

NATO-Russia Relations: The Background

The end of the Cold War was a turning point in Europe's history. From 1991, NATO began to work hard to establish a strategic partnership with Russia.

However, in March 2014, Russia illegally annexed Crimea. In response, NATO suspended all practical cooperation with Russia, while keeping political and military channels of communication open. This factsheet sets out the key dates and events in the relationship.

1994: The Partnership for Peace

In June 1994, Russia became the first country to join NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), a programme of practical bilateral cooperation between NATO and partner countries.

The Brussels Summit Declaration defined the goals of PfP as expanding and intensifying political and military cooperation in Europe, increasing stability, diminishing threats to peace, and building strengthened security relationships.

1997: The NATO-Russia Founding Act

On 27 May 1997, NATO leaders and President Boris Yeltsin signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act, expressing their determination to "build together a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and cooperative security."

The Act established the goal of cooperation in areas such as peacekeeping, arms control, counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics and theatre missile defence.

In the Founding Act, NATO and Russia agreed to base their cooperation on the principles of human rights and civil liberties, refraining from the threat or use of force against each other or any other state. With the illegal annexation of Crimea, the territory of a sovereign state, Russia violated the Founding Act.



Signing of NATO-Russia Founding Act, 27 May 1997

2002-2008: Cooperation through the NATO-Russia Council

On 28 May 2002, NATO leaders and President Vladimir Putin signed a declaration in Rome titled "NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality." This established the NATO-Russia Council as a consensus-based body of equal members. Russia was the only NATO partner offered such a privileged partnership.

The NATO-Russia Council led to cooperation in areas such as counter-terrorism, crisis management, arms control and theatre missile defence. NATO and Russia cooperated on supporting Afghanistan – including Russian provision of transit routes for ISAF, counter-narcotics training for officers from Afghanistan, Central Asia and Pakistan, and support for the Afghan army's helicopter fleet.

2008: The Georgia Crisis

Russia's military action in Georgia in August 2008 led to the suspension of formal meetings of the NATO-Russia Council and cooperation in some areas. Allies continue to call on Russia to reverse its recognition of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

At the NATO Summit in Strasbourg and Kehl on 4 April 2009, NATO leaders acknowledged disagreements with Russia over Georgia, but decided to resume practical and political cooperation. They also expressed their readiness to make the NATO-Russia Council a more efficient vehicle for cooperation.

2010-2014: Seeking a New Stage of Cooperation

During the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, NATO leaders and President Dmitry Medvedev agreed to embark on “a new stage of cooperation towards a true strategic partnership”, based on the goals and principles of the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the NATO-Russia Rome Declaration.

NATO met its commitments to that cooperation. The Alliance invited Russia to explore the potential for expanded cooperation on missile defence, and the two agreed to further strengthen their cooperation in the fight against terrorism, and counter-piracy efforts. In the years that followed, NATO and Russia worked together in support of the Afghan army’s helicopter fleet, conducted joint counter-piracy and submarine-rescue exercises, and discussed a joint mission to help dispose of Syria’s chemical weapons.



Joint NATO-Russia counter-terrorism exercise Vigilant Skies 2011

2014-2017: Responding to the Ukraine Crisis

In March 2014, Russia illegally and illegitimately annexed Crimea, part of Ukraine’s sovereign territory. In response, on 1 April 2014, NATO Foreign Ministers decided to suspend all practical cooperation with Russia. Since then, Russia has continued its aggressive actions against Ukraine, including destabilising eastern Ukraine. As a result, NATO’s practical cooperation with Russia remains suspended.

NATO has responded to this more dangerous security environment by enhancing its deterrence and defence posture, while remaining open to political dialogue with Russia.

At the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, NATO leaders made clear that an improvement in the Alliance’s relations with Russia will be contingent on a clear and constructive change in Russia’s actions – one that demonstrates compliance with international law and Russia’s international commitments. Until then, NATO and Russia cannot return to “business as usual”.

Channels for communication nevertheless remain open. Talking to Russia allows NATO to clearly communicate our views, with the crisis in and around Ukraine being the first topic of discussion.

The NATO-Russia Council has met six times since the suspension of practical cooperation, most recently on 30 March 2017. The Secretary General and Deputy Secretary General also engage regularly with Russian counterparts.

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