

Czech Project Can Help Lift NATO-Russia Ties

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Despite vague proclamations, the current rapprochement between Russia and the West lacks any solid foundation for overhauling their security relationship. But the little-explored area of defense cooperation could potentially help them build a more lasting partnership.

The Russian-Czech joint modernization program to upgrade Russian-made Mi helicopters is a good example that is significant in several ways. First and foremost, the agreement demonstrates to the Russians the Western willingness to let their technologies be used in active NATO campaigns — in this case, Afghanistan. Second, the cooperation concerns a segment of the defense market that is relatively nonsensitive, thereby becoming an ideal test ground for similar projects in the future.

For NATO policymakers, it is paramount that Western leaders recognize potential benefits of and shed their biases against defense cooperation with Russia. It is true that by letting Russian companies enter the European defense market, European defense manufacturers

might face greater competition. But in the long run, the benefits of defense cooperation far outweigh the potential costs.

If any substantial defense cooperation is to take place, it is crucial that the Kremlin removes burdensome restrictions on its defense sector. Russia should pass legislation to enable its defense industry to conclude joint ventures with Western companies. Russia should emphasize its competitive edge in the field of transport helicopters and air defenses, support these industries at home and promote their products abroad.

In the long term, Russia and EU countries should develop a feasibility study to construct a joint military transport helicopter. In so doing, Russia and Europe should build on the basis of a failed initiative between Russia, France and Germany to develop a Russian Mi-26 transport helicopter. Russia has an extensive experience with building helicopters that are reliable and easy to maintain. In return, European countries can offer investment and advanced technologies. If this project is successful, it can lead to development of other components of tactical and strategic airlift.

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