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Great Power Recognition is a Double-Edged Sword for Moscow

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Summary

A curious mixture of hype and low expectations provided the backdrop as Joe Biden met Vladimir Putin in Geneva on 16 June 2021. Their meeting should be seen in the context of the NATO summit that took place two days earlier. The NATO summit hinted at a more unified stance on Russia among the alliance's members, while the Geneva summit addressed Russia's status concerns, and both have ramifications for Russia's relations with Western states and its neighbours' external relations.

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In Russia the mood was generally positive after the Geneva summit. A key reason for this was that the meeting was widely interpreted as recognition of Russia's great power status. It called to mind Cold War-era summits, the earliest of which, in 1955, also took place in Geneva. This was a far cry from the US position in 2014 when Barack Obama (in)famously called Russia a "regional power". However, incipient recognition of Russia's great power status by the US may yet prove a double-edged sword for Russia. Combined with a more unified NATO stance on Russia, it sets in motion a mutually reinforcing dynamic that could exacerbate tensions.

NATO divided

A unified NATO stance on Russia, if indeed one is emerging, has been oddly long coming. It would be tempting to think that Russia's "resurgence" beginning with its intervention in Georgia in 2008, and especially its involvement in Ukraine from 2014, galvanised NATO members in a way not seen since the Cold War. To some extent this is of course

true and it certainly put Russia high up on the agenda of alliance members, not least the newer members that were formerly part of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact, as well as bringing an increase in NATO drills and an altered force posture on its eastern flank.

Yet there was also a lot of disagreement within NATO about what to do and alliance members had competing priorities. The Ukraine crisis occurred when NATO's European members were also dealing with the migrant crisis, terrorism concerns and the fallout from the global financial crisis.

> The fragmentation within NATO was consistent with viewing Russia as a regional power as well since this implied it had limited capabilities and a limited geographical scope of interests.

NATO members were therefore justified in having conflicting priorities; for many in southern and western Europe Russia was perceived as a concern rather than a threat.

In the US, Barack Obama's presidency soon gave way to Donald Trump who came into office questioning the existence of NATO and seemingly all sweetness and light around Putin. While in office he repeatedly challenged NATO members on missing an agreed target on defence spending. In the face of Trump's scepticism, NATO – as it had been in the 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and apparent end of East-West confrontation – was once again fighting for its survival. France's president Emmanuel Macron didn't help matters by calling the alliance "braindead" in November 2019.

NATO united

The recent change of guard in Washington therefore added interest to the NATO summit in Brussels on 14 June, albeit overshadowed by the symbolism of the Geneva summit. The latter expectedly drew criticism from Republicans in the US who accused Biden of "appeasement" in response to the comity on display in the press conferences ending the summit. This was deeply ironic given the last Republican president's fawning on Putin, but an important reminder of the domestic constraints faced by the US president.

If Biden confers on Russia the status it aspires to then this goes someway to establishing a new basis for bilateral relations. The sticking point for Russia may prove to be less America's policy on Russia itself than America's renewed commitment to NATO though. The comments on Russia in the NATO summit communiqué are more focused than is often the case in such documents, reflecting as they do compromises among signatories.

NATO claims that it "remains clear-eyed about the challenges Russia poses" (Paragraph 46). It seems meatier than the communiqué that resulted from NATO's 2014 summit in Wales. While a more robust position was apparent at the Warsaw summit in 2016, NATO quickly digressed into preoccupation with its internal politics during the Trump era.

In press remarks after the latest summit, Germany's Angela Merkel insisted Russia was NATO's "major challenge" (see 7.22pm) and Macron emphasised the alliance's North Atlantic focus (see 6.37pm), implying Russia should take precedence over China. Indeed, and in contrast, there were widely varying views found in NATO leaders' remarks on China. It follows that the alliance's planned new Strategic Concept will surely end up reflecting concerns associated with Russia first and foremost.

The outcome of the Brussels summit therefore suggests that NATO members' threat perceptions of Russia, while not identical, have somewhat converged. Since 2015 they have agreed that Article 5, the collective defence clause, could be invoked in response to "hybrid warfare" (Paragraph 31) which many see as emanating from Russia. There are many material reasons for shared threat perception among NATO allies about Russia, stemming from allegations which need not be enumerated here, more significant is that divergent views on Russia policy will be harder to justify if Russia is recognised as a great power.

> If NATO members agree Russia is a great power, it will be harder to ignore and therefore demand more of their attention, including on non-traditional or "hybrid" matters.

Moscow therefore will need to be careful how it wields its putative weapon of great power recognition.

Implications

There is a risk that NATO members' focus on a common approach among themselves on Russia comes at the cost of looking for solutions *with Russia*. For this reason, Russian satisfaction with the summit in Geneva should be tempered by the outcome of the earlier NATO summit. Biden's message of "America's back" is aimed primarily at allies, but its implications affect adversaries as well.

For Russia a more consolidated rival bloc will make it harder to find "pseudo-allies" inside NATO to do its bidding. Russia retains considerable influence in Hungary through energy ties, though perceptions of Russia by Hungarians are very mixed (see this recent report). Another potential pseudo-ally was Turkey, which for a while seemed to be

drifting closer to Russia. However, Biden and Recep Erdogan also talked in Brussels and the rhetoric at least looks like an improvement on recent relations between Turkey and its allies.

> For the “in-between” states located between Russia and NATO a more unified NATO, combined with wider recognition of Russia as a great power, may be viewed as an opportunity to appeal more forcefully to the West for support as a counterweight to Russia’s influence.

Or it may result in them believing Russia is stronger and has more to give, and therefore expect more concessions from it. These prospective responses are these states’ prerogative and Moscow’s chagrin. In this regard, this autumn’s large Zapad-2021 military exercise could be instructive. How will Belarus, a participant, engage in the exercise and portray the drills to third parties? How will Ukraine, with Russian troops close to its northern border, respond to the exercise?

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