

Molotov's Proposal of 1954 for USSR Entry into NATO: The missed opportunity for resolution of Cold War disputes

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Abstract

The 1954 Molotov proposal as regards USSR's entry into NATO comprised a missed opportunity to mitigate the Cold War. The philosophy of the Soviet Foreign Minister's proposal was based on the fact that if the USSR was accepting a full US membership on the General European Agreement on Collective Security in Europe, then the entry of the USSR into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization could be more easily achieved. However, according to NATO declassified documents, Alliance's member countries characterized Molotov's proposal as unreal, underlining that an extension of the Atlantic Pact through the adherence of the Soviet Union to the North Atlantic Treaty was contrary to the very principles on which the defense system and the security of the Western nations depended. Moreover, they characterized the Soviet proposal as a product of propaganda pursuing to NATO's paralysis and subsequently its dissolution.

Keywords: *Molotov, USSR, NATO entry, Security regime, Europe.*

Introduction

The meeting in Geneva on 16 June 2021, between the US President Joe Biden and the Russian President Vladimir Putin came at a time when both sides described their relations as being at rock bottom. Figuratively US and Russia proceeded to that meeting in order to discuss arms control and cyber-attacks as well as to "reset" their tended relations especially after the withdrawal of both of their ambassadors from Washington DC and Moscow respectively on March and April 2021, but the "heated" atmosphere among the two superpowers continued. Hereto, *New York Times'* comment captured exactly the outcome of the Geneva meeting stating that "no dramatic actions were announced to arrest the downward spiral that has already hurtled them toward the worst US-Russian tensions since the Cold War" (The New York Times, 2021).

The Geneva June meeting followed two other meetings on 28 July and 30 September 2021, with both the American and the Russian Delegation agreeing to form two interagency expert working groups - the Working Group on Principles and Objectives for Future Arms Control, and the Working Group on Capabilities and Actions with Strategic Effects (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

However, US and Russia tried in vain to convince the public opinion about their efforts to defuse their tensions and that because on 18 October 2021, Russia decided to suspend its NATO diplomatic mission (TACC, 2021). The reason was the decision of the Alliance Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on 6 October, to withdraw the accreditation of eight members of the Russian Permanent Mission to NATO as well as to reduce the overall number of mission personnel to ten (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to NATO, 2021).

In response, the Russian Permanent Mission to NATO suspended the activities of the NATO Military Liaison Mission Moscow and closed down the NATO Information Office at the Embassy of the Kingdom of Belgium in Moscow (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to NATO, 2021).

Therefore, we could argue that the Cold War atmosphere among US and Russia had come to the fore in a moment where also the US-China relations are at a breaking point, while Europe continues to restrengthen its relations with US especially after the end of the Trump administration. Thus, the Cold War blocks “came back” with US and EU versus Russia and China. Of course, we are not in a bipolar world but little by little all the states already started taking their place on each side. Hence, as real actors, US and Russia have started getting involved in the same Cold War struggle for even greater maximization of their power.

Purpose of the Study and Methodology

One of the key questions that arose after the fall of the USSR, is whether the Cold War could have been mitigated. The proposals tabled by USSR Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov during the Berlin Conference in 1954 showed that Cold War tensions could have been softened. Thus, the purpose of this scientific article is to analyze the aforementioned proposals and primary the possibility of the USSR becoming a NATO member country. Also, the article gives prominence to the other two proposals of the Soviet Minister which were the organization of a pan-European security conference which foreshadowed the establishment of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the signing of a General European Agreement on Collective Security in Europe. As far as the methodology is concerned, the scientific article was based on a wide range of NATO and USSR declassified documents, scientific papers, books, studies and newspapers articles.

Ukraine in the center of Transatlantic - Russian geopolitical interests

The gradual escalation between the US-Russian relations regarding especially Ukraine brought back again in Europe the Transatlantic-Russian point of interest. Even if the struggle between capitalism and socialism belongs to the past, the bilateral intertemporal geopolitical interests rest the same.

The expansion of NATO to the East in late 90’s, led many former socialistic states under the transatlantic defense umbrella, despite Moscow's volition for membership in the Alliance. According to an article on 4 November 2021 in the newspaper *The Guardian* (2021) NATO former Secretary General George Robertson recalled the following interesting dialogue that he had at an early meeting with Vladimir Putin:

Putin said: "When are you going to invite us to join NATO?" And [Robertson] said: "Well, we don't invite people to join NATO, they apply to join NATO". And he said: "Well, we're not standing in line with a lot of countries that don't matter".

Also, according to the same article, Vladimir Putin in a BBC interview shortly before he was first inaugurated as Russian President had said that he would not rule out joining NATO “if and when Russia’s views are taken into account as those of an equal partner (Rankin, 2021).

Putin’s reference that Russia was not going “to stand in line”, demonstrated his shelf-awareness that the transatlantic alliance was not willing to confront his country with its special legacy, as it is also proved by an academic NATO report. More specifically, Professor Yuriy Davydov (2000, p. 5), former NATO Research Fellow had pointed out that:

"A former enemy cannot become a partner in the twinkling of an eye. But it does not mean that it cannot become the one at all. Russia will have to go a longer way, than many present candidates for the alliance".

Nevertheless, Alliance’s expansion has forged ahead over the years with more and more former USSR states becoming member countries, bringing US and Russia in 2008 at a breaking point

due to Washington's decision to extend NATO to Ukraine and Georgia. At that time, the EU too has been marching eastward, unveiling its Eastern Partnership initiative, a program to foster prosperity in such countries as Ukraine and integrate them into the EU economy which in the eyes of Russian leaders was considered as a stalking horse for NATO expansion (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Professor John J. Mearsheimer characterized NATO enlargement to the East under Clinton and Bush administration, as well as US and EU intension to bring under their influence Ukraine, as a Western affront (Mearsheimer, 2014). Hereto, referring to West efforts to bring Kiev under its aegis, he stated that West's final tool for peeling Kiev away from Moscow has been its efforts to spread Western values and promote democracy in Ukraine and other post-Soviet states, a plan that often entails funding pro-Western individuals and organizations. Also, regarding the US efforts, he referred to Victoria Nuland, former U.S. assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, who has admitted that the United States had invested billions of dollars since 1991 to help Ukraine achieve "the future it deserves." As part of that effort, the U.S. government has bankrolled the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The nonprofit foundation has funded more than 60 projects aimed at promoting civil society in Ukraine, and the NED's president, Carl Gershman, has called that country "the biggest prize" (Mearsheimer, 2014).

In 2014, Crimea's annexation from Russia imposed severe strains on the American-Russian relations. Despite the Minsk Peace Agreements (Minsk I & Minsk II) the state of war in eastern Ukraine continued, with more than 14,000 people being killed, including approximately 3,000 civilians, and injured more than 7,000 civilians, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN News, 2022).

Moscow's proposal for signing a Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees as well as for signing an Agreement on measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation and member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on 17 December 2021, demonstrated not only Russia's tendency for ceasefire in eastern Ukraine but also its struggle to avoid a direct conflict with the United States. However, Washington's decision to reject the aforementioned treaties led the US-Russian relations at a breaking point.

Molotov's Proposals for a new Security Regime in Europe

In June 1948, the attempt by the West to establish a German state as a counter to the threat of a Soviet invasion in Europe led to the blockade of West Berlin. The USSR, after leaving the Allied Control Council (ACC), blocked West Berlin in response to Western plans. Thus, the United States proceeded to air supply leading the US-Soviet relations at a breaking point. Consequently, US together with Canada, France, UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy, Denmark, Iceland, Portugal and Norway, established NATO revising substantially the status quo that existed until 4 April 1949, giving to security a clearer military dimension.

In view of this new reality, everyone would expect either a corresponding military type reaction or a spasmodic move of impression on the part of the USSR purely for reasons of prestige. But, the Soviet response to the creation of NATO came on 29 August 1949, through the successful test of the first atomic USSR bomb RDS-1 at Semipalatinsk Polygon in Kazakhstan (Adushkin and Leith, 2001). This move had actually a dual character, as on the one hand the USSR overcame the security gap created by NATO and on the other hand moved away the case of re-using a nuclear bomb as happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Thus, since maintaining a cautious attitude towards the acquisition of nuclear power by a country, in this case the creation of a doctrine of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War probably worked positively even in crises such as that of 1963.

The return to the forefront (CPSU CC Protocol, 1953) of Vyacheslav Molotov as USSR Foreign Minister on March 5 1953, brought very closely the possibility of the end of the Cold War (Salisbury, 1953). Hence, during the Big Four Berlin Conference in 1954, Molotov came up with some very specific proposals regarding the security regime in Europe.

Initially, he proposed the organization of a pan-European security conference (Bahr, 2006, p. 23) to discuss the danger of a re-emergence of German aggression and the hostile behavior by NATO as well as the emerging European Defense Community against the USSR. Although, Molotov's proposal was rejected by majority in the West, it foreshadowed the subsequent establishment of OSCE in 1975 in Helsinki.

Then, the Soviet Foreign Minister proposed the signing of a General European Agreement on Collective Security in Europe. According to Molotov, this agreement would have been non-aggressive and all Western states could become members, including the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) as equal parties in law until the establishment of a unified, peaceful and democratic German State, under one very important condition. Neither the US nor China could become members, but they could participate in the processes as observers (CVCE, 2016, p. 2).

However, as far as the US participation was concerned, the USSR made a one-hundred-degree turn seeing no obstacles, stressing America's common fight against Nazi aggression during World War II and the responsibility which it bears alone with the Soviet Union, France and Britain for a post-war settlement in Europe (Associated Press, 1954). Actually, the aforementioned Molotov's proposal represented somehow a follow-up of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's proposal on 1952 who was proposing a peace treaty that made the reunification of Germany contingent on establishing a neutral status for the country (Ruggenthaler, 2011, p. 172).

Nevertheless, and this proposal from Molotov did not work since most states saw this move as a covert attempt by the USSR to penetrate the West. Though, it is fair to say that Molotov through his proposal pursued to the dissolution of NATO, since the creation of a General European system of collective security would put an end to the formation in Europe of antagonistic military groups of countries (Associated Press, 1954), referring shelf-evidently to NATO and the European Defense Community.

Molotov's Proposal for USSR entry into NATO and the reaction of the Alliance

The third and most important proposal by the USSR was made exactly one month after the Berlin Conference in March 1954. According to the Swiss newspaper *La Liberté*, Molotov on 24 March 1954, proposed in a letter to Nikita Khrushchev and Georgy Malenkov, who were at that time the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the possibility of the USSR becoming a member of NATO (La Liberté, 1954).

The reasoning of the Soviet Foreign Minister was based on the fact that if the USSR was accepting a full US membership on the above General European Agreement, then the entry of the USSR into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization could be more easily achieved. Also, Molotov in order to safeguard the prestige of his country in case his proposal was rejected by NATO, in his letter to the CPSU leadership proposed that the Soviet note to the Alliance should not state directly the readiness of the USSR to join the North Atlantic bloc but limit itself to a declaration of its readiness to examine jointly with other interested parties the question of the participation of the USSR in the North Atlantic bloc (AVP RF, 1954). Hereto, according to the Soviet Note (Associated Press, 1954) on 1 April 1954:

"The Soviet Government, guided by the unchanged principles of its foreign policy of peace and desirous of relaxing the tension in international relations, states its readiness to join

with the interested governments in examining the matter of having the Soviet Union participate in the North Atlantic Treaty".

Also, the Soviet Government in order to strengthen its position concerning the USSR entry into the NATO, raised the point that the Soviet Union was the only one of all the big powers belonging to the anti-Hitler coalition that was not a signatory and thus NATO was regarded as an aggressive pact directed against the USSR. Therefore, NATO could lose its aggressive character if all the big powers belonging to the anti-Hitler coalition became its participants, expecting from the French, British and US government to look with favor on steps to ensure such a situation whereby the North Atlantic Treaty would acquire a really defensive character and cease to be a closed military group of states (Associated Press, 1954).

Therefore, in the event of the USSR joining NATO and the simultaneous signing of the Collective Security Agreement, this on one hand could mean a significant soviet victory over the US and the West, and on the other could mark the clear superiority of the USSR in establishing a new security regime in Europe.

On 24 April 1954, through a Tripartite reply US, France and the UK expressed their views regarding USSR's proposal for entry into NATO. According to the declassified draft reply on behalf of NATO they characterized Soviet Union's proposal as unreal. Specifically, Washington, Paris and London underlined that an extension of the Atlantic Pact through the adherence of the Soviet Union to the North Atlantic Treaty was contrary to the principles on which the defense system and the security of the Western nations depended. According to them, NATO was founded on the principle of individual liberty and the rule of law and constituted something more than a purely military arrangement pervaded free and full exchange of information between all its members and decisions are taken unanimously. (NATOa, April 1954).

Consequently, analyzing this draft, which is also the final text of NATO response to the USSR, as it appears from a relevant document of the Alliance Executive Secretary to the delegations of the members of the Alliance (NATOb, 1954), we draw the following two conclusions.

Initially, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom claimed that NATO was created to deal collectively with USSR aggression and expansion towards Europe. Thus, they argued that in a defense military organization an aggressive country like the USSR could not be a member, as this was contrary to the principles on which the defense system and the security of the Western nations were left. Therefore, we conclude that the refusal of the USSR to join NATO was due to the fact that, according to the West, USSR was an aggressive country. Although this view is much respected, US' unilateral «settlement» of the German issue with the establishment of West Germany, contrary to the Potsdam Conference Agreement, pushed the US-Soviet relations to a tipping point.

Also, United States, France, and the United Kingdom argued that as NATO decisions were made unanimously, USSR could use the veto power on every decision and none of the member states was prepared to allow their joint defense system to be disrupted in this way, accusing USSR of doing the same within the UN, a view which has a strong basis since from 1946 to 1984 the Soviet Union invoked veto 119 times (Global Policy Forum, n.d.).

Accordingly, as second conclusion, we comprehend the "fear" of a prolonged use of the veto, thus complicating the functioning of the Alliance. In this regard, it should be noted that a possible reckless use of veto by the Soviet Union, in case of entry, was also a common concern at the Meeting of NATO Delegations that took place on 7 April 1954, in Paris. Especially: a) Denmark stressed that USSR continuous veto had paralyzed the work of the UN Security Council, b) Italy stated that the unanimity rule followed by NATO would put the USSR in the easy position of

being able to prevent any work being done by NATO by abuse of their right of veto, as they were already doing in UN (NATOC, 1954). Also, all NATO members characterized the proposal of the USSR as a product of propaganda, which according to US the basic purpose was to divide opinion in NATO countries and to hold up ratification of the EDC Treaty (NATOC, 1954).

In our view, the above arguments of NATO members for the non-entry of the USSR into NATO were presumptuous. The main reason was that both the US and the West did not want NATO to become another International Co-operation Organization, as was the case with the UN, with all the obstacles that arose at the level of the Security Council. Hence, US and West wanted to maintain NATO as a Military Organization operating on the basis of the same geopolitical interests, mainly in Europe in the first place, which at the same time could be activated at any time in the event of a possible conflict with the USSR. This tactic, combined with West Germany's accession to NATO on 14 May 1955, led to the practical creation of the military defense alliance of the socialist states, the Warsaw Pact.

However, at this point we would like to list which were in our opinion the reasons for the rejection of the above very important proposals of the USSR Foreign Minister that never led to a new security regime and subsequently to the end of the Cold War.

Reasons for Rejection

The first reason was the *wrong timing* that Molotov chose to present his proposals. When Foreign Ministers Dulles, Molotov, Eden and Bido met in Berlin, the agenda included only the following topics for discussion: a) measures for reducing tension in international relations and the convening of a meeting of Ministers for Foreign Affairs of France, Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States and the Chinese People's Republic, b) the German question and the problems of ensuring European security, c) the Austrian State Treaty (Slany, 1986, p. 1175).

Looking at the agenda, the German issue was the most important issue for discussion, since both the US and the USSR sought to find a solution, at their own convenience of course. Thus, while the Soviet proposal for the future of Germany concerned the formation of a provisional single government that could take over the conduct of single elections, at the same time it was coupled with a radical plan to replace the Cold War blocs with pan-European collective security structures on the terms and process of Germany's reunification (Roberts, 2008, p. 1). Hence, this proposal actually sidelined the German question and automatically raised another important issue that of European collective security, which the United States were certainly not willing to negotiate despite the discussions that followed at the conference.

The second reason was the *utopia of Molotov's proposals* in relation to security. The formation of NATO practically marked the complete establishment of the United States of America in Europe, as well as a specific security regime in which mainly, if not exclusively, only friendly Western powers could participate. At the same time, the idea of a united Europe was already beginning to take shape, including defense. The plan to set up a European Army would go through the European Defense Community (EDC) which was a French initiative. So, in the already established security regime that included NATO and the emerging EDC, Molotov's proposals for a new security regime in Europe could not succeed for three reasons:

- i) First, the signing of a collective security agreement in Europe under the USSR did not benefit the dominant circles in France for two reasons. Initially, because this agreement would have led to a wreck the EDC, which would be a very strong blow to the French prestige, and secondly, because part of the French society and the press such as the newspaper *Le Monde* were positive (AVP RF, 1954) in a proposal that was an idea and initiative of the USSR, which in combination

with the recession of the French economy and the wrong moves in the war in Indochina, could lead France to a left turn.

- ii) Second, an entry of the USSR into NATO would first and foremost change the character of NATO. The Alliance was the security umbrella for the western democracies but mainly marked the creation of the first military organization that in the name of Western security against a growing Soviet threat legitimized in the best way the US presence in Europe. Thus, a USSR membership in NATO would, on the one hand, mean the need for its gradual abolition and, on the other, would enable the USSR to exert even greater influence in the West. Also, at a later stage a great number of countries friendly to the USSR might ask to become members of NATO, something that could lead to the formation of heterogeneous alliances within the Alliance.
- iii) Third, the suspicion with which the West in general confronted any proposal or initiative of the USSR, which was, after all, a main feature of the Cold War.

As third and last reason we see the *inter party dispute* between the Foreign Minister and the leadership of the USSR. Sketching the portrait of Molotov, we notice that from a very early age he was the right hand of both Lenin and Stalin. The fact that he served in the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as the second-highest-ranking secretary-general made his influence very strong. Utilizing him as foreign minister at important moments had given him a great opportunity in shaping the foreign policy of the USSR and after Stalin's death, he gradually formed a personal agenda in foreign policy, especially at the conference of the Big Four in January 1954. However, the fierce dispute regarding the end or not of the Cold War and the de-escalation or not between the USSR and the US, quickly led him to a personal feud with Khrushchev and Malenkov, which marked the end of Molotov's career.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Molotov's proposal of 1954 for USSR entry into NATO consisted of a missed opportunity to mitigate the Cold War. A serious proposition, one designed to make collective security more palatable to the West and to open up the possibility of negotiations that would lead to a pan-European détente (Roberts, 2008, p. 33). Therefore, the refusal by the West on Molotov's proposals led to the formation of NATO counter, the Warsaw Pact in May 1955. As a result, US and USSR engaged in an arms race, propaganda war, nuclear proliferation, regional conflicts and missiles crisis, putting in danger peace and prosperity worldwide until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Moscow's volition to become a NATO member comprised an intertemporal pursuit. As Professor Geoffrey Roberts (2008, pp. 32-33) had pointed out:

"This was not the first time the Soviets had said that if NATO was a defensive alliance they would like to join, and nor would it be the last. At the Deputy Foreign Minister's Conference in 1951 Gromyko had said that if NATO were directed against German aggression the USSR would like to become a member, remarks that were published in Pravda. In August 1952 Stalin himself joked with the French ambassador that if NATO were a peaceful alliance then the Soviet Union should join it".

A pursuit which has also been discussed in 2000 with the former US President Bill Clinton as Vladimir Putin had admitted for the first time in public (Kremlin, 2022) during his address to the Russian people on 21 February 2022, stating that:

"When then outgoing US President Bill Clinton visited Moscow in 2000, I asked him how America would feel about admitting Russia to NATO. I will not reveal all the details of that conversation, but the reaction to my question was, let us say, quite restrained, and the

Americans' true attitude to that possibility can actually be seen from their subsequent steps with regard to our country".

Therefore, we could assume that if the 1954 Molotov's Proposal for USSR entry into NATO had been accepted by the US and its allies, then a series of Cold War or post-Cold War disputes might have become extinct, such as the recent "military operations of the Russian Federation inside the sovereign territory of Ukraine" (UN, 2022) condemned by the General Assembly of United Nations, Resolution No. A/RES/ES-11/1.

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