

## **Did Stalin Want to Join NATO?**

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ON 25 AUGUST 1952, Stalin received French Ambassador Louis Joxe for a working meeting at which the ambassador in reply to Stalin's question about the nature of NATO from Charles de Gaulle's perspective hinted that the bloc was an absolutely peaceful structure strictly within the UN Charter. "Stalin laughed and asked Vyshinsky, who was present during the conversation, whether the U.S.S.R. should join it then." Nikolai Kochkin who had spent some time in the Russian Foreign Ministry's archives pointed out: "From every indication, it was simply irony, but it cannot be ruled out that Stalin had some latent intentions" (*Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn*, No. 1-2, 2009, [www.interaffiars.ru](http://www.interaffiars.ru)). In 1951, Andrei Gromyko repeatedly stated: "If this pact was aimed against the restoration of German aggression, the U.S.S.R. would join NATO."

In March 1954, twelve months after Stalin's death, the Soviet Union sent a note to the governments of the United States, France and Great Britain which said that the North Atlantic Alliance created a closed group of states and ignored the task of preventing another German aggression. The U.S.S.R., the only of the great powers — members of the anti-Hitler coalition left outside the Alliance, could not but treat it as an aggressive structure aimed against the Soviet Union. Under certain conditions, namely, if it united all great powers — members of the anti-Hitler coalition, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would have lost its aggressive nature. In view of this the Soviet government was prepared "to consider jointly with the interested governments the question of the participation of the U.S.S.R. in the North Atlantic Treaty."

An analysis of numerous projects and memorandums, in short everything which was going on behind the scenes, testifies that the Soviet intention to join NATO was not a propaganda ploy. Moscow went even further: it did not exclude America's involvement in the European security treaty. A year later, in 1955 at the Four-Power Conference in Geneva the Soviet Union revived the question of its potential NATO membership.

What happened next is no secret: the former Soviet allies resolutely declined everything which came from Moscow.

Should this be taken to mean that nobody in the West supported (or supports) the idea of NATO membership for the Soviet Union/Russia? The answer is “No.” Recently, former Defense Minister of Germany Volker Rühle and several other prominent German politicians and former generals called on the West to invite Russia to NATO. According to *Der Spiegel* the ruling coalition and the opposition are toying with the idea. In fact, it has its supporters on the other side of the Atlantic. William Perry, eminent politician and former U.S. Secretary of Defense, said some time ago: “We must draw the circle [of security] so that Russia is inside it, not excluded from it.” This will transform NATO into a strategic link between three poles of power — North America, Europe and Russia. One wonders: What has changed? Why Russia is needed so much?

People behind the initiative are open about their motives: they are concerned with the new power centers and an obvious need to provide an adequate answer to the political, economic and strategic dynamics demonstrated by the large Asian powers. Russia, the eternal outpost at the border between Europe and Asia, is a natural, desired or even indispensable ally. To ensure its security, Europe should act together with Russia, not against it. Today, it has become clear that Russia is needed inside NATO to ensure energy security of NATO members, to say nothing about control over nuclear weapons and the problems of Iran, Afghanistan and the Middle East.

It should be said that “Russia’s friends” in NATO expect a much easier and prompt settlement of many issues dealt with in the Security Council for the simple reason that China will be completely isolated. By the same token the remedies for the Iranian and Mid-Eastern problems will become less painful for the West. More than that: Russia will stop being a systemic critic of many of the most complicated Trans-Atlantic political issues. There is even a more important consideration: with Russia on its side the Alliance will restore its legitimacy lost after its UN-unsanctioned attack at Yugoslavia.

For obvious reasons nothing is said about Russia’s possible military involvement in the “hot spots”: discussed aloud this issue (too sensitive for Russia) would have betrayed NATO’s inability to live up to its inflated global ambitions. There is, however, a time gap: Iran, Afghanistan and the Middle East require prompt joint action while Russia’s NATO membership is seen as a distant perspective, somewhere 50 years from now.

There is another important fact that makes Russia look like a useful ally for the West. Witness what is written, from time to time, in the American press about Russia's positions on the international scene. One of such contributions carries a telltale title: "Russia is not, and will not be, diplomatically isolated."

Its author says with a great deal of sarcasm addressed to the George W. Bush Administration: "One of the favorite neo-con tropes is that ... Russia is friendless and alone in the international

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arena due to the Kremlin's profound incompetence, rapaciousness, and cruelty." And further: "Today numerous countries that used to be Russia's outright enemies (Israel, China, Turkey) or very negatively disposed towards it (Brazil, Argentina, and other previously right-wing military regimes in South America, as well as the apartheid regime in South Africa) are now in close diplomatic and economic engagement with Russia. Even during the height of the Cold War India had decent relations with Russia, and these have only gotten closer as of late. Russia has even gotten substantially more economically engaged with Japan, despite some nasty, and probably intractable, disputes over the Kuril Islands. <...> Russia has good relations with all of the other BRICs and the other fast-growing economies of Asia. It has good relations with most of the Middle East, including Iran and Israel, and its antagonists are primarily former Warsaw Pact countries in a narrow geographical band in Eastern Europe." The recent presidential elections in Ukraine have supplied another argument.

The new geopolitical challenges, Russia's firm diplomatic positions, crises in the world economy and in the development ideology are behind the idea of the NATO membership for Russia. This means that we should not treat what is said in the West as merely intrigues passed for friendly advances. Herr Ruhe whom I met in Berlin when he headed the Bundestag Committee for International Affairs was very sincere and pragmatic about drawing closer to Russia. How should we respond, if any response is needed, to these obvious probes?

The hypothetical question requires no answer yet it would be unwise to ignore the reasons which force very different people in the West talk

about closer relations with Russia. The question, however, raises new questions. First, should Russia as a Eurasian country (from the geographical point of view) join the Alliance which strives to prevent the emergence of new centers of global power in Asia in the first place? This will make Russia an active buffer. In fact, Russia's national interests demand, first and foremost, that it should decide whether the "strategic dynamics" of Asia threatens it at all. Second, will Russia's vague promise to join NATO encourage the post-Soviet states to seek membership in the Alliance? Indeed, "since Russia is more or less willing we can hop on as well." Finally: one feels that those who say that the process of drawing closer requires a "different Russia and a different NATO" are right. This means that Russia will have to revise its ideas about its place and role in the world while NATO should shed its "NATO-centrism." In any case, the rapidly changing world will force the sides to look for new approaches and novel solutions.

As part of the Alliance, Russia will have, likewise, to revise its ideas about sovereignty: after all, those inside a corporation should stop jesting at its expense, as a proverb goes.