



Why Russia Is Walking Away From NATO and European Union

Description

NATO feels no need to concede. Nor does it feel under any moral or political obligation to do so. Russia, on the other hand, is not the Russia of the 1990s, says Paul Robinson in an interview with SCF.

Sometimes things get so bad that one party feels it is best just to walk away from the relationship. That reasoning, notes Professor Paul Robinson in the following interview, seems to be behind Russia's recent decision to cut diplomatic links with the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Russia has similarly rebuffed relations with the European Union, lamenting that they also have broken down and become dysfunctional. These moves do not signify a sinister Russian agenda, according to Robinson. It simply reflects a frustration with and disillusionment in diplomatic channels that Moscow has pursued over several decades with both blocs. Henceforth, it may be more productive for Moscow to deal with individual states on a bilateral basis rather than through mediation with collective groups. This is because, as Robinson explains, both NATO and the EU have become encumbered with "groupthink" and "group polarization" whereby the blocs have adopted extremely prejudicial attitudes towards Russia. Paradoxically, the group position tends to be not representative of all individual members. He cautions, however, that tensions between East and West may persist and even escalate.

Paul Robinson's [biography](#) includes currently being Professor of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa where he teaches Russian and military history, among other topics. He writes extensively for international media on relations between Russia and the West. Prior to graduate studies at Toronto and Oxford Universities, he served as a regular officer in the British Army Intelligence Corps from 1989 to 1994, and as a reserve officer in the Canadian Forces from 1994 to 1996. He also worked as a media research executive in Moscow in 1995. Robinson is the author of six books, [including](#) *Russian Conservatism: An Ideology or a Natural Attitude?*

Interview

Question: You recently [described](#) the now suspended NATO-Russia Council as something of a "charade" – where little was achieved in terms of meaningful communication between NATO and

Russia. Why was this forum so ineffective? Moscow claims its views were not being listened to. Is that a reasonable grievance?

Paul Robinson: I think that there were perhaps clashing expectations on both sides as to what such an arrangement was for and what it could achieve, which led both of them to feel frustrated with the results. Ultimately, the problem is that they have different perceptions of their interests. As the more powerful party, NATO feels no need to concede. Nor does it feel under any moral or political obligation to do so. Russia, on the other hand, is not the Russia of the 1990s, when NATO-Russia cooperation began. It is stronger, more confident, more self-assertive. It too is not in a mood to concede. The result is an ever-growing confrontation.

Question: Russia appears to be now moving toward trying to set up bilateral communications with individual members of NATO. You have mentioned the problem of “groupthink” and “group polarization”. Can you elaborate on how those dynamics operate and how they limited NATO dialogue with Russia?

Paul Robinson: Groupthink tends to suppress dissent, as dissenters don’t want to cause trouble or stand out from the crowd. The prevailing narrative or dominant position therefore tends to go unchallenged. And, of course, the more it goes unchallenged, the more it becomes accepted as gospel truth and the harder it is to counter it. At present, the dominant narrative in the West is the malign nature of the “Putin regime” and of Russian foreign and defense policy. Groupthink means that even if somebody within NATO disagreed with this, they would be unlikely to challenge it.

Group polarization works slightly differently. It is a process whereby discussion pushes members of a group towards extremes, normally towards an extreme version of the dominant position at the start. Within the EU and NATO, this process has become more pronounced, I think, since the inclusion of eastern European states, some of whom, particularly Poland and the Baltic States, are very hostile towards Russia. Their presence within the EU and NATO has pushed those organizations towards a more extreme version of anti-Russianism than would otherwise have been the case. Both institutions work on consensus, and to reach consensus they concede to the most Russophobic elements.

Question: There appears to be an analogy with how Russia’s diplomatic dealings with NATO have also been manifest with regard to Russia’s relations with the European Union as a bloc. Would you agree that there is something of the same kind of dynamics at play frustrating meaningful dialogue?

Paul Robinson: The EU and NATO have similar membership but are constructed in different ways. EU decision-making is very complex, and it requires the agreement of almost all involved. As a result, it can be very difficult for the EU to come to any sort of decision, let alone come to it quickly. This can make dealing with the EU very frustrating for outside parties, who therefore prefer to deal with individual members. In addition to that, the EU, like NATO, has to take into account the deeply anti-Russian stances of some of its members, and as such will always be more anti-Russia than will much of the EU’s membership. This provides another incentive for Russia to skirt EU institutions whenever possible and deal with members one on one.

Question: No doubt Russia will now be accused more than ever of trying to split Western alliances by going down the route of opting for bilateral negotiations with individual nations. How do you ascertain Russia's motives? Is it genuine reaching out, or something more Machiavellian?

Paul Robinson: I don't see anything Machiavellian in what Russia is doing. While some will accuse it of trying to split NATO and the EU, in reality it's just pursuing its national interests, and it finds it easier to do so bilaterally than by working with NATO and/or the EU. That's really all there is to it.

Question: You have expressed doubt about Moscow's political prudence in closing down the NATO diplomatic links, suggesting that the move leaves Russia open to criticism of being non-communicative and worsening already fraught relations with the West. However, do you not think it is better to clear the air, so to speak, and disabuse any illusions of "partnership"?

Paul Robinson: There are perhaps times when things get so bad that the only thing left to do is walk away. Clearly, Moscow has decided that that time is now. I think that the step is more symbolic than anything else, as the diplomatic links were not achieving anything positive in practice. If relations improve, the links can be quite easily restored. I think, though, that that is very unlikely for a very long time, if ever. The rift seems pretty permanent and I am not optimistic for a reduction of East-West tensions.

Question: At the latest NATO [summit](#) of defense ministers held last week there were the familiar accusations of Russia threatening Europe's security and that of Ukraine in particular. Moscow, on the other hand, points to NATO expansion over many years in contravention of the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997, as well as more recently supplying Ukraine with billions of dollars worth of lethal weaponry. Which narrative is more credible: Russia as aggressor, or NATO as aggressor?

Paul Robinson: I consider the situation to be a classic example of what international scholars call the "security dilemma". Mutual suspicions lead each side to take measures to defend themselves against the other; those measures are then seen as threatening by the other party, sparking further measures, which are in turn seen as threatening, thus inducing yet more measures, and so on, in a process of escalation. So, Russian actions to protect itself induce fear in NATO, which takes action to protect itself, which induces fear in Moscow, which takes measures, etc, etc. Once you're on this spiral, it's hard to get off.

Question: U.S. President Joe Biden talks about not wanting a Cold War with China or Russia. But U.S. conduct and policy contradicts this seeming aspiration of not wanting confrontation. What is going on with U.S. policy? Is it deception, duplicity or plain incoherence with nobody in control?

Paul Robinson: I don't believe that this is duplicity. I do think that policy is poorly thought through, and the likely reactions of China and Russia to U.S. policy are not properly considered. This may be in part because policy is rarely coherent in the sense of being the product of a single will, resulting in a single, clear objective with actions being coordinated carefully with that objective. Multiple, often competing interest groups contribute to policy-making. Economic interests dictate good relations with China. But the military-industrial complex profits from depicting China as a dangerous threat. And so on. The result is some sort of compromise in which the state seeks both to have good relations with China and to "contain"/"deter" China in a way that of course threatens it and may contribute to worsening

relations. The fact that the various elements of policy don't fit each other well is simply a product of how policy is made in a large, complex state such as the USA.

Question: What steps need to be taken by the United States, Russia and China in order to alleviate tensions and improve global security?

Paul Robinson: Those involved need a little less self-assurance and a little more understanding of the other side's perspective. Military expenditures need to be cut – war between the large powers is unthinkable, given the destruction it would cause, so in my opinion there is no justification for most of the military capacity currently deployed and being developed. The reality is that the richest parts of the world live in considerable security. This is especially true of countries in the West: we have no need for military capabilities. By reducing them we would send positive signals to other parties that could help cut through the Gordian knot of the security dilemma and help to de-escalate international tensions.

by Finian Cunningham

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Date Created
11/05/2021