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# NATO-Russia Council forms during Bush's Europe trip

By Ron Hutcheson  
Knight Ridder Newspapers

ROME (KRT) — In a move that seemed unthinkable not long ago, the United States and Europe on Tuesday embraced Russia as a junior partner in the NATO alliance and agreed to work together to fight terrorism and defuse regional conflicts.

The decision to create a new NATO-Russia Council that grants the former communist giant shared, if limited, authority was a remarkable turnabout for an alliance that formed after World War II to counter Soviet influence. President Bush and other world leaders hailed the change as a historic step toward international cooperation.

"Two former foes are now joined as partners," Bush said at a meeting near Rome with NATO leaders and Russian President Vladimir Putin. "This partnership takes us closer to an even larger goal — a Europe that is whole, free and at peace for the first time in history."

On the final day of his weeklong visit to Europe and Russia, Bush also visited Pope John Paul II and raised concerns about the sex scandal involving priests and children that has rocked the Roman Catholic Church.

"I am concerned about the Catholic Church in America. I'm concerned about its standing," Bush said before the Vatican stop. "I will say that because the Catholic Church is an incredibly important institution in our country."

White House aides declined to reveal details after the 20-minute session, Bush's second meeting with the pope. A Vatican statement later brushed past the sex scandal, saying the pope told Bush he had "faith in the spiritual resources of American Catholics despite the difficulties of the moment."

As Bush prepared to leave, the ailing 82-year-old pontiff rose shakily from his seat and said, "God bless America. I hope to be able to meet you again."

Russia's participation in the newly christened NATO-Russia Council came four days after Bush and Putin signed a treaty to pull about two-thirds of their nuclear weapons out of service. The two steps mark a dramatic milestone in efforts to shed the legacy of the Cold War.

"What's happening today turns completely on its head everything we've lived with up to now," said Lord George Robertson, the secretary-general of NATO.

Only three years ago, in 1999, Russia froze relations with NATO after the alliance bombed Yugoslavia to halt its war against the breakaway province of Kosovo.

NATO members and their new partner acknowledged that they have a long way to go before their goal of global cooperation becomes a reality.

Even with the new arrangement, "there's a lot to do to give substance to the vision," British Prime Minister Tony Blair said.

In a sign of lingering distrust, NATO nations limited Russia's participation to a handful of issues, led by terrorism, and gave any NATO member the right to bar Russia from deliberations. If the 20 members of the new council lack full consensus on any issue, the 19 non-Russian NATO allies could address it alone.

Russia remains wary of NATO's pending expansion, even though several former Soviet satellite countries, including the Baltic republics on Russia's border, are clamoring to join the alliance. The core NATO members are expected to let about a half dozen East European countries join in November.

"Russia cannot have a veto over who becomes a member or not," Secretary of State Colin Powell told reporters in Rome.

Under the agreement with NATO, Russia will cooperate on anti-terrorism, search-and-rescue missions, arms control, stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction and emergency planning.

"Being realists, we must remember that relations between Russia and the North Atlantic alliance have been historically far from straightforward," Putin said. Even so, the Russian president said, the significance of the new NATO arrangement "cannot be overestimated."

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