In the eyes of some observers, the Kosovo crisis posed the greatest threat to relations between Russia and NATO since the end of the Cold War. It also, according to some, seemingly demonstrated the impotence and marginalisation of Russia as an actor in European security affairs. In order to test and explore the validity of these propositions the discussions in this chapter first chart the course of Russian policy towards, and involvement in dealing with, the Kosovo crisis. Following this, attention will turn to an examination of the longer term impact of the crisis on relations between Russia and NATO.

**Russia and the Kosovo crisis**

*Drifting apart from NATO, September 1997–March 1999*

Russia and the leading NATO members were extensively engaged in discussing what to do about the developing crisis in Kosovo during 1997 and 1998. Two main forums were utilised for the conduct of these conversations, which produced a greater degree of agreement than is sometimes supposed. They were the Contact Group and the UNSC.

Kosovo was first discussed at a specially convened meeting of Contact Group foreign ministers on the sidelines of the annual session of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 1997. In a brief statement, they voiced ‘deep concern over tensions in Kosovo’ and warned both Serbs and Albanians ‘against any resort to violence to press political demands’. No sanctions were threatened in the
statement, should either side – or both – fail to heed this warning. Nevertheless the western participants and Russia managed to reach agreement on their preferences for the future status of Kosovo. They stated that ‘we do not support independence and we do not support maintenance of the status quo. We support an enhanced status for Kosovo within the FRY’. In effect this would have restored the status quo ante of the period up to 1989, before President Milosevic removed much of the autonomy formerly enjoyed by Kosovo within Communist Yugoslavia.

When Russia and the NATO members began to disagree, it was over the possible use of coercion in order to impose a settlement on Milosevic. The Contact Group considered the imposition of sanctions at a meeting in London in March 1998, in the face of worsening violence in Kosovo. The proposed sanctions were:

a. A ‘comprehensive arms embargo against the FRY, including Kosovo’.
b. A ban on supplying ‘equipment to the FRY which might be used for internal repression, or for terrorism’.
c. ‘Denial of visas for senior FRY and Serbian representatives responsible for repressive action by FRY security forces in Kosovo.’
d. A ban on ‘government-financed export credit support for trade and investment … in Serbia’.

The London statement noted that ‘the Russian Federation cannot support measures ‘c’ and ‘d’ above for immediate imposition. But if there is no progress towards the steps called for by the Contact Group, the Russian Federation will then be willing to discuss all the above measures’.

Russia had thus not simply opted out of imposing sanctions as some observers subsequently claimed. Its opposition was focused on those elements of the proposed sanctions package that were directed specifically against the Serbs. Elements ‘a’ and ‘b’ were not opposed. This was because they would impact upon the KLA as well as Serb forces, if weapons and repressive equipment were prevented from entering the FRY ‘including Kosovo’. Even with regard to the sanctions directed specifically against the Serbs, the statement carefully noted that Russia might be willing to impose these too if the Milosevic government proved intransigent.

UNSC Resolution 1160, passed in March 1998, imposed a comprehensive arms embargo on the FRY ‘including Kosovo’, as called
for by the Contact Group. It also threatened ‘the consideration of additional measures’ should the FRY authorities not prove willing to enter into a serious political dialogue over the future of Kosovo. This resolution invoked Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, which provides for ‘action with respect to threats to the peace, breaches of the peace, and acts of aggression’. The invocation of Chapter 7 was regarded in some important quarters at NATO as opening the door to potential military enforcement action if the arms embargo did not prove sufficient.

The Russian government supported Resolution 1160. According to Russian press commentary, it did so for two reasons. First, in order to send what it hoped would be a final warning to Milosevic and, second, because its government did not want Russia to be isolated within the Security Council. None of this meant, however, that the Russian government was happy to countenance the use of force. Indeed, the differences on this crucial issue, which began to loom large during the second half of 1998, became the major source of division and discord between Russia and NATO over the subsequent handling of the Kosovo crisis.

In September 1998, the Security Council passed Resolution 1199. This made a series of specific demands of the FRY government and the leaders of the Albanian community in Kosovo. For the first time it called for ‘international monitoring’ on the ground in the province in order to verify compliance with these demands. As with the predecessor Resolution 1160, it threatened ‘to consider further action and additional measures to maintain or restore peace and stability in the region’. The fact that its government also supported Resolution 1199 provoked some dissent inside Russia, chiefly on the grounds that the resolution’s terms might be used by NATO countries as cover for military action, without further recourse to the UN. But, as Catherine Guicherd has pointed out, UNSC Resolutions providing for consideration of ‘additional measures’ did not give carte blanche to member states. Rather, they ‘have usually been interpreted as requiring further action by the Security Council to allow military action’. This understanding was given added clarity and weight in the cases of Resolutions 1160 and 1199 by the fact that ‘Russia and China both had accompanied their votes by legally valid declaratory statements spelling out that the resolutions should not be interpreted as authorising the use of force’.

An assumption that NATO members would return to the Security Council to request authorisation to use force seems naive in retrospect.
given Russian opposition. Yet, it should be recalled that, up to this point, NATO had treated Russia as a full and equal partner in its efforts to tackle the Kosovo crisis. Indeed, Russia’s role and input had been *greater* than that of most NATO members, due to its status on the Security Council and membership of the Contact Group. Subsequently, however, the Russians scarcely helped their own cause – or the UN’s – by making clear that they would, under no circumstances, entertain *any* possibility of approving NATO military strikes in the Security Council.

Tim Judah has recounted a story from Richard Holbrooke which, even if apocryphal in some details, nevertheless does fairly illustrate the essential rigidity of the underlying Russian position. Holbrooke described an informal Contact Group discussion in October 1998 between the then German Foreign Minister, Klaus Kinkel, and his Russian counterpart, Igor Ivanov:

Ivanov said: ‘If you take it [the issue of using force] to the UN, we’ll veto it. If you don’t we’ll just denounce you.’ Kinkel says he wants to take it to the Security Council, as do the British and French … So, Kinkel says: ‘Let’s have another stab at it.’ But Ivanov says: ‘Fine, we’ll veto it.’ And Kinkel asks again and Ivanov says: ‘I just told you Klaus, we’ll veto it.’9

This confirmed the public line from Ivanov that, if NATO sought a UN mandate for military action, Russia would ‘undoubtedly exercise its veto’.10

In a 2000 report, the Independent International Commission on Kosovo concluded that Russia’s ‘rigid commitment to veto any enforcement action’ constituted ‘the major factor forcing NATO into an unmandated action’ in its subsequent bombing campaign.11 The inflexibility of the Russians (and Chinese) on the Security Council was even criticised – albeit indirectly – by the UN Secretary-General. In his annual report to the General Assembly in September 1999, Kofi Annan stated that ‘the choice, as I said during the Kosovo conflict, must not be between … Council division, and regional action’. He added that ‘the Member States of the United Nations should have been able to find common ground in upholding the principles of the Charter, and acting in defence of our common humanity’.12 Oleg Levitin, a former Russian Foreign Ministry official who worked on its Balkan Desk and in the Contact Group, subsequently argued that Russian policy on Kosovo generally had been inflexible and unimaginative during this period.13

The Russian government may also have believed at this time that
it had an additional veto over what NATO might do. On 29 January 1999, the Contact Group issued its summons to the Serbs and Albanians to attend negotiations at Rambouillet. This was followed by a session of the NATO NAC on 30 January, which agreed that:

NATO is ready to take whatever measures are necessary in the light of both parties’ compliance with international commitments and requirements, including in particular assessment by the Contact Group of the response to its demands, to avert a humanitarian catastrophe, by compelling compliance with the demands of the international community and the achievement of a political settlement. The Council has therefore agreed today that the NATO Secretary General may authorise air strikes against targets on FRY territory [emphasis added].\textsuperscript{14}

This ratcheting-up of the NATO airstrike threat provoked little protest in Moscow at the time. The Russians may have thought that the 30 January statement, suggesting that NATO members would act only if the Contact Group determined that the FRY government was being obstructive, gave Russia, as a Contact Group member, a de facto veto over any use of force.

Significant deterioration in relations between Russia and NATO did not become apparent until after the Rambouillet meeting got underway. Over the course of the negotiations, which broke up and then reconvened the following month in Paris, the souring of relations was pronounced, however. Marc Weller, who was present at Rambouillet as an adviser to the Albanian delegation, has provided a succinct summary:

Throughout the talks, significant rifts in the Contact Group were visible, relating to the political settlement, to the implementation force and to the threat or use of force as a tool of achieving a settlement. These divisions became more pronounced towards the conclusion of the conference, when a collapse of the talks appeared likely. In fact, one might say that towards the end, the talks were less about Kosovo and more about relations within the Contact Group.\textsuperscript{15}

Perhaps the key bone of contention between the Russian representatives and their western counterparts was over the Russian perception that, not only was NATO biased against the Serbs, it was actively seeking to engineer a situation whereby the talks would fail, with the Serbs being blamed. NATO would then have a pretext to begin bombing.\textsuperscript{16} Some western observers, for their part, suspected the Russians of not only being partisan in favour of the Serbs, but of acting as the latter’s de facto representatives at Rambouillet.\textsuperscript{17}
As it became increasingly clear that an agreement would not be reached in France, the prospect of NATO military action began to loom large. It was made clear by the United States that NATO reserved the right to launch airstrikes without consulting Russia, the UN or anybody else. In February and March 1999, the prospect of airstrikes was moving up the agenda and Russian opposition to them was simultaneously becoming sharper and more vocal.

Operation Allied Force, March–June 1999

The launch of Operation Allied Force on 24 March 1999 followed the final breakdown of negotiations. In New York, Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s Permanent Representative on the UNSC, told a specially convened meeting of the council that his country was ‘profoundly outraged’ by the launch of airstrikes. In the view of the Russian government, he said:

Those who are involved in this unilateral use of force against the sovereign Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – carried out in violation of the Charter of the United Nations and without the authorization of the Security Council – must realize the heavy responsibility they bear for subverting the Charter and other norms of international law and for attempting to establish in the world, de facto, the primacy of force and unilateral diktat.

It was arguable, as noted above, that Russia itself bore part of the blame for ‘subverting the Charter’ in this instance. Because it had been making clear for months that any attempt by NATO to use the UN would be doomed to failure, the Russian government, in effect, colluded with those NATO countries that were hardly predisposed to involving the UN in the first place.

The Russian government, under Boris Yeltsin, severed most of its institutional links with NATO on the day the bombing began. Much was made of this in both the Russian and western media, where it was frequently suggested that Russia had ‘broken off links with the West’. In reality the Russian action was carefully calibrated and targeted and it did not amount to anything so drastic. The Yeltsin administration resisted calls from the Russian Communist Party amongst others to terminate its military presence in Bosnia as part of the NATO-led SFOR. The government opted instead to make limited and symbolic ‘adjustments’ to its SFOR contingent. These included withdrawing its deputy commander and two signals officers.
responsible for communications with NATO. In this way Russia could indicate its displeasure whilst maintaining the substance of its military co-operation with NATO forces on the ground in Bosnia. On the wider diplomatic front, the Russian government maintained normal diplomatic relations with all NATO governments, including the United States.

Although its immediate rhetorical response was subsequently described as being ‘of a pitch unheard in the entire post-Cold War period’, the Yeltsin government was clear from the start and explicitly that its practical response to the NATO ‘aggression’ would be circumscribed. Following the initial bombing raids on the FRY, Ivanov stated that ‘Russia does not intend to take any [military] countermeasures with respect to NATO’. It was clear that Russia lacked the means to take such measures even if it had wanted to. The only military response was to deploy an intelligence collection ship, the Liman. A rumoured deployment of warships from the Black Sea Fleet never materialised.

There were, in addition, three reasons behind this policy of limited disruption of relations. First, the Yeltsin government felt that it could not afford – literally – to take any action which might jeopardise the financial and economic support that it received from western countries and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In spring 1999 the Russian economy had barely begun to recover from the effects of a currency crisis the previous summer. Second, there was an underlying fear of being isolated, or rather in this case of Russia isolating itself. President Yeltsin expressed this clearly one month into the bombing. ‘In spite of NATO’s aggressive actions, we cannot break with the Western countries’ he said, ‘we cannot lead ourselves into isolation because we are in Europe and no one will kick us out of Europe’. In some quarters, finally, there was a sense of impotence; that there was nothing Russia could do to stop the bombing anyway.

In his initial response to the bombing, on 24 March, Yeltsin, whilst announcing the suspension of institutional links with NATO, was careful to keep the door open in one particularly important area. He stated that ‘the sooner negotiations are resumed, the greater the chance the international community will have of finding a political settlement. Russia is prepared to continue working closely with the other members of the Contact Group for the sake of achieving this goal’ [emphasis added]. From the very beginning of Operation Allied Force, the best opportunity for Russia to avoid becoming isolated or marginalised
and to demonstrate that it was not completely impotent, lay in the diplomatic sphere. Thus it was scarcely surprising that, from day one, Russian leaders concentrated their energies on efforts to broker a diplomatic settlement and to make their country an indispensable partner in doing so.

First off the mark was the then Prime Minister, Yevgeny Primakov. Primakov put special effort into cultivating the French and, especially, the German governments. This was shrewd diplomacy. Primakov was almost certainly calculating that the chances of an acceptable settlement package being constructed would be enhanced if he could build a sympathetic coalition inside NATO generally, rather than dealing exclusively with the United States. In addition, he probably calculated that these two continental European countries would be more amenable to according Russia a key role in the diplomacy than the US. By cultivating them, therefore, Russia might thus better establish itself as a vital factor in the diplomatic equation.

The latter element of Primakov’s strategy soon began to yield results. At the end of March, Rossiiskaya Gazeta quoted ‘French diplomatic sources’ as saying that ‘the small door leading to peace in the Balkans has one key, it is in Russia’s hands’. One week later, the German Foreign Ministry stated that ‘the German government believes that a solution to the conflict in Kosovo can be found only through close cooperation with Russia’.

Following these initial ‘successes’, President Yeltsin decided to become more directly involved. He did so on 14 April 1999 by appointing former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to be his ‘special representative for the conflict in Yugoslavia’. In effect this meant that Primakov was being sidelined. The latter, indeed, was to be sacked by Yeltsin as Prime Minister the following month. Yeltsin’s decision to shuffle his pack was prompted by several concerns. One was domestic politicking. As Russian commentator Vladimir Baranovsky noted, ‘the coming parliamentary and presidential elections are always present in a very conspicuous way in nearly all the steps taken by the leading Russian politicians in connection with the Yugoslav developments’. By the spring of 1999, Yeltsin had evidently decided that he did not want Primakov to succeed him as President. Thus, the latter’s power base was progressively undermined.

Nezavisimaya Gazeta identified other reasons for Yeltsin choosing Chernomyrdin. It opined that ‘the President had to put all national efforts to resolve the Yugoslav crisis into the hands of a man who would be completely under Boris Yeltsin’s control’. Chernomyrdin
was, in addition, ‘so well known in the world that he can negotiate as an equal with Western and Yugoslav leaders’.

By the middle of April, three weeks after the start of Operation Allied Force, Russian leaders had succeeded in securing a role in the diplomatic negotiations that would eventually contribute to a settlement of the Kosovo crisis. In assessing the nature and extent of the influence that Russia had on the terms of the final settlement, it is necessary first of all to consider NATO’s own starting point, which was agreed just before Chernomyrdin’s appointment. In a statement released after a NAC meeting on 12 April, the member states set out five demands which President Milosevic was expected to meet before the bombing could be called off. They were:

- a verifiable end to Serb military action and repression in Kosovo
- the withdrawal from Kosovo of Serb military, police and paramilitary forces
- the stationing in the province of an ‘international military presence’
- the unconditional and safe return of refugees and displaced persons and ‘unhindered access to them by humanitarian aid organisations’
- willingness to work, on the basis of the draft Rambouillet agreement, on a settlement of the political status of Kosovo.

Two days after these five points were agreed, ironically on the day that Chernomyrdin was appointed to his special envoy’s job, Primakov’s efforts with the German government yielded their most tangible fruit. A German ‘peace plan’ was unveiled. Actually this description, although widely used in the media, was inaccurate on two counts. First, the proposals did not amount to a ‘plan’ as such. Rather, they were presented as a series of suggested steps by which a settlement might be reached. Second, the proposals were not exclusively German. They had been agreed jointly by German and Russian diplomats. The vital importance of Russian involvement was repeatedly stressed on the German side, although it suited the Russians to have the proposals presented formally by the FRG in order to increase the chances of a positive reception within NATO.

The de facto Russo-German proposals incorporated NATO’s five demands, but there were also four significant additions. First, it was proposed that the Group of Eight (G8) provide the framework within which the eventual proposals to be put to Milosevic be agreed. This reflected the obvious Russian interest in institutionalising Russia’s involvement as a full and equal participant in the international
diplomatic efforts. The Contact Group was evidently seen as a busted flush, having more or less fallen apart in France. The membership of the G8 was virtually identical however; with Canada and Japan sitting alongside Russia and the five leading NATO members. Thus it seemed to offer a comparable forum.

The second key element in the Russo-German proposals was United Nations involvement. The UN had not been mentioned in NATO’s 12 April statement, other than in a passing reference to any final settlement of the status of Kosovo being ‘in conformity [with] … the Charter of the United Nations’. In the Russo-German proposals, however, the UN was assigned major roles. In the first place, any agreement should, it was proposed, be implemented via a UNSC Resolution. It was further suggested that the UN should be in charge of the ‘transitional administration’ of Kosovo pending a final settlement of its status.

The third new element was the proposal that any settlement must include agreement on demilitarising the KLA, which had not figured at all in NATO’s 12 April demands. Ensuring that this was part of any eventual settlement was motivated by the long-standing Russian view that NATO was biased against the Serbs. Finally, a bombing pause was proposed once the withdrawal of Serb military and other forces had begun; this to be made permanent once the withdrawal was completed.37

The initial response from NATO collectively to these initiatives seemed frosty. At the Washington summit in late April, NATO’s five demands were simply repeated verbatim and, for good measure, it was stated that ‘there can be no compromise on these conditions’.38 Behind the scenes, however, things were more fluid. According to then US Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott, Yeltsin put through a telephone call to President Clinton towards the end of the summit (the five demands had been reaffirmed on the first day). During this conversation, it was agreed that Chernomyrdin should negotiate directly with the US on forming an agreed position, which could then be presented to Milosevic.

Talbott, who was designated by Clinton as Chernomyrdin’s chief interlocutor on the American side, subsequently stated that:

I think [this] can be seen as a bit of a turning point, because until Viktor Chernomyrdin engaged on behalf of President Yeltsin and the Russian government, the Russian position was basically kind of just say no … But when President Yeltsin decided to dispatch Mr Chernomyrdin, who was a close ally and associate of his, and had been his prime minister for a long
time ... it represented an attempt to use the prestige of Russia and the diplomatic energy of Russia and the skills of Mr Chernomyrdin to see if despite our disagreement over the need for the bombing campaign, we could agree on the terms by which the bombing campaign could come to an end.

Talbott acknowledged that there had been pressure on the western side, at the summit, to accommodate the Russians. He recalled ‘a real sense of tension building’ and a ‘widespread feeling that [Kosovo] was going to spoil much else of what was going on between the US and Russia, between the West and Russia, between NATO and Russia’.39

Following the NATO summit, things began to move quickly. From late April, Chernomyrdin and Talbott began a series of meetings designed to flesh out a common negotiating position. In early May, Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari joined them, as the representative of the European Union. It was widely recognised that the initial Chernomyrdin-Talbott talks represented the opening of a new phase in diplomatic efforts to end the crisis.40 It was accepted on all sides that the Russians were not there purely for form’s sake or to make up the numbers.

Chernomyrdin’s presence in the newly formed diplomatic troika fulfilled two key functions. First, by late April and after a month’s worth of bombing, the Clinton administration had come round to the view, as Erik Yesson has put it, that ‘NATO could not bring to bear sufficient leverage on Serbia by itself; other actors had to participate’.41 The best-placed ‘other actor’ seemed to be Russia, with its historic engagement in South East Europe and sympathy for the Serbs. Chernomyrdin played on this, telling his western interlocutors that ‘if you want to persuade Milosevic you have to convince me first’.42

Second, Chernomyrdin was able to develop a ‘good cop/bad cop’ approach with Ahtisaari in what Talbott called the ‘hammer and anvil’ strategy. As the Deputy Secretary of State explained, ‘the notion was that Chernomyrdin would be the hammer and would pound away on Milosevic, and President Ahtisaari would be the anvil against who the pounding would take place, so that Milosevic would know what he had to do in order to get the bombing stopped’.43

It is noteworthy that Talbott himself did not travel to Belgrade during the diplomatic endgame in late May and early June. Rather, he left it to Chernomyrdin and Ahtisaari to execute their hammer and anvil strategy. For this to work it was essential that all three negotiators had reached solid agreement on a common negotiating position in advance. The Americans had to be sure that the Russians were firmly
on board. Otherwise there was a chance that Chernomyrdin might depart from the agreed script in Belgrade. As Talbott later put it, ‘the logic of … the tri-lateral diplomacy among President Ahtisaari, Mr Chernomyrdin and ourselves was to basically close down the gaps that existed among the various parts of the international community’, which otherwise President Milosevic might have been able to exploit.\(^4^4\)

It is an inaccurate caricature to – as some have done\(^4^5\) – portray Russia as having been little more than the ‘messenger boy’ or ‘post office’ transmitting NATO’s demands to Milosevic. The demands that were transmitted differed in significant respects, and not just ‘in nuance’,\(^4^6\) from those that NATO had originally laid down on 12 April 1999. None of NATO’s original demands were deleted. The differences lay in what was subsequently added in. These additions were the best measurement of Russia’s diplomatic influence and success.

The principles upon which the eventual settlement was based were agreed at a meeting of G8 foreign ministers on 6 May 1999. Use of the G8 forum in itself reflected a concession to Russian (and German) requests as put forward in their joint proposals of 14 April. The G8 principles incorporated the 12 April NATO demands but amplified them in significant ways. In so doing they also reflected key elements of the 14 April Russo-German proposals. The main additions were:

- The ‘international presences’ to be deployed in Kosovo following a Serb withdrawal should be both ‘civil and security’.
- These presences should be ‘endorsed and adopted by the United Nations’.
- The G8 statement agreed on the ‘establishment of an interim administration for Kosovo to be decided by the Security Council of the United Nations’.
- The ‘demilitarization of the UCK’ (KLA) was identified as an integral part of an overall political settlement.\(^4^7\)

Overall, as Dov Lynch has noted, the G8 settlement ‘contained important elements of success for Russia’.\(^4^8\) Of course the Russians had to agree some compromises in return, as is normal practice in diplomatic intercourse.\(^4^9\)

**Jockeying for position, June–July 1999**

One key issue had not been resolved before Milosevic accepted the NATO/G8 demands. This was the nature and extent of a Russian
military presence, working with NATO, in post-settlement Kosovo. Chernomyrdin had accepted that the international security presence should be NATO-led. This was incorporated into UNSC Resolution 1244, which put into place the agreed settlement. The specific question of Russian participation was effectively set aside for subsequent consideration, in order to prevent it from holding up the overall deal. What happened next demonstrated that, for all their diplomatic cooperation since the end of April, substantial underlying distrust remained between Russia and NATO.

On the day after Resolution 1244 was passed, some 200 Russian troops detached themselves from the Russian SFOR contingent in Bosnia. They undertook a pre-emptive march to the airport in Pristina, arriving before the first NATO troops from the newly formed KFOR. Various explanations for the ‘dash to Pristina’ have been put forward. In the West, conspiracy theorists suggested that Serb forces, on their way out of Kosovo, had arranged to give back to the Russians military equipment that the latter had covertly supplied during the conflict. A variation on this theme had the Serbs handing over the wreckage of the highly sensitive US F-117 ‘stealth’ fighter, which had been shot down early on in the NATO bombing campaign. In Russia, meanwhile, some explanations focused on the perceived need for Yeltsin (assuming that the dash was, indeed, ordered by him) to pull off a dramatic gesture to distract attention from political travails at home. Others argued that it was designed to reinforce the point that Russia remained an important player in South East European affairs.

Still others have argued that the dash represented only the initial deployment of an intended substantial force. Its purpose was allegedly to occupy the northern part of Kosovo, where the majority of its Serbian population lived, and assist the Milosevic government in effectively partitioning the province. This particular conspiracy theory has enjoyed high-level support. Former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski advanced it, in hearings before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in October 1999. In his memoir of the Kosovo crisis, General Clark makes clear that he also believed that partition was the Russian objective. Yet, as Clark also noted in his memoirs; ‘if the Russians really wanted to enter and establish a sector in the north of Kosovo, they could simply drive across the border [i.e. from Bosnia through Serbia], even if we blocked the airfield, and plant their flag. Reinforcements could be flown in to airfields in Serbia and driven in’ Why, therefore, dispatch a symbolic force to a high-profile
site in the provincial capital when a more substantial force could have been dispatched directly to northern Kosovo?

The most likely explanation is that the Russian bottom line was about ensuring that they had some actual military presence, however small, in the heart of Kosovo at the start of the post-conflict phase and were not, therefore, frozen out completely by NATO. The nature of the Russian involvement in KFOR had not yet been agreed, as noted. Many in Russia evidently felt that, when the crunch came, they could not trust NATO to ensure that Russia’s views would be adequately respected in Kosovo unless Russia itself moved to establish facts on the ground before NATO arrived. Thereafter, and like it or not, NATO members would be compelled to negotiate a mutually acceptable Russian role in KFOR. This, in essence, is what subsequently happened.

By July 1999, it was clear that relations between Russia and the West had survived the Kosovo crisis essentially intact, if far from in rude health. The discussions above have demonstrated that at no time during the crisis had there been a complete breakdown in relations. There certainly did exist a substantial mistrust of NATO amongst Russian political and military leaders, as evidenced by the pre-emptive dash to Pristina. But the prevailing Russian view was summed up in Vremya MN:

During the Balkan war, Russia made the most important choice in our country’s recent history. We didn’t ally ourselves with NATO, but, thank God, we didn’t become its enemy either. Now, Russia and the West can become partners who may not have any reason to love each other, but have to work together if only because there’s no getting away from each other.58

Russia and NATO since the Kosovo crisis

The period between June 1999 and September 2001 was characterised by a deliberate Russian policy of gradually and incrementally restoring those links and co-operation with NATO that had been broken off at the start of Operation Allied Force. This process was begun during the last months of the Yeltsin administration. Co-operation in KFOR59 necessitated re-establishing some kind of institutional channel of communication between Russia and NATO at the political level, to allow for the discussion of Kosovo-related issues.
On 23 July 1999, the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) met for the first time since before the start of Operation Allied Force. The PJC had been established in the summer of 1997 to provide a forum for consultation between Russia and the NATO members. It had, however, failed to live up to expectations with Russia and NATO both investing relatively little political capital in the forum. On the other hand, for all its limitations the PJC was the only extant politico-diplomatic structure for the carrying on of Russia–NATO discussions. Therefore, the use of it was more by default than Russian desire.

The Russian side was at pains to make clear that PJC meetings would not wipe the slate clean and did not signal a return to business as before. Rather, the Russian government emphasised that the PJC was being reactivated solely for the purpose of discussing issues ‘in a clearly defined sphere: interaction within the framework of KFOR’. A moderate upgrading was announced two months later when the Russian government decided to send back its chief military representative to NATO. However, it declared that this signalled no change in its basic approach of restricting contacts to those deemed necessary in order to maintain Russia’s voice in KFOR.

No further progress was possible during the remainder of the Yeltsin Presidency, seemingly bearing out the predictions of pessimists who had argued that Russia–NATO relations were unlikely to ever be restored to their pre-crisis levels. At the least, it was widely assumed inside Russia during the second half of 1999 that no further progress on restoring relations with NATO was possible until after the forthcoming parliamentary and presidential elections.

Balancing this, however, was the view, widely expressed by Russian political leaders, that Russia would have to learn (again) to live with NATO on the European stage. As Igor Ivanov expressed it in October 1999: ‘like it or not, NATO is a reality in today’s international arena, primarily in Europe but also in the world in general’. Four months later, Primakov expressed a similar view when he said that ‘we have to talk, as NATO is a real force and this should be taken into account’. Once the elections were out of the way, therefore, and a new President installed in office, it seemed likely that, notwithstanding the bitterness left by the Kosovo crisis, Russia’s political leaders would continue – and perhaps accelerate – the process of gradually re-establishing ties with NATO.

President Yeltsin announced his resignation at the end of 1999 having, it was widely assumed, manoeuvred his preferred successor, Vladimir Putin, into pole position for the forthcoming presidential
election. Putin wasted little time, early in 2000, in making clear his interest in not only continuing with the incremental restoration of links with NATO, but in moving them forward in qualitative terms. In February, Lord Robertson visited Moscow on the first high-level NATO official trip to Russia since *Operation Allied Force*. He met with Putin and Ivanov. The two sides agreed on a statement pledging to ‘intensify their dialogue in the Permanent Joint Council ... on a wide range of security issues that will enable NATO and Russia to address the challenges that lie ahead and to make their mutual cooperation a cornerstone of European security’. In other words, consultations within the PJC would, from henceforth, take place on other issues in addition to those relating to KFOR.

Robertson was, sensibly, careful to avoid the appearance of triumphalism over this agreement. He restricted his public assessment to the understated comment that ‘we’ve moved from permafrost into slightly softer ground’. Nevertheless, there was little doubt that this was the most significant step forward since the end of *Operation Allied Force*. In Russia, *Segodnya* asserted that ‘it’s safe to say that the crisis in Russia–NATO relations has been overcome, or almost overcome’. It is important to note, however, that the moves made between June 1999 and February 2000 resulted in the restoration of the *status quo ante*; i.e. the Permanent Joint Council. No thought appeared to have been given by NATO members to developing new and better consultative machinery with Russia. To be fair, prior to the severe jolt induced by the events of 11 September 2001, it was not easy to see what a better alternative to the existing PJC-based framework might look like.

In March 2000, Putin made headlines both at home and abroad following a British television interview. Most of the attention focused on his response to a question about possible Russian membership in NATO. ‘Why not?’ was Putin’s reply. This was widely interpreted as a strong political signal to the NATO members that Putin wanted to see relations further improved and developed, in a qualitatively significant way.

In Brussels, Robertson, in a statement, said that although ‘at present Russian membership of NATO is not on the agenda’, nevertheless, NATO recognised ‘the need for partnership between the Alliance and Russia, and will work hard to build on our existing links’. The indications by Putin that the ‘existing links’ were not sufficient and should be superseded by something more did not elicit a NATO response at this time.
The impact of 11 September 2001

Initially, in the days and weeks following the terrorist strikes on New York and Washington DC on 11 September 2001, it seemed as if their effect would be felt more in confirming the objectives that Putin had already signalled rather than in ushering in anything dramatically new. In late September, the Russian President was quoted as calling on NATO to admit Russia to membership; a clear echo of his television interview eighteen months previously. Putin seemingly wanted to take advantage of western – especially US – interest in constructing the broadest possible international coalition for the impending ‘war on terror’ in order to persuade NATO members to respond more dynamically than hitherto to his signals in favour of enhanced relations and more co-operation. Following a meeting with Robertson in early October, Putin was quoted as saying that ‘we have got the impression that our signals in favour of closer co-operation have been heard’. Positive mood music had also been picked up at a PJC meeting at the end of September. Thus far, however, there had been little more than words.

The prospects of this situation changing seemed especially promising in November. Amongst NATO members there was talk that Russian representatives might be given co-decision-making rights – in effect a veto – in a new ‘council of twenty’ at NATO headquarters. Tony Blair was publicly credited with the initiative behind this idea, perhaps because he was reckoned to have a particularly good personal relationship with the Russian President. In fact, on a visit to Moscow that month, Lord Robertson attributed similar ideas to the US, FRG, Italy and Canada.

Robertson’s public remarks on his visit to Russia were most noteworthy for his candid admission of the lack of substance in Russia–NATO relations to date. In a speech to the Diplomatic Academy in Moscow, Robertson said that ‘the current state of NATO–Russia relations is not sufficient to deal seriously with the new security challenges that confront us today and tomorrow’. He added that:

Our Partnership has remained a nervous one … Fundamental differences in perception persist, above all regarding the future of the European security architecture, and the respective roles NATO and Russia should play within this architecture. The 1999 Kosovo crisis exposed these fundamental differences in perception.
In effect, Robertson used his November 2001 visit to formally propose the ‘council of twenty’ to the Russian government. He gave it a provisional name – the ‘Russia-North Atlantic Council’ (RNAC). This new body, he explained:

would involve Russia having an equality with the NATO countries in terms of the subject matter and would be part of the same compromising trade-offs, give and take, that is involved in day-to-day NATO business. That is how we do business at 19. The great United States of America, the mighty France and Germany, the United Kingdom have an equal voice to tiny Luxembourg and even tinier Iceland. But we get compromises. We build consensus. So the idea would be that Russia would enter that. That would give Russia a right of equality but also a responsibility and an obligation that would come from being part of the consensus-building organization. That is why I say a new attitude is going to be required on both sides if this is going to work. But if it works, it obviously is a huge change, a sea change in the way in which we do business.  

From these remarks, it was clear that Robertson envisaged the RNAC serving, in significant part, to ‘discipline’ the Russians. This might prevent them from repeating what some westerners regarded as a dilettante approach under the ‘Founding Act’ (the name given to the 1997 agreement on Russia–NATO relations, which had established the PJC). By 2001, NATO officials could point to a number of instances where Russia had obstructed the implementation of the Founding Act’s provisions; by, for example, repeatedly holding up the opening of a NATO military liaison mission in Moscow.

Consensus-building has achieved an almost mystical status amongst NATO member states. This was evident during the course of Operation Allied Force. As noted in Chapter 2, constant reference was made throughout the campaign to the primary importance of maintaining allied solidarity and cohesion. That this was maintained was regarded within NATO, and elsewhere, as a major – if not the prime – reason why Milosevic eventually conceded. According to NATO officials subsequently, there was never any significant prospect of consensus-breaking. This, they explained, was because of the strenuous efforts made in developing basic consensus on NATO’s objectives before military operations were launched. Once achieved, the consensus was something that no member – large or small – would lightly break. Thus, one can understand the idea that bringing Russian representatives into the consensus-building process would have positive effects in encouraging them to engage more seriously and constructively with NATO than hitherto.
NATO foreign ministers formally endorsed the RNAC proposal at their meeting in December 2001. They stated that the aim of establishing a new council would be to ‘identify and pursue opportunities for joint action at 20’, by creating ‘new, effective mechanisms for consultation, cooperation, joint decision, and coordinated/joint action’. Significantly, by promising to create ‘new, effective mechanisms’, NATO members were tacitly admitting that their existing co-operative arrangements with Russia had been ultimately ineffective. The ministers were careful to reaffirm that Russia was being offered a more substantial voice but ultimately no veto over core areas. ‘NATO’, they stated, ‘will maintain its prerogative of independent decision and action at 19 on all issues consistent with its obligations and responsibilities’.79

As the year 2002 began, representatives from NATO and Russia set to work on trying to turn the RNAC idea into reality. The talks got underway against the general background – certainly in Russia – of a sense that whatever ‘bounce’ had been given to the country’s relations with the West in general, and the United States in particular, by 11 September had substantially dissipated. In January 2002, an editorial in Izvestia argued that ‘everything [is] just like it was before … Sept. 11 changed nothing. The Americans are the same as they were before. Russia and its president need not expect a special approach, leniency or solidarity on the part of the sole superpower’.80 Vremya MN, meanwhile, noted that ‘the latest illusory honeymoon in relations with the US lasted less than five months’.81

At first, the course of negotiations in the spring of 2002 appeared to confirm the suspicions of the Russian pessimists. For their part, Russian negotiators seemed to some in the West to be unable or unwilling to break away from an approach which alternated between making over-ambitious demands and putting forward ideas seemingly designed to weaken and undermine NATO.82

The NATO position reportedly hardened at this time, under pressure from a divided Bush administration.83 In February 2002, a widely cited report in the Financial Times claimed that NATO members had reached agreement on restricting the scope of Russian input. Reportedly, Russia would not be offered decision-making rights on matters pertaining to ‘the vital interests of any one Nato country’ or ‘issues that involve military decisions’. It was also reported that NATO members had agreed on a ‘retrieval’ mechanism, allowing them to withdraw an issue from the new council ‘if consensus proves impossible’.84
A sense of approaching *impasse* was apparent at this time. In early March, the Russians were reported to have ‘submitted a proposal which focused very heavily on substance’, whereas NATO members ‘had agreed a position that focused on … structure, modalities and principles’. As a result, ideas for the new council were ‘still at a relatively early stage of exploration’.85 In an interview published in *The Times*, Igor Ivanov revealed that negotiations ‘were not going well’, a situation that he attributed to ‘the refusal by some to overcome Cold War stereotypes’.86

Yet, the December 2001 NATO meeting had pledged that the new council would be ready at, or even before, the next foreign ministers’ gathering which was scheduled for May 2002 in Reykjavik. This imposed a deadline that would have been highly politically and diplomatically embarrassing – for both sides – to have missed. Thus, in Reykjavik the NATO ministers announced the creation of what was now to be officially known as the ‘NATO-Russia Council’ (NRC) to replace the existing PJC.

According to press reports, the NRC would give Russia co-decision-making rights in nine issue areas, including significant ones such as military crisis management, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and theatre missile defence. This appeared to confound pessimists who had speculated that nothing of substance would emerge from the Russia–NATO negotiations. As such, it provoked enthusiastic media commentary. *The Times*, for example, called the NRC ‘the most far-reaching change in the North Atlantic alliance since Nato was founded in 1949’.87 The *Guardian* was only slightly less enthusiastic in describing the new arrangement as ‘one of the most fundamental shifts in European security since the collapse of communism’.88

Important provisos were, however, reportedly included in the new arrangement. One was the retrieval mechanism, allowing NATO members to withdraw an issue from discussion in the NRC if the prospects for consensus being reached with the Russians looked poor. This opened the door to potential disagreements over who should decide when such an *impasse* had been reached. There was also reported ambiguity over whether or not NATO members would reserve the right to formulate common positions in advance of meetings with the Russians.89 This was an important issue. It had been one of the main complaints from the Russian side in the PJC since 1997.

Two weeks after the Reykjavik meeting, leaders from the nineteen NATO member states met in Rome with President Putin to formally
set the seal on their new council. Their agreed communiqué was upbeat and effusive. The nine areas for co-operative endeavour, which had been flagged up in Reykjavik, were confirmed. It was stated that the NRC would ‘provide a mechanism for consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, joint decision, and joint action for the member states of NATO and Russia’. NATO officials stressed the importance of the consensus-building element, confirming that a significant part of the institution’s intention with the new council was to educate their Russian interlocutors in the ways of responsible multilateral decision-making.

If this sounded somewhat patronising, it also represented perhaps the best hope of NATO members taking the new council seriously in the sense of really intending to develop joint decision-making and implementation procedures with the Russians. The Rome communiqué appeared quite clear on this score, stating that ‘the members of the NATO-Russia Council … will take joint decisions and will bear equal responsibility, individually and jointly, for their implementation’. Taken at face value this seemed unequivocal. The recent history of Russia–NATO relations cautioned against taking such statements at face value however. The 1997 Founding Act – the first attempt to create a lasting Russia-NATO institutional relationship – was also supposed to provide the means ‘for joint decisions and joint action … to the maximum extent possible’. But this had never been developed.

In substantial part, the failure of the Founding Act had been due to the approach of the Russians, as noted earlier. However, NATO members must also bear part of the blame. They had never been willing to engage in genuinely thorough-going multilateral consultations, preferring instead to formulate common positions amongst themselves in advance of PJC meetings and then engage in rather desultory and non-binding conversations with the Russians. As a result of the failure by all parties to invest more political capital and effort in it, the PJC was effectively moribund even before its failure to perform any useful role during the Kosovo crisis.

What were the prospects of the new NRC turning out differently? There could be no guarantees. However, optimists could point to two differences with 1997. First, there was some evidence that both sides had learnt from the failure of the PJC. NATO leaders in 2001–02 explicitly stated their willingness, from the start of negotiations, to bring Russian representatives into their hallowed consensus-building practices. The Russians, for their part, accepted the implied obligation
that this placed on them to participate constructively and positively in the often frustrating and laborious task of building consensus amongst different countries.

There was also the prospect of the new arrangements being institutionalised to a greater degree. Russia was to maintain a permanent mission at the NATO headquarters, as opposed to just sending representatives to meetings, as had been the case with the PJC. The 2002 agreement also pledged that a ‘Preparatory Committee’ would be established to undertake the necessary staff-work in advance of NRC meetings. This apparently innocuous administrative announcement belied a more profound potential change. The Preparatory Committee would include ‘Russian representation at the appropriate level’. This would, if implemented in good faith, allow the Russians to be involved at the crucial agenda-setting and preparation stages of the consultative process. It would make it more difficult for NATO members to present them with pre-cooked ‘alliance positions’.

Underlying this, second, was an emerging perception that western – and especially United States – policy towards Russia was now in the process of undergoing a sea-change as a result of the events of 11 September 2001. In Rome, Lord Robertson spoke of the:

> expectations that this will not be just another glitzy protocol event, but a real breakthrough. Expectations that the new NATO-Russia Council will not just talk but will act, not just analyse but prescribe, not just deliberate but take decisive action … and if we need a reminder of why, then there is a simple answer. There is a common enemy out there. The man and woman in the street, be it Petrovka Street or 66th Street, knows it, feels it and they expect us to address it. 11 September 2001 brought death to thousands of people in one act of terrible, criminal violence. But it also brought a message to the leaders of the democratic world. Find solutions and find them together.94

In the wider domain, opinion was more mixed. Some observers and commentators continued to argue that Russia–NATO relations were as they had always been – hollow and lacking substance – and that the new NRC was unlikely to change that. In the UK, the *Guardian*, adopting in its editorial a markedly cooler tone than had its reporter at Reykjavik, wrote of the ‘phoney piazza of platitudes’ in Rome.95

For a growing number of commentators, however, a more positive and important change was underway. In an insightful commentary, *The Economist* argued that ‘America’s relations with Russia are better than at any time since the end of the second world war and are improving’.
Three reasons were cited in support of this contention. The first was renewed concern in the US that terrorists or ‘rogue’ states might gain access to ex-Soviet nuclear materials, either through theft or covert Russian sales, unless the Russians were persuaded and/or helped to secure their stockpiles. Second, the Bush administration was reported to be taking a renewed interest in Russia’s role as a major producer of oil and gas. As such, a closer US partnership with Russia might help reduce the former’s level of dependence on energy supplies from the Middle East. Third, and most direct, the administration wanted to maintain, for the long haul, the practical co-operation and assistance which Putin had been giving to the war on terror since the autumn of 2001.96

Conclusions

The story of Russia’s involvement in the Kosovo crisis tells us important things about its status and role in post-Cold War European security affairs. Most important, from the evidence of the crisis Russia has not been as weak, in terms of diplomacy, and its relations with NATO not as unbalanced as is sometimes supposed. In the period April–June 1999, it played a key diplomatic role in bringing about the Kosovo settlement.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that during the crisis Russia had effectively used its diplomacy to make up for a measurable decline in influence and power overall. The diplomatic success cannot easily disguise Russia’s general decline as a power. In this context, Lawrence Freedman has written that ‘if [Russia] continues to be treated as a great power, that is because others choose to do so, not because they must’.97

In 2000, Ivo Daalder and Michael O’Hanlon argued that the long-term impact of the Kosovo crisis on Russia–NATO relations was likely to be ‘modest’.98 Events since then have confirmed the validity of their conclusion. Relations between Russia and the West, and in particular between Russia and the United States, have been much more profoundly affected by the events of 11 September 2001.

Notwithstanding this, relations have, so far, remained ultimately unfulfilled. Neither side has clearly identified to the other – nor, in all probability, worked out for itself – what it wants from the relationship. The Russian government has, at various times, been vocal and clear in asserting what it did not want; chiefly the eastward enlargement of NATO’s membership and unilateral military action over
Kosovo. But it has proved vaguer and more reticent when it has come to identifying and fleshing out the nature and parameters of its relationship with the institution.

Notes


9 Judah, Kosovo: War and Revenge, p. 183.


16 For a development of the argument that Rambouillet ‘was set up to fail’ see M. McCGwire, ‘Why did we bomb Belgrade?’, International Affairs, 76:1 (2000), 12ff.


18 In a press briefing on 21 February, State Department spokesperson James Rubin said that ‘the fact that Russia doesn’t support military action is not a surprise, but NATO’s authority has been given to Secretary General


20 The Communist leader, Gennady Zyuganov, had called for this on the day after air operations were launched. *Sovetskaya Rossia* (27 March 1999). *CDPSP*, 51:12 (1999), 5.


27 Lynch, ‘“Walking the Tightrope”’, p. 70.


33 V. Baranovsky, ‘Russia’s interests are too important’, *International Affairs* (Moscow), 45:3 (1999), 11.


44 Talbott interview, *Frontline: War in Europe*.


47 Statement by the Chairman on the Conclusion of the Meeting of the G8 Foreign Ministers on the Petersberg. Website reference www.g7.utoronto.ca/g7/foreign/fm990506.htm.

48 Lynch, “‘Walking the Tightrope’”, pp. 75–6.

49 For an assessment of the overall ‘balance sheet’ see Andersen, ‘Russia and the former Yugoslavia’, pp. 201–2.


52 Ibid., p. 118.


55 *The War in Kosovo and a Postwar Analysis* (Washington DC, Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, September/October 1999), pp. 79–87.


57 Ibid., p. 387.


59 For the text of the agreement on Russian participation in KFOR see *Agreed Points on Russian Participation in KFOR*. Website reference www.nato.int/kfor/resources/documents/helsinki.htm.


66 Quoted in ‘NATO and Russia re-establish ties as tensions ease’.

70 Statement by Lord Robertson, NATO Secretary General, on Acting President Putin’s Interview with the BBC (Press Release (2000)023). Website reference www.nato.int/docu/pr/2000/p00-023e.htm.
72 Quoted in C. Bremner, ‘Russia and West to work more closely on security’, *The Times* (4 October 2001).
77 Press Conference with NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson, 22 November 2001.
78 Authors’ interviews with officials at NATO headquarters, November 2001.
82 See M. Evans, ‘Russian bid to “weaken” Nato alienates West’, *The Times* (16 March 2002).
84 J. Dempsey, ‘Nato woos Russia with offer of closer relations’, *Financial Times* (25 February 2002). This article was subsequently criticised within NATO circles as being ‘highly inaccurate’. See *A Summary of the Meetings at NATO and SHAPE of the Joint Monitoring Group on the NATO-Russia Founding Act*. NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Website reference www.nato-pa.int/publications/special/av076-jmg-rus.html.
85 *A Summary of the Meetings at NATO and SHAPE of the Joint Monitoring Group.*
86 M. Binyon, ‘Russia “will stand by coalition even if Iraq is attacked”’, *The Times* (15 March 2002).

For differing views about what NATO members had agreed on this score see M. Evans, ‘Russia to move into Nato HQ’, *The Times* (15 May 2002) and J. Dempsey and R. Wolffe, ‘In from the cold’, *Financial Times* (15 May 2002).


R. Owen and M. Evans, ‘Nato and Russia sign deal to end 50 years of fear’, *The Times* (29 May 2002).


Remarks by NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson at the NATO-Russia Summit. Website reference www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s020528b.htm.


