Russia's top five myths about NATO

Myth 1: NATO's presence in the Baltic region is dangerous and unpopular

Fact: NATO has taken defensive and proportionate measures in response to a changed security environment. Following Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine, Allies requested a greater NATO presence in the region.

In 2016, NATO deployed four multinational battlegroups – or "enhanced forward presence" – to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. In 2017, the battlegroups became fully operational. More than 4,500 troops from Europe and North America work very closely together with home defence forces. NATO's presence in the region is at the specific request of the host nations, and enjoys significant public support. A 2016 Gallup poll found that most people in Allied countries in the Baltic region associate NATO with the protection of their country. NATO forces uphold the highest standards of conduct, both on and off duty.

NATO personnel meet Russian arms control inspectors at Estonia's 1st Infantry Brigade in Tapa on 8 November 2017

As part of NATO Allies' ongoing commitment to transparency, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania hosted Russian arms control inspectors in November 2017 and in March 2018. They toured a number of military sites, including some used by multinational NATO battlegroups. Lithuania also hosted Russian arms control inspectors in June, during exercise Saber Strike 2018.

Myth 2: NATO missile defence threatens Russian security

Fact: NATO's missile defence system is purely defensive and not directed against Russia. Bilateral agreements between the US and host nations do not allow missile sites to be used for any purpose other than missile defence.

This system defends against ballistic missiles from outside the Euro-Atlantic area. NATO has attempted many times to cooperate with Russia on missile defence. Russian statements threatening to target Allies because of NATO's ballistic missile defence are unacceptable and counterproductive.

Myth 3: NATO has tried to isolate or marginalise Russia

Fact: For more than two decades, NATO has consistently worked to build a cooperative relationship with Russia.

NATO began reaching out with offers of dialogue at the London NATO Summit of July 1990. In the following years, the Alliance promoted dialogue and cooperation by creating the Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), open to the whole of Europe, including Russia.

In 1997, NATO and Russia signed the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security, creating the NATO Russia Permanent Joint Council. In 2002, this was upgraded, creating the NATO-Russia Council (NRC).

We set out to build a good relationship with Russia. We worked together on issues ranging from counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism to submarine rescue and civil emergency planning.

However, in March 2014, in response to Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine, NATO suspended practical cooperation with Russia. At the same time, NATO has kept channels for communication with Russia open. The NATO-Russia Council has met seven times since April 2016. The Secretary General and Deputy Secretary General also engage regularly with their Russian counterparts. We do not seek confrontation, but we cannot ignore Russia breaking international rules, undermining our stability and security.

Myth 4: NATO promised Russia it would not expand after the Cold War

Fact: NATO Allies take decisions by consensus and these are recorded. There is no record of any such decision having been taken by NATO. Personal assurances from individual leaders cannot replace Alliance consensus and do not constitute formal NATO agreement.

NATO's "Open Door Policy" is based on Article 10 of the Alliance's founding document, the North Atlantic Treaty (1949). The Treaty states that NATO membership is open to any "European state in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area". It states that any decision on enlargement must be made "by unanimous agreement". NATO has never revoked Article 10, nor limited the potential for enlargement. Over the past 65 years, 29 countries have chosen freely, and in accordance with their domestic democratic processes, to join NATO. This is their sovereign choice.
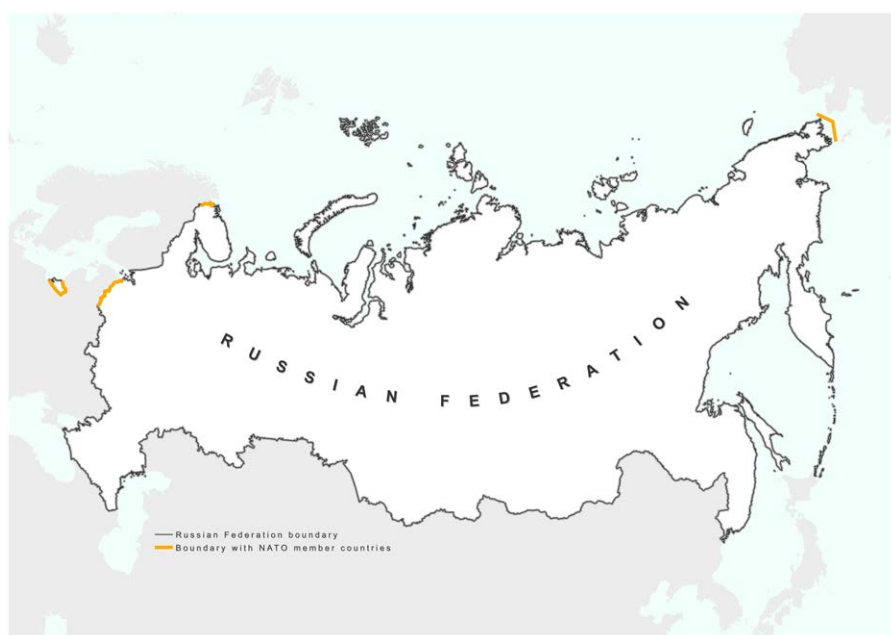
In addition, at the time of the alleged promise, the Warsaw Pact still existed. Its members did not agree on its dissolution until 1991. The idea of their accession to NATO was not on the agenda in 1989. This was confirmed by Mikhail Gorbachev himself in an interview with Russia Beyond the Headlines:

"The topic of 'NATO expansion' was not discussed at all, and it wasn't brought up in those years. I say this with full responsibility. Not a single Eastern European country raised the issue, not even after the Warsaw Pact ceased to exist in 1991. Western leaders didn't bring it up, either."

Myth 5: NATO is encircling Russia

Fact: This myth ignores geography. Russia's land border is just over 20,000 kilometres long. Of that, less than one-sixteenth (1,215 kilometres), is shared with NATO members. Russia has land borders with 14 countries. Only five of them are NATO members.

Outside NATO territory, the Alliance only has a military presence in two places: Kosovo and Afghanistan. Both operations are carried out with a United Nations mandate, endorsed by the UN Security Council, of which Russia is a member. In contrast, Russia has military bases and soldiers in three countries – Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – without the consent of their governments.

Russian Federation boundary
Boundary with NATO member countries

For more information, please visit our 'NATO-Russia Setting the Record Straight' portal on the NATO website: http://goo.gl/GvTesc

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