

NATO-Russian Relations Can Still Be Saved

By [Simon Saradzhyan](#)

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It is indisputable that the Ukraine crisis has dealt a serious blow to Russia's relations with core members of NATO. It would take many years for Moscow, Washington and Brussels to fully mend the fences even if the conflict in Ukraine were resolved tomorrow.

But as Russia's new military doctrine indicates, the Rubicon in NATO-Russian relations has not been crossed — at least not yet. While naming Russia's allies, the doctrine, which was published on Dec. 26, avoids designating either NATO as a whole or any of its specific members as adversaries.

The new document does place NATO first on the list of external military dangers to Russia. However, as I noted in my initial analysis of the 2014 document in my blog, that's not qualitatively different from the 2010 doctrine. The latter designated NATO as a top source of military threats to Russia even though the document was adopted at the time that the U.S.-Russian reset was in full swing.

Moreover, the new document even calls for a dialogue of equals between NATO and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization in the sphere of European security and for cooperation in the sphere of missile defense. It also notes that the probability of a large-scale war against Russia has been decreasing.

Importantly, the 2014 doctrine leaves a condition for the use of nuclear weapons unchanged compared with the 2010 document. Like its predecessor, the new doctrine allows the first use of nuclear weapons if Russia or its allies are attacked with the use of a weapon of mass destruction or if a conventional conflict threatens "the very existence" of the Russian state.

The new doctrine also preserves its predecessor's provisions for countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The doctrine's innovations include references to the threat of radiological terrorism the notion of non-nuclear strategic deterrence.

Other innovations include classification of the following challenges as main external military dangers to Russia: use of military information and communications technologies for military-political objectives to carry out actions directed against the sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity of states; establishment of regimes in neighboring states, and subversive activities of special services and organizations of foreign states and their coalitions against Russia.

These references clearly stem from Russia's experiences and perceptions acquired in the course of the color revolutions in neighboring post-Soviet states. The new doctrine also introduces a section on allied relations with South Ossetia and Abkhazia while also preserving its predecessor's language on such relations with Belarus in particular and members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in general.

Prior to the publication of the 2014 doctrine, Russian and Western media were awash with speculation that the new doctrine would identify NATO as Russia's foe. Such speculation was not unfounded.

The Financial Times quoted people familiar with the draft of this strategic document as saying in November that the latter would openly designate the U.S. and NATO as adversaries in the wake of the standoff in Ukraine. The new Ukrainian authorities' decision to restart the drive for their country to get NATO membership had also fueled speculation that Russia's new doctrine would designate the alliance as an adversary.

You may also recall reports in the Western media last year that the U.S. government reportedly wanted an updated NATO doctrine that would identify Russia as a revitalized and fundamental danger. Moreover, NATO's then-Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and his deputy Alexander Vershbow had argued prior to NATO's September 2014 summit that the alliance should treat Russia as an adversary because Russia considers this Western bloc as an adversary, though I begged to differ at that time.

The summit came and went, but NATO members decided not to publicly name Russia as a foe. Moreover, Rasmussen's successor at the helm of this organization is no longer calling for Russia to be branded a foe of the alliance. Jens Stoltenberg told Russian reporters last month that "NATO is not an enemy of Russia. On the contrary." The new secretary general stated in the wake of the recent Paris terrorist attack, that Russia "should be an ally in the

fight against terrorism."

The language has become conciliatory on the Russian side too, at least when it comes to diplomats. NATO is not an enemy for Russia, according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. And NATO-Russian relations have not reached the "point of no return," according to Lavrov's deputy foreign minister, Alexei Meshkov.

Were the crisis in Ukraine to prompt Russia and NATO to officially call each other foes in their strategic documents, it would become hard for leaders of both sides to argue for reversal of this designation. Such a reversal would require qualitative improvement in the Russian-Western relationship, which is unlikely in the near future.

Russia and core founding members of NATO share too many interests to afford a relapse of the adversarial relationship they abandoned more than a quarter-century ago.

It is about time that former Cold War foes start collecting the peace dividends, which Russia might find especially handy, given its current economic woes. The best predictor for the latter is a decline in the price of oil, but if Russia and the U.S., acting together with European Union, could convince the government in Kiev and separatists in eastern Ukraine to reach a lasting resolution of their conflict, then many of the most damaging of Western sanctions against Russia would be lifted.

The first step toward normalizing the relationship would be the resolution of the conflict in Ukraine, as I have argued in a piece that I co-authored with Dr. Gary Samore from Harvard University's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs this fall.

Such a solution could incorporate decentralization of power within Ukraine and robust protection of the rights of minorities, along with disarming all the illegal armed formations, a legally binding affirmation of Ukraine's military neutrality, and unequivocal guarantees (rather than assurances) of Ukraine's territorial integrity, perhaps, while deferring the final resolution of Crimea's status.

One of the subsequent moves should include rebuilding the collective security architecture in post-Cold War Europe, which has failed time and again, as demonstrated not only by the crisis in Ukraine, but by the 2008 war and the conflicts in former Yugoslavia. Germany's recent decision to involve Russia in talks about reforming a pan-European security structure is a right step in that direction.

The longer the sides remain locked in conflict, the more likely it will be that the temporary measures that Russia and Western countries have imposed upon each other will become permanent, and the sides will slide into a new cold war.

As the saying goes, "Nothing is more permanent than the temporary." If you have doubts about the lasting nature of "temporary" punishment, then you should have asked U.S. Senators Henry Jackson and Charles Vanik — co-sponsors of a 1974 amendment that limited trade with the Soviet Union — while they were still alive.

Simon Saradzhyan is a researcher at Harvard University's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Follow him on twitter [@saradzhyan](https://twitter.com/saradzhyan)

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