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Adapting NATO-Russia dialogue

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In response to Russia's illegal annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea in March 2014, NATO Allies took a series of steps to strengthen their deterrence and defence posture on the Eastern Flank.¹ In accordance with the 2014 Wales Summit Declaration, which NATO reaffirmed in the 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué, this included ceasing practical cooperation and significantly limiting dialogue with Russia.² Seven years on, however, there is reason to reconsider the added-value of this approach in light of the changing security landscape, NATO 2030 initiative, and *de facto* deadlock in the NATO Russia Council (NRC) over Ukraine. Moreover, the recent summit in Geneva between President Biden and President Putin highlights the emerging importance of adapting dialogue approaches with Russia.

This *Policy Brief* explores new avenues and proposes a modified dialogue format to complement the NATO-Russia Council (NRC or Council) along with a series of topics aimed at transparency and risk reduction in military operations and exercises, both of which are objectives that NATO set out at the Wales Summit. This does

Why rethink dialogue now?

If Russia has yet to respond to the last NRC invitation and to replace the outgoing Russian ambassador to NATO, it is worth asking if now is the right time to revisit the question of dialogue. After all, dialogue requires interest from both parties. There are three reasons why now may be the right moment. First, the prevailing wisdom about Russia's disinterest in dialogue is probably misguided. Russia has sent mixed signals. While refusing to accept the open invitation to

Throughout NATO's history, both Russia/Soviet Union and the Alliance have recognized the risks of not communicating with one another

reconvene the Council, Russian leadership have simultaneously offered NATO site inspections and supported a range of topics for dialogue including arms control, countering terrorism/piracy, and dealing with "transnational issues" more broadly.³ This suggests that Russia, like NATO, is not interested in a return to dialogue as it existed before 2014 but is open to dialogue in principle, depending on the topic and format.

Second, it is clear that the current approach

the willingness of Russia to engage in dialogue. There are, however, areas of mutual interest that could bring Russia back to the table. These include risk reduction, arms control, confidence building measures (CBMs), and counter terrorism.

The second constraint is the variation of views across the Alliance. While some allies have expressed interest in rethinking NATO-Russia dialogue, many others are by and large reticent, if not opposed. Yet, it is still possible to change the dialogue approach without returning to “business as usual”. This is because the goals of dialogue articulated in the Wales Summit (and subsequent declarations) have yet to be achieved, particularly concerning risk reduction. As former NATO Deputy Secretary General Vershbow pointed out, NATO and Russia have had “similar ideas [about risk reduction] but at different times”.⁸ Those Allies that are typically most cautious about dialogue with Russia may also be more confident in rethinking the current approach if it is in tandem with US policy, given American support for these states.

Potential topics of meaningful dialogue

With respect to risk reduction and transparency, both sides have called for dialogue in light of risky close encounters that have resulted from stronger posturing

lished. The current number of participants in the NRC lends itself to deadlock when contentious issues arise, constrained by diverging national views and the formality of large-group dynamics (an aversion to public conflict known as the “Ringelmann effect” in social psychology). Smaller group sizes of three to eight are best suited to facilitate the type of frank and meaningful dialogue that the Secretary General and Allies have envisioned.

The creation of this adjunct platform carries risks (under-representation of some members and supplanting the NRC), but they may be mitigated with a few precautionary measures. In order to ensure collective representation, these groups should be formed

The reality of NATO-Russia dialogue is that “no-business” has become the new “business-as-usual”

on a rotational basis with NATO Civilian International Staff. Each staff member consults with multiple states and acts as a proxy for sub-groups of all 30 Allies. The scope of topics