

## No More Radio Silence

*The NATO-Russia Council has met again for the first time in two years. Good sense has prevailed: whoever stays silent solves nothing.*

Here's some good news: the NATO-Russia Council has met again for the first time in nearly two years. The Council had convened for the last time in June 2014. Since then there had been only radio silence - NATO had boycotted the Council in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea.

This was a bad idea from the beginning. After all, when would one need the Council if not in times of crisis? One person who had taken issue with breaking the lines of communication to Russia was Germany's Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Now Steinmeier stated with some relief that the Council "can once again take up its important work." He'd worked towards this goal from behind the scenes for quite some time.

For his part, NATO's General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg, a soft-spoken man, would not have complained had the Council reconvened earlier. But countries like the US and Poland wanted to play hardball with Putin. Not least to assuage Washington and Warsaw, but of course also to make it clear to Moscow that violently redrawing borders was unacceptable, Stoltenberg maintains that there will be "no return to business as usual until Russia once again respects international law."

In a meeting that lasted twice as long as planned, the Council addressed the crisis in Ukraine, the risk of unforeseen collision of military aircraft (such as, for example, in the airspace over the Baltic Sea), the situation in Afghanistan, and the threat of terrorism. These are all matters in which, without Russia, there can be no progress and no solution.

### **Crisis of confidence in the relations between Russia and the West**

The same goes for Syria, naturally. Putin's involvement in the civil war was intended to rescue the Assad Regime from the growing threat of defeat and to secure Russian military bases on the Mediterranean. At the same time, the intervention has also helped diplomatic efforts to end the war. The ceasefire has held for more than six weeks. There are, of course, still skirmishes. But the battles since then have not been fought nearly as brutally as they had been before the truce. Had the Russians and the Americans not found their way back to the negotiation table, there would not have been a ceasefire.

None of this changes the fact that Russia's actions in Ukraine have led to a lasting crisis of

confidence with the West. The NATO Summit in 2014 in Wales dealt, among other issues, with the establishment of a new Rapid Response Force (“Spearhead”) and the relocation of military hardware to Eastern Europe. For the Baltic states and for Poland, this is not enough. They want a stronger NATO presence in their territories. Only this way will they feel protected against Russian attack.

Washington has shown understanding for the Eastern European countries. For all its willingness to maintain a conversation with Putin, the Obama administration regards Russia as the source of its greatest national security threats, above even China, North Korea, Iran and international terrorism. That is why the Pentagon wants to move more heavy artillery and more troops to Eastern Europe. In the coming years this will cost the US Department of Defense almost three and a half billion dollars – effectively quadrupling this part of its budget. The New York Times found this “Message to Mr. Putin” somewhat “excessive.”

Poland and the Baltic states see the matter rather differently. At the coming NATO Summit in Warsaw in early July, they won’t be particularly inclined to commit to a dialogue with Moscow. Germany, America, Britain and France should take note of this, even while trying at the same time to bring about a careful rapprochement with Russia.

Steinmeier already has a new goal in mind: to invite Russia back to the table of the great industrialized nations. He hopes that the “conditions will be right to return to the G8.” Hopefully, he will find support in this endeavor, as he did in the reconvening of the NATO Russia Council. Because he who remains silent solves nothing.

*This article is part of a regular series of contributions from Matthias Nass for the Bucerius network. Matthias Nass began his career with ZEIT in 1983, and from 1998 to 2010 served as Deputy Editor-in-Chief. Since 2011, he has served as Chief International Correspondent for the newspaper. His area of expertise is foreign and security policy. This article was originally published in ZEIT Online. The opinions expressed in this article belong solely to the author, and do not reflect the official position of any of the Bucerius Institutions.*