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A NATO transit hub in Ulyanovsk - What's behind the Russian debate?

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"Sometimes history needs a push", in the words of Soviet revolutionary Vladimir Lenin. The same could also be said of stagnant NATO-Russia relations. Discussions on the NATO-Russia showpiece project, missile defence, are gridlocked and Russian president Vladimir Putin will not attend the Chicago Summit in May 2012. Despite these poor auspices, the Kremlin recently took the initiative of proposing that a NATO transit centre for military personnel and "non-lethal" cargo to and from Afghanistan could be set up in the central Russian city of Ulyanovsk. Named after its most famous son, Lenin (who was born there as Vladimir Ulyanov), Ulyanovsk is a city of some 600,000 inhabitants on the Volga. It is centrally placed in the well developed industrial area known as the Ulyanovsk Region, important mainly for the automobile industry. The city's famous Vostochny ("East") airport was built in 1983, to provide an alternative landing area for the Buran space programme. This airport has the fifth longest runway in the world and is suitable for all types of aircraft, including large cargo planes such as the Antonov An-124 Ruslan or the Boeing C-17 Globemaster. It has been an international airport since 1999, is ideally connected to the Russian railway system, and could make Ulyanovsk a major logistic hub for the surrounding area.

NATO is defending Russia in the Hindu Kush

The Kremlin's proposal to allow NATO the use of Ulyanovsk Vostochny Airport as a "multimodal" transit facility for air and rail transport of personnel and cargo was unexpected, but is perfectly in line with Russian interests. A first consideration in this respect is that the Kremlin had granted NATO member states transit rights to Afghanistan through Russia on a bilateral basis from the very beginning of the operation in Afghanistan, as this met Russia's need for somebody to take care of the pressing security problem originating from the soft underbelly of the former Soviet empire. NATO as such was allowed to ship supplies through Russia after 2009, when relations with the US improved in the context of the so-called reset policy. A second factor to consider is that granting use of Ulyanovsk Vostochny will give Moscow additional political leverage and bring it closer to those nations which are heavily involved in ISAF. Thirdly, this transit arrangement will not cost a penny but will actually bring much needed money to the struggling Russian provinces. According to conservative estimates, ISAF will redeploy 125,000 containers and 72,000 vehicles. Even if not all of these take the route through Russia, the transit arrangement will have a positive impact on the economic development of the Ulyanovsk Region.

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Russia's strategic interest in cooperating closely with NATO and the US is apparent, even if politicians in Moscow would hardly admit it until recently. The Ulyanovsk issue has led to a kind of role reversal. It is suddenly the Russian officials who are emphasizing the argument that NATO's war in Afghanistan ensures Russia's security, meaning that NATO's engagement is in Russia's core interest. Foreign Minister Lavrov stated in a recent address to the State Duma, the lower chamber of the Russian parliament: "We are helping the coalition (…) primarily out of our own national interest."[2]

Independent Russian experts are even more outspoken. Anatoly Tsiganok, an expert with the Institute of Political and Military Analysis in Moscow, recently stated: "We're thankful to the Americans: for 10 years they've been protecting us from the Taliban. (...) Letting them use Ulyanovsk could be just the beginning. We can move on to address other outstanding issues between us, such as the anti-missile shield in Europe."[3] Indeed, showing such good will to NATO could afford Moscow an opportunity to indulge its penchant for connecting unrelated policy issues, giving it the edge in discussions of more sensitive questions such as missile defence. However, even if it might be undesirable to have such topics set off against each other as bargaining chips, Russia's open pragmatism and realism towards ISAF definitely mark a step in the right direction with a view to overcoming the stalemate in NATO-Russia relations.

A logistic bridge too far? Headwinds from different directions inside Russia …

The advantages are obvious but, after years and years of anti-Western propaganda, many Russians have great difficulty in understanding their leaders' "good will" towards NATO. Indeed, they see it as a danger to their homeland if the Alliance, regarded in official military doctrine as a threat to Russian security, is allowed to use a facility in central Russia for military purposes.[4] Russian policy-makers probably did not foresee such opposition as there has been: small demonstrations in Ulyanovsk, protests in Russian blogs and social networks, and heated and tense discussions in the newly elected State Duma.

The political opposition is vehemently expressing its patriotic concerns over the Ulyanovsk issue. Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist party (KPRF), expresses this view in an official statement to the State Duma, entitled "Transit point of NATO in Ulyanovsk - a possible springboard for aggression": "For the first time in the history of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, there is going to be a foreign base on our territory, moreover it is the base of a military bloc, that is perceived by an overwhelming majority of the population as hostile."[5]

Accusations that support to the West/US/NATO is unpatriotic have not gone unanswered. An example is a Facebook post by Dmitry Rogozin, former Russian Ambassador to NATO and now Vice-Premier with responsibility for the defence industry. Rogozin, hardly a pro-NATO activist, defends the Kremlin's plans and does not think that "the transit of NATO toilet paper through Russia can be considered the betrayal of the Fatherland."[6] He dismisses the view of many fellow Russians, expressed in internet blogs and through statements by the KPRF, that the transit arrangement will bring an influx of weapons and drugs from Afghanistan into Russia. In answer to such claims, Rogozin has posted the message: "Customs checks will be obligatory. Stop panicking."

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2 Maria Kuchma, NATO Base in Russia 'Pragmatic Decision', Ria Novosti, quoted by the newsletter Johnsons Russia List, 21 March 2012.

3 Fred Weir, US-Russia 'reset' gets a boost with Russian offer of airbase, The Christian Science Monitor, 15 March 2012, http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2012/0315/US-Russia-reset-gets-a-boost-with-Russian-offer-of-airbase.

4 The February 5, 2010 military doctrine mentions NATO as a main source of external military danger to Russia. English translation - http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2010/02/05/text-of-newly-approved-russian-military-doctrine/l8t.

5 Statement of the KPRF in the State Duma, 20 March 2012, http://kprf.ru/dep/104215.html. In a Twitter message on 20 March 2012, he goes so far as to say that the NATO base in Ulyanovsk is Putin's gift to the US in order to ensure American recognition of the recent election results.

6 Quoted by Ria novosti, 13 March 2012, http://en.rian.ru/world/20120313/172143260.html.

A couple of dozen protesters in Ulyanovsk can be seen as a tangible sign of an essentially home-made dilemma. "The anti-NATO demonstrations in Ulyanovsk were, kind of ironically, organized by United Russia [Putin's party]," comments Alexei Malashenko, a leading political expert with the Carnegie Center in Moscow. "It seems people took Putin too literally. There is a contradiction between the things Putin says about US imperialism, and the need to take practical decisions for cooperation."[7] During the election campaign the anti-US and anti-NATO card was played prominently – very often without differentiating between the anathemas. It is thus no surprise that the prospect of a NATO facility within the country feeds the fear of "creeping occupation."[8] Nikolai Zlobin, director of the Russian and Asian programs at the World Security Institute in Washington, hits the nail on the head: "The Russian government uses anti-Americanism to strengthen its own position domestically and effectively damages Russia's strategic interests."[9] This dilemma of political communication shows the need to explain national strategic interests better and to overcome a misplaced sense of patriotism that interprets responsiveness to the US or NATO as a sign of weakness. Common interests and partnership with NATO should finally be given their place on the Russian political menu.

Meanwhile, local politicians in the Ulyanovsk Region do not have to think twice about this win-win situation and are looking forward to the benefits of NATO's presence. For them the Kremlin's offer is a stroke of luck offering a boost to much needed investment. The cooperation with NATO would be realized in bilateral arrangements with those NATO countries who want to use the facility. The governor of the Ulyanovsk Region, Sergei Morozov, welcomes the profitable project and has hopes for a few thousand new jobs. Also, not surprisingly, the head of the local customs authority foresees enormous duty revenues for the years to come. Experts assume that (1) transit flights with personnel and military cargo will stop there for refuelling, (2) non-military or non-lethal goods will be flown out of Afghanistan to Europe (mainly Germany), and (3) less important goods will be transferred through Ulyanovsk Vostochny for onward rail shipment to Riga and Tallinn. After some necessary reconstruction works the transit hub, working with mainly Russian companies, will be able to process thousands of containers. One major beneficiary is going to be the Volga-Dnepr cargo airline, already the biggest taxpayer in the region, which uses An-124 Ruslan long-range heavy transport aircraft. This company is already working closely with some NATO countries through the Strategic Airlift Interim Solution (SALIS) initiative, by which most materials have been transported from Europe to Afghanistan.

… and outside Russia

Last but not least, a further contradiction has to be resolved by the Russian leadership before NATO can be allowed into the Ulyanovsk region. During a December 2011 session of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, comprising Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), Moscow negotiated that military bases of third countries can be deployed on the territory of CSTO member states only with the consent of all fellow members. This agreement – maybe a product of simple mistrust – makes it easier to control political moves by CSTO allies. In the last few years especially, Moscow has kept a close eye on Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan – sometimes even more than an eye.[10] In the case of the Ulyanovsk hub, it is the watcher's turn to be watched. The CSTO member states will ask Moscow for an explanation. This issue is unlikely to be a real impediment, as the Russians hasten to declare that the installation used by NATO will simply be a transit facility ("perevalochny punkt") and not a military base ("voennaya baza").[11] An important consideration is that almost all other CSTO members (except Belarus

7 Alexei Malashenko quoted in Fred Weir, see footnote 3.
8 Viktoriya Fomenko, Voennoi baze NATO v Rossii – byt, Trud, 21. March 2012, http://www.trud.ru/article/21-03-2012/273903_voennoj_baze_nato_v_rossii_byt.html.
9 Nikolai Zlobin, The Military-political friendship between the US and Russia, Vedomosti, 26 March 2012, http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/1561360/voennopoliticheskaya_druzhba.
10 Uzbekistan hosts a German base (Termez), while a US base (Karshi-Khanabad) was closed in 2005. Kyrgyzstan hosts the US Transit Center at Manas Airport.
11 To paraphrase a Twitter message of Dmitry Rogozin from 15 March 2012: "To make it short: There is no 'NATO base' in Russia. And that's that."

and Armenia) are similarly involved in the transit business to and from Afghanistan. However, even if this issue does not bring the initiative to a halt and the Ulyanovsk arrangement goes ahead, it will cause a credibility problem for Russia within the CSTO.

It's good for NATO and it's good for Russia

Despite misgivings on both sides, the Afghanistan situation is a perfect vehicle to deepen and improve NATO-Russia cooperation. As a regional power, Russia will in any case have to take on greater responsibility in Central Asia and Afghanistan after 2014.

Working together in Ulyanovsk might not in itself be enough to provide the momentum which is needed to overcome the gridlock between NATO and Russia. The project would nevertheless be a confidence-booster for both sides, as it not only involves investments but could develop into an arrangement of operational significance. And, last but not least, it is also a chance for NATO to improve its reputation within Russia.

Cooperation in Ulyanovsk can be seen as a win-win situation, as NATO can strengthen its northern lines of communication to Afghanistan while Russia can be more actively involved in a common security measure which is extremely relevant to its own security. Obviously, Russia has to deal with the unexpected domestic protest and resolve contradictions in the formulation of its strategic interests. Most importantly it has to discontinue its anti-Western rhetoric.