than permitted by the previous START agreement, but

also for first time ever Russia agreed to cut its superiority in intercontinental ballistic missiles, supposedly the most destabilizing first strike force, and the United States did the same in sea-launched ballistic missiles and strategic bombers. A political and legal international foundation was laid for preventing proliferation of Soviet nuclear weapons; over the ensuing years all were placed under control and gathered on the territory of the Russian Federation recognized as the only nuclear power among the post-Soviet states.

With regard to economic aid and assistance, however, America's contribution was much less impressive. While preparations for cooperation with Russia were in progress, President Bush was losing to Democrats in America. President Clinton was elected under the motto: "it's the economy, stupid"—by which he meant the U.S. economy. His administration promised and did help us, but mostly through programs of the International Monetary Fund. These were conditional on the reforms the government in Moscow swore to undertake. But what Russia really needed was immediate aid to set up the reforms in practical manner.

Simply put, the social cost and complexity of the reforms were too heavy a lift for the government in Moscow without commensurate Western assistance. Russian reformers were unable to provide sustained political leadership in the face of worsening pressure by reactionaries and nationalists. We failed for domestic reasons. We own historic responsibility for that. Yet, the West could have done more to prevent that failure. Soon a pattern was established of mutual financial and economic promises that were predictably unrealistic and thus politically damaging. Something of the kind followed also in the foreign policy field.

Troubled Partnership with NATO

In the early 1990s, the rapprochement of Russia with the West and integration of East European states into Western economic institutions were accepted even by hardliners in Moscow. Yet, the adversary image of NATO was—and is—the last line of their defense, as it guaranteed them a privileged position in the power structure of the "ceased fortress," whether it was called the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation.

To be sure, turning the two opposing military machines into allies was a monumental task. Yet it could be achieved. Step by step the military and security forces of democratic Russia should have become partners of their Western counterparts in fighting common enemies like rogue states, terrorists, drug-traffickers and so on. Advocating this perspective, in December 1993 I won 70% of the popular vote in a competitive election for the parliament membership in the region of Murmansk, which included the major naval base hosting the core of Russian nuclear-armed fleet.

It was clear that my solution required the radical and resolute reform of the military and security services inherited from the USSR. Yet President Yeltsin chose a KGB-associated veteran, Evgeny Primakov, to be chief of the foreign intelligence service. He also appointed other heads of military and security government bodies who were personally loyal to him but hardly zealous reformers. He argued that change was a tough process; it should be carefully controlled to maintain stability along the way. That was true, but in my view, stability should have been pursued hand-in-hand with resolute and robust action to transform the old structures.

Bearing in mind the complexity of the NATO issues, I had a confidential agreement to avoid radical public moves with Warren Christopher, U.S. Secretary of State in first term of the Clinton Administration. This was more or less similar to the kind of understandings I had with some Eastern European leaders who recognized that their desire to join NATO should be realized in stages and in consonance with Moscow. Slowly but surely, a discussion on finding a mutually acceptable solution between Russia and NATO gained steam.

Russia's Bad Surprise For America

Lech Wałęsa, the President of Poland, was not a patient person. When President Yeltsin arrived in Warsaw on a hot August day in 1993, Wałęsa invited him to a late private dinner. After midnight Yeltsin woke me up. He could hardly utter an apology for the late call and handed me a piece of paper with ragged handwriting and his signature. It was a last-minute insertion for the joint Russian-Polish declaration that had

been prepared for a signature ceremony next morning. The paper endorsed Poland's aspiration to join NATO—right now.

In my heart I welcomed Yeltsin's addition. In my mind, though, I had no doubt that without any practical purpose the statement would wake up the sleeping dogs in Russia against NATO and those in Eastern Europe favoring NATO. Like all East European nations, Poland would not be ready to join NATO earlier than in a number of years. In the meantime, Russia would have to work out its cooperation with the Alliance.

Early at dawn the next morning, Defense Minister Grachev and I asked Yeltsin to have a more sober look at the matter. Then milder language was agreed with the Poles. The incident, including the "late night" formulation, leaked to the press, triggering a never-ending firework of political agitation across the spectrum of conflicting opinions and interests in Russia and elsewhere. I had to apologize to my American colleagues and other partners who were caught off guard and who had not yet given any green light to Central and Eastern European states about NATO membership.

Most importantly, as a result of this story and the leak, we all lost the ability to address the matter calmly, without politicized domestic and international pressures. Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary immediately demanded unambiguous responses from the United States and NATO on whether the Alliance was open to the new democracies. That amounted to an offer neither Washington nor Brussels could refuse in the long run. Jittery politicians in the West spoke of an imminent Russian threat, to the delight of NATO-fear-mongering hardliners in Russia.

Bridging the gap between Russia and NATO now became a burning task. Defense Minister Grachev visited Washington in 1993. He felt that the Pentagon was skeptical of NATO enlargement and preferred instead cooperation with Eastern Europeans and Russia through a mechanism called the Partnership for Peace (PfP). That was good news for Yeltsin, who now realized the hot nature of the problem and tried to push genie back into the bottle.

In October Secretary of State Warren Christopher came to Moscow as special envoy of the U.S. president to brief the Russian president

on the new NATO policy and test his reaction. He was accompanied by Strobe Talbott, who played an important role in bridging U.S. and Russian positions. This is how Strobe describes the meeting in his book *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy*:

Chris laid out our decision on NATO: we would not proceed immediately with enlargement but concentrate instead on developing the "Partnership for Peace"...Without letting Chris finish, Yeltsin spread his arms and intoned, drawing out the words, "Genialno! Zdorovo!" (Brilliant! Terrific!).

After "a brief review of other issues," the meeting was concluded. Christopher repeats this story in his memoirs. Declassified documents from U.S. and Russian archives also show that U.S. officials led Russian President Boris Yeltsin to believe in 1993 that the Partnership for Peace was the alternative to NATO expansion, rather than a precursor to it.

After leaving the meeting with Yeltsin, however, the U.S. visitors provided to me an "unabridged" message: the new policy was not *instead of* but rather a pathway *to* enlargement. Why at the meeting they switched to other issues without finishing their main presentation and clarifying the issue remained unclear to me. Allies were pleased by the news that Russia's president praised the PFP, and it was adopted as the NATO strategy. Primakov told Yeltsin that Clinton deceived him to get NATO approval and that the PFP was a trick to draw East Europeans into NATO, leaving Russia in the cold. The Russian press increasingly shared this suspicion.

Yeltsin preferred to stick to what he heard directly from Clinton's special representative and authorized me to sign up to the PFP on June 22, 1994.

America's Bad Surprise for Russia

Yeltsin then felt offended and betrayed when in December 1994 NATO approved a policy that could be summarized in a simple formula: the PFP "sets in motion a process that leads to the enlargement of NATO." He was also enraged by Clinton's recurring failures to consult—in fact a "courtesy call" would do—in advance of the U.S. bombings of Bosnian Serbs under NATO auspices. That was interpreted in

Russia as a sign that Moscow was seen by Washington and Brussels as a second-rate partner. In response, Yeltsin spoke of a new “Cold Peace” at the summit of the 53-nation Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

To avoid the political firestorm igniting in Moscow, I worked strenuously to decouple the criticism of hasty enlargement from hostility toward NATO itself. “Hasty” was the key word meaning a tactical disagreement with a friendly alliance on when best to accommodate its potential new participants. Without this word, Russian opposition to enlargement implied strategic confrontation with an enemy trying to advance to our very borders.

By the end of 1994, the hard-liners were winning the day in Moscow, as an old-style security and governing bureaucracy, intermingled with crony oligarchs, was perverting democratic and market reforms.

Those forces restored state-controlled monopolies in key sectors of economy and wanted to keep out Western competition. They fostered “seized fortress” propaganda for the Russian people while they and their families were enjoying lavish lifestyles in London, New York and French Riviera. Yeltsin was yielding to their pressure. Already in November 1993 Primakov published a report that NATO was still a threat to Russia. In this vein, he insisted on changing the policy formula on NATO from “No hasty enlargement—Yes partnership!” to the simple and bold proclamation: “No enlargement!” In early 1995 Yeltsin approved that change. Then he signed a program of modernization of Russian strategic nuclear forces.

The Bill–Boris Show

The historic opportunity for Russia to become a NATO ally might have still been saved had presidents Yeltsin and Clinton spoken more clearly and absolutely frankly to each other on the core of the matter and really worked at hammering out a solution. Yet, they were more fixated on representation, and were busy with the Bill–Boris amity show at their joint press conferences.

Apparently in an attempt to avoid the risk of adding the question “who lost Russia?” to his own domestic problems, Clinton preferred to

downplay and paper over the growing rupture in the very foundation of the structure of partnership, i.e. common values. Yeltsin escaped into Soviet-style doublespeak (only too familiar to a former party apparatchik), one for domestic and another for foreign audiences. Both fudged and left issues open to interpretation or to being resolved in the future.

During 1995 Bill urged Boris to sign a PfP program of cooperation and to send a military detachment, even autonomous and symbolic, to Bosnia, making the NATO operation there look acceptable to Russia. In exchange Clinton promised to support Yeltsin's reelection campaign looming in 1996 with his less than 10% approval rating. Among other things, no visible steps would be taken towards NATO expansion during that year. This pathetic deal boiled down to mutual understanding that Boris would actually run under anti-NATO banners (and the West would look away). None of this addressed the NATO enlargement conundrum between the United States and Russia.

And then, at the beginning of 1996, Primakov succeeded me (later he became the prime minister) and Grachev was replaced by an even more traditionalist general. Russia was turning away from Western common values.

In 1997 the "Founding Act" between NATO and the Russia was added to the pile of goodwill declarations implemented as halfheartedly as they were signed. Yeltsin, in his radio address to the Russian people on May 30, described the Act as an effort "to minimize the negative consequences of NATO's expansion and prevent a new split in Europe." He then described the agreement—inaccurately, according to Western officials—as "enshrining NATO's pledge not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territories of its new member countries and not [to] build up its armed forces near our borders...nor carry out relevant infrastructure preparations." Russia continued to strongly oppose NATO also when the Alliance stopped Serbian cruelties in Kosovo in 1999 shortly after admitting Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic as new members.

Conclusions and Outlook

The chance of alliance between Russia and NATO, which had opened in the early 1990s, was missed. Instead, the relationship de-

graded into hostility, veiled by diplomatic niceties that were thrown away at a later stage.

While the West failed to seize the opportunity and some diplomatic mistakes were made on both sides, the United States and NATO were on the right side of history by admitting new democracies to the Alliance and being willing to find an accommodation with Russia. It was Moscow that returned to its antagonism toward NATO, which has been intensifying ever since. Yeltsin's chosen successor president, Vladimir Putin, tried to hinder the West with a charm offensive in the early years of the 21 century and even hinted that Russia might join NATO. In the meantime, domestic anti-American and anti-NATO propaganda has continued to gain momentum. Today the Kremlin has left little doubt about its attitude toward the Alliance in words and in deeds.

NATO remains the main power to safeguard the liberal world order. It is under attack from autocratic, populist and extremist forces who claim that the organization is outdated. The Kremlin's champs and chumps in the West portray NATO as a bloc promoting American hegemony, expanding to the East and cornering Russia. It is reassuring however, that the U.S. Congress continues to display firm bipartisan support for NATO.

The prospects of a new opening in Russian–NATO relations will depend on the resilience and firmness of the Alliance and on deep changes in Moscow's domestic and foreign policy. I believe that sooner or later the Russian people will follow the suit of other European nations in finding their national interest in democratic reforms and cooperation with NATO and other Western institutions.