A Retrospective on NATO Enlargement

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Introduction: Who Is to Blame?

In 1998, George Kennan described NATO’s eastward expansion as a “tragic mistake.” Expansion, he argued, would upset Russia, undermine the country’s path towards democratization, and spread NATO too thin—all without a serious security threat to justify it.¹ Likeminded critics today charge that enlargement has committed the United States to the defense of countries peripheral, at best, to its national security interests, at the expense of relations with one that could more easily throw a wrench into the pursuit of those interests. The debate recurred, if more quietly, when the Baltic states took part in the “Big Bang” of enlargement in 2004, bringing NATO troops near Russia’s borders.² In April 2008, the promise of NATO membership for Georgia helped to spark the Russo-Georgian War. History rhymed, if not repeated, in 2014 when Ukraine’s revolution and shift towards the West prompted Russia to annex Crimea and intervene in the Donbass region. NATO’s collective defense principle is now more relevant than it has been in decades. Would the United States go to war to defend Ukraine, Georgia, or—per Article 5—the Baltic states? Would it be worth it?

These are essential questions that, up until recently, would frequently be kicked down the road. If the guns of August 2008 did not suffice as a wake-up call, those of 2014 did. The United States and European Union introduced sanctions against Moscow in February 2014, prompting counter-sanctions and soon a financial crisis in Russia. Relations between Moscow and Brussels hit a historic low for the post-Cold War era, laying bare not only a deep sense of mutual distrust and frustration, but also incompatible views of the world order. Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly condemned the post-Cold War order, citing NATO enlargement as one among the many grievances that have made that order unacceptable. At the 2007 Munich Conference on

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Security Policy, Putin described NATO expansion as “a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust.” It was one broken promise among many, he and other Russian policymakers charged, one that has, as Boris Yeltsin would put it, sown “the seeds of mistrust.”

Washington and Moscow are clearly not on the same page, and arguably not even reading the same history book. Why, then, did NATO expand to begin with? What set the stage for enlargement? What were the arguments for and against, and how did the actual outcomes of enlargement correspond to what was promised? To examine the roots of the current crisis, this thesis will evaluate the arguments laid out by enlargement’s architects and critics. It will also consider contemporary arguments about the consequences of enlargement, such as John J. Mearsheimer and Michael McFaul’s competing interpretations of the war in Ukraine.

Mearsheimer lays “most of the responsibility for the crisis” at the feet of the United States and its European allies, who made a self-destructive strategic blunder by wandering into “Russia’s backyard.” In contrast, McFaul and others have attributed the forceful shift in Russian foreign policy to personal ideology meshed with domestic politics. “Putin continued to need the United States as an adversary” to keep his regime afloat, though he also sincerely distrusted the United States.

The crisis in NATO-Russia relations cannot be blamed solely on Vladimir Putin and Russian national security strategy. It must be put into the wider context of post-1991 geopolitical shifts, of which NATO enlargement is but one. I also do not mean to argue that NATO enlargement alone necessarily caused the Russian backlash. It was certainly not a clear-cut case

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of cause and effect, given the many other factors tied up in the turn away from NATO under Russian President Vladimir Putin. Had NATO not marched eastward, would a resurgent Russia still be chafing at an expanded NATO? Could this confrontation have been avoided? As attractive as a solid, clearly defined answer to this may be, it remains elusive. I do not mean to draw a direct line of causation between it and the souring of relations with Russia, nor do I plan to lay out where we would be today if NATO had not expanded beyond a united Germany. Instead, my analysis will focus more on whether the proponents or critics of enlargement had the stronger argument, in light of where we are today.

In chapter one, I will discuss the political landscape in both the U.S. and Europe in the early 1990s, which enabled enlargement to move from a hypothetical to a reality. The collapse of the Iron Curtain, the expansion of the European Union, and the strengthened appeal of liberal ideals on both sides of the Atlantic all factored into enlargement becoming policy. From there, I will examine the arguments for and against enlargement. Chapter two analyzes two central and interlinked arguments for enlargement: that an expanded Alliance would function both as a preventive, stabilizing measure for Western and post-communist states, and as a normative tool to spread liberal democratic ideals. The chapter will also consider attempt to untangle the impact of NATO membership from that of the EU, using Poland and Romania as case studies.

Chapter three will focus on the central argument against enlargement: the probable alienation of Russia. This chapter will examine trends and particularities in the country’s foreign policy up until enlargement in the late 1990s, as well as what has been called a “turn” away from the West and Western institutions since then. It will also consider the wars in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014-) as they pertain to both NATO expansion and Russian foreign policy. Why did these wars unfold as they did, and what can they tell us about the foreign policies of NATO,
Russia, the U.S., and the E.U. alike in the 21st century? Finally, chapter four will delve into NATO’s growing list of commitments and evaluate whether NATO can effectively live up to them. Has expansion impeded the Alliance’s ability to act cohesively? Has it committed the United States to the defense of indefensible countries by bringing the Baltic states under its nuclear umbrella? After answering these questions, I will weigh the benefits and consequences of NATO expansion and consider whether it was, in Kennan’s words, “a tragic mistake.”
Chapter 1: An Enabling Environment: NATO’s Path to Enlargement

Introduction

On December 3, 1989, U.S. President George H.W. Bush and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev announced the end of the Cold War. A revolutionary wave had just undone Soviet control of Central and Eastern Europe. A little over two years later, neither the Soviet Union nor the Warsaw Pact would exist. NATO, in contrast, would not only outlive its former ideological and military counterweight, but take on many of its members. Though the Alliance had expanded before during the Cold War, incorporating former Soviet satellites would be easier said than done, especially as the collapse of the Warsaw Pact raised questions over the rationale for NATO. The decision would prove highly controversial.

How, then, did enlargement arise as a possibility? How did it gain traction within the foreign policy discourse in the United States and Europe? How did enlargement become a reality, rather than a hypothetical? Why did NATO expand when it did? What were the factors in American and European politics—both Western and Eastern—that encouraged or enabled this decision? What were the roles of other international organizations like the Western European Union, the Conference on Security and Cooperation and Europe, and the United Nations? What was the historical backdrop and what were the key political forces that made it possible for NATO to move eastward?

This chapter will answer these questions. The first half will focus on the European context for enlargement; the second, on that of the United States. I will provide a historical foundation for the debates over NATO’s future, then segue into the questions the post-Cold War era posed for NATO’s continuation as the dominant security structure in Europe. I will also discuss how the collapse of the Warsaw Pact (and, later, the Soviet Union) created a “gray zone”
rife with security concerns that other international organizations could not address. These existential anxieties coincided with turmoil in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The emerging republics in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)\(^7\) feared a resurgent and revanchist Russia, as well as the destabilizing potential of ethnic conflict. Additionally, norms and attitudes regarding integration, liberal democracy, and responsibility toward former Warsaw Pact states pushed European attitudes closer to the enlargement of both the EU and NATO.

In the latter part of the chapter, I will consider the circumstances in American politics that made enlargement attractive to the Alliance’s leading member. The end of the Cold War had raised many questions about the future of American grand strategy. The Clinton administration’s foreign policy must be considered within the context of these debates, to which NATO is also central. Next, I will discuss how bureaucratic and congressional politics factored into the Clinton administration’s NATO policy. Pressure from Congress effectively greased the wheels of enlargement from a domestic standpoint, especially after the 1994 midterm elections brought a more hardline Republican majority. For all of the debates in the Pentagon and among academics and former policymakers, the lack of a unified, well-positioned opposition helped ease enlargement’s path from possibility to policy.

**The Unraveling of the Bipolar Order**

First, some history is necessary to clarify how enlargement even became a possibility. The aftermath of the Second World War saw Europe sharply divided into spheres of influence. After the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences, the majority of Central and Eastern Europe—Poland,

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\(^7\) CEE encompasses the following former communist states: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Similarly, “CEEC” stands for “Central Eastern European Country.”
Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany—came to be “in practice … accepted as an area where the Soviets would run the show.” The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, though never recognized as part of the Soviet Union by the West, had already been de facto incorporated as Soviet Socialist Republics. Yalta in particular became a symbol of Western betrayal, an argument that would pervade later debates over NATO’s future.

With the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty on April 4, 1949 and the Warsaw Pact on May 14, 1955, the division of Europe became more starkly militarized. Though the North Atlantic Treaty does not mention the Soviet Union by name, its original purpose is clear. As the alliance’s first secretary-general Lord Ismay reportedly put it, NATO was there “to keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.” In the 1950s, as the U.S. extended its nuclear umbrella over Western European allies, Article 5’s stipulation—that an attack on one would be an attack on all—came with the threat of retaliation so as to deter any adversary who might consider conflict. Like the North Atlantic Treaty, the Warsaw Pact committed members to mutual defense. It also provided the Soviets with a controllable buffer zone that they could use to offset Western power, be it German or American.

Over the next three decades, however, this settlement would come undone. Between 1964 and 1985, under Leonid Brezhnev and his brief successors Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, the Soviet Union slid into a period of economic and political stagnation. The nomenklatura, an aging bureaucratic elite in the communist party, served as the vanguard for a

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decaying but seemingly stable system. Yet the standard of living was not improving for the average Soviet citizen—nor in the Eastern Bloc, for that matter. Whether bogged down militarily in Afghanistan or economically at home, the Soviet Union was creaking under the weight of Cold War commitments and political rigidity. With the election of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, the Politburo hoped to reinvigorate the tired Soviet system in danger of collapse. By 1988, after three years of more continuity than change, Gorbachev was implementing serious structural reform to the domestic and international spheres of Soviet conduct.11

The unintentional result of these reforms was the undoing of the Warsaw Pact, the reunification of Germany, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The new Soviet policy encouraged its western neighbors to put their own spin on glasnost and perestroika.12 At the same time, Gorbachev phased out the “Brezhnev doctrine” of limited sovereignty—the use of military force that would deter an Eastern bloc state from opting out of the Warsaw Pact or Soviet-style communism, notably applied in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Yet instead of revitalizing the worn image of socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, these reforms brought its critics to the political fore. By the end of 1989, a revolutionary wave had supplanted communist regimes across the region, to the surprise of the Soviet Union and United States alike. Central and Eastern Europe, once a Soviet buffer zone, was slipping out of the Soviet Union’s control. Most notably, the divided Germany, once “the nonnegotiable bedrock of Soviet security in Europe,” was about to become whole again.13 By July 1, 1991, the Warsaw Pact had ceased to exist.

What role did the Soviet Union play in the future of Central and Eastern Europe? What was to become of its sphere of influence? The revolutions of 1989 had been nothing if not a

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13 Stent, 74.
categorical rejection of communism and Soviet influence in Central and Eastern Europe. Moscow tried and failed to save face and regain the initiative, but was quickly losing the military muscle and political leverage it needed to persuade its departing allies. Former worst-case scenarios like the demise of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of communism had supplanted “postwar European realities.” Meanwhile, as the Soviet Union’s economy continued to decline, its politics grew highly fragmented and polarized. Gorbachev’s political power weakened, attacked by hardline communists and reformists alike, further lessening his leverage at the negotiating table with the West. In February 1990, Gorbachev could resist a united Germany within NATO. By June 1990, if not earlier, he had clearly conceded. German unification, like the Warsaw Pact’s demise, was “a speeding train over which the Soviet driver had lost control.”

By the end of 1991, so was the Soviet Union.

**NATO’s New Look**

With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Warsaw Pact, and finally the Soviet Union, NATO’s purpose came into question. The Russians were, for now, “out.” There was barely any Soviet or Russian military threat left to deter. Did NATO belong in this new era? American and allied European leadership thought so. Without its own substantial, reliable integrated security architecture, Western Europe had little incentive to kick NATO out. Keeping NATO around

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16 Stent, 150.
would also help assuage European anxieties about a united Germany or a resurgent Russia.\textsuperscript{17} Notwithstanding a minority calling for NATO’s dismantlement, the bulk of the American foreign policy debate veered toward preserving NATO, albeit with competing visions of how to do so.

Given the changed international context, a failure to adapt would spell irrelevance and waste for the Alliance. Western Europe no longer faced the prospect of a calculated, full-scale territorial attack. In accordance with general U.S. trends toward an expanding spectrum of foreign policy interests, the U.S.-led NATO broadened its own security functions—in good part owing to a broadened definition of security. In a marked departure from its predecessors, NATO’s 1991 Strategic Concept points not to invasion as the most likely threat to Allied security, but to “adverse consequences of instabilities that may arise from the serious economic, social and political difficulties, including ethnic rivalries and territorial disputes, which are faced by many countries in central and eastern Europe.” The document then highlights the danger of crises and conflicts that “could involve outside powers or spill over into NATO countries, having a direct effect on the security of the Alliance.”\textsuperscript{18} Defense was not just a matter of fending off or deterring attacks, but also of preventing conflict in the first place.

These changing definitions greased the wheels for NATO enlargement, as the later arguments for an “open door” NATO policy were founded in good part on prevention. Some proponents of enlargement, namely Central and Eastern Europeans, hoped to hedge against a resurgent Russia. Others, most notably Asmus, Kugler, and Larrabee, described enlargement as a stabilizing force amid the post-Cold War security vacuum, which risked triggering a “desperate


search for security in the region.” Without a credible security guarantee like Article 5, the region could spiral into nationalistic turmoil à la Weimar Germany.\(^\text{19}\)

Even so, in 1991—or most of 1993, for that matter—enlargement was more a possibility than a clear policy. Though the Europeans and Americans largely opposed NATO dismantlement, many bureaucrats and diplomats in the Pentagon and State Department were likewise skeptical of NATO expansion, insofar as it showed up on their radar.\(^\text{20}\) For much of the Russian political elite, the notion of NATO expanding beyond a united Germany—itself a concession that some of them regretted—was intolerable.\(^\text{21}\) In the end, what turned enlargement from possibility into policy was not any unified, broad-based support. Instead, the policy grew out of a “permissive environment” where a few committed proponents managed to “outorganize” its opponents.\(^\text{22}\)

Soviet or Russian leverage is conspicuously absent here, or at least minimized. As with the Warsaw Pact, Gorbachev felt that NATO was “created in another age,” and needed to become “to an even greater degree [a] political, not just military” organization.\(^\text{23}\) In that tune, the Warsaw Pact’s final communiqué spoke not of NATO, but of a “Pan-European process for the creation of new structures for security and cooperation on the continent.”\(^\text{24}\) By “Pan-European process,” the Soviets invariably meant the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe


\(^\text{22}\) Goldgeier, 4.


\(^\text{24}\) CVCE, “Communiqué from the final session of the Warsaw Pact Political Consultative Committee (Prague, 1 July 1991),” translated by Anna Grinev and Natalia Biletska.
However, the U.S. had always put NATO first, and was not keen on the CSCE taking (or sharing) that position as the prime European security institution. The drastically weakened, defeated Kremlin held little if any sway over NATO’s future, and it played a secondary role in NATO redevelopment and enlargement. It impacted the debate more through weakness and hypotheticals than any real, present strength. Instead, the key players were NATO allies, with the U.S. holding the most leverage.

The Return to Europe

Though the U.S. held the most leverage over NATO’s future, it is also important to look into how NATO enlargement became politically possible in Europe. From 1989 onwards, with the division of Europe apparently undone, long-standing debates over the “idea of Europe” had taken center stage. Leadership in both the liberal West and post-communist Central and Eastern Europe took advantage of the opportunity to redefine their respective countries, and with them the continent as a whole. The collapse of communism in Europe appeared to vindicate the capitalist and liberal democratic ideals that had shaped its western spheres. Most notable was that of European political and economic integration, manifest in the European Community (EC), later to become the European Union (EU). In a globalizing world, the EU sought to prove itself an economic heavyweight. Moreover, it had long developed institutionalized values and norms to

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define its pan-European identity: a commitment to the rule of law, democratic participation, market-based economies, human rights, and multilateralism.28

This normative framework made fertile ground for the later integration of Central and Eastern Europe into both the EU and NATO. The pursuit of European integration had long rested on the notion that shared economic and political institutions would make war “not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible.”29 Interdependent and democratic regimes in a rules-based international system, the argument went, were more likely to engage one another peacefully than militarily. Economic integration and democratic regimes, while not a cure-all, lowered the odds of conflict by raising its economic and political costs.30 In 1991, proponents of integration in Berlin or Paris might point to the past forty-odd years’ lack of interstate conflict, along with increased economic prosperity and democratic institutions, as proof of the European project’s success. They could also point to NATO’s reassuring, stabilizing presence as a third-party-led, multilateral institution with muscle.31 With that recent history in mind, many proponents of enlargement asked: “Why not provide the same for Central and Eastern Europe?”

Before delving into how these proponents of EU and NATO eastern enlargement won out, some clarification will help. The EU and NATO are distinct organizations. The EU is a Europe-based, Europe-led organization that began as an economic institution, later venturing into integrated foreign policy, military, judiciary, and policing. In contrast, NATO is a transatlantic, U.S.-dominated military alliance initially geared toward deterring a Soviet invasion, projecting American power, and otherwise securing an uneasy postwar settlement. Yet notwithstanding

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later institutional overlap and friction, the EU and NATO have generally worked either in tandem or on parallel tracks, with NATO predominating in defense.\textsuperscript{32} Both grew out of the same desire to stabilize and integrate Europe, with integration as a prerequisite to stability. The two are historically interconnected and, as of the 1990s, were central to the new Europe’s “architecture.”\textsuperscript{33} For newly post-communist states, being a part of the EU and NATO meant returning to Europe, and they sought both shortly after independence.

Given this relationship, EU and NATO enlargement can be understood in similar terms, particularly through a constructivist lens. Ideas and institutions shape identity and interests, and vice versa. Through enlargement, these institutions and communities could strengthen and legitimize their own collective identity and norms. If Poland, Hungary, or the Czech Republic took on the liberal reforms and values central to NATO and EU accession, it would strengthen the appeal of those reforms and values as universal. Liberal democracy and capitalism, in other words, are not just for the West. Moreover, membership in both institutions was not simply a given, but required the adoption of liberal norms. If newly independent regimes wanted NATO’s security guarantee, they would have to meet NATO’s criteria. They needed to “uphold democracy,” to be “making progress toward a market economy,” to have civilian control of the military, and to respect the sovereignty of other states.\textsuperscript{34} Likewise, “rejoining Europe” could bolster liberal regimes and actors in Central and Eastern Europe by providing them with an

\textsuperscript{32} The existence of the Western European Union (WEU) does not negate this, as the organization spent the Cold War subordinate to NATO. As one analyst described it, among international organizations, the WEU’s “length of existence is the most inversely proportional to the actual functions that it has fulfilled” (Gordon 1997, 125). In 2011, the WEU was terminated, with its institutional duties merged into the Common Defense and Security Policy.

\textsuperscript{33} Schimmelfennig, 1.

\textsuperscript{34} U.S. Department of State Bureau of European and Canadian Affairs, “Minimum Requirements for NATO Membership,” June 30, 1997.
external source of legitimacy wrapped in the EU’s promises of economic growth and NATO’s security guarantee.35

These concerns over legitimacy did not come out of nowhere. After communism’s collapse in Central and Eastern Europe, deceptively simple bipolarity had given way to ambiguity and unease. On both a domestic and international level, the guidelines had been muddled. After decades of centralized politics and planned economies, what would democratization and market reform look like? How would the sought-after “return to Europe” play out? The struggle was no longer one of “us versus them,” pitting reform-minded populations against unpopular communist regimes. Those old coalitions had split apart, with new political actors bearing competing visions.36 In Poland, for instance, the Solidarity movement had fragmented, and President Lech Wałęsa’s political power had waned by 1991. Throughout the region, government and market reforms brought both risk and opportunity. Would economic liberalization and democratization prove destabilizing, possibly empowering nationalists and communists? How long would the “growing pains” of democratization and economic reform last?

Another dimension of uncertainty lay in the security vacuum that had opened up between Western Europe and the former Soviet Union.37 After breaking out of the Soviet bloc, many in this non-aligned gray area feared being drawn back in by a resurgent Russia. Consequently, the deep-seated anxiety over possible Russian military aggression was crucial to the region’s calculus in seeking NATO membership. Joining NATO was not simply a return to Europe and “the West,” but also (if not more so) an escape from Russia, “the East.” After decades of rule

35 Schimmelfennig, 73-75.
from Moscow, “being part of “the East” was simply not acceptable anywhere in the region.”

Turmoil within Russia’s own borders might temporarily rule out military adventure beyond them, but for how long? For all of President Boris Yeltsin’s plans for political and economic reform, its neighbors could not be certain of a pacified Russia in the long term. Yeltsin’s hold on power was already tenuous. The 1993 constitutional crisis over his economic and political reforms, followed by communist and nationalist gains in the Duma, had only made more explicit the fragility of Russia’s democratic transition.

Still, scenarios of a resurgent Russia or highly destabilized Central and Eastern Europe were, at the time, just scenarios. Were they really enough to ease Paris, Berlin, and London into supporting NATO expansion? These were long-run, hypothetical costs, and expansion came with long-run, hypothetical benefits. NATO expansion, like EU expansion, would be costly for member states. It might not bear the promised fruits. Yet these institutions and states (NATO and EU alike) had based their identities around liberal norms of inclusion, interdependence, and democratic peace. They found it hard to justify closing NATO or the EU’s door, especially not to countries interested in liberal democracy and free markets. Additionally, some Europeans saw NATO enlargement as a redress to a grievous wrong committed at Yalta. Both Poland’s Lech Wałęsa and the Czech Republic’s Václav Havel regularly invoked the “ghost of Yalta” to push the Europeans and Americans on NATO membership. This “shaming strategy” further narrowed Western Europeans’ room for political maneuver in relations with the post-communist states.

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39 Berend, 84; Schimmelfennig, 233.
There was another “narrowing factor,” albeit more parallel to than intersecting with the question of NATO enlargement: the Yugoslav wars. To some extent, former Yugoslavia’s ethnic turmoil raised concerns about Central and Eastern Europe’s own conflict potential. More importantly, however, the Western European response reflected their own military ineffectiveness. As U.S. Secretary of State James Baker saw it, “it was time to make the Europeans step up to the plate and show that they could act as a unified power.” The outcome was less one of Brussels speaking, but rather Paris, Berlin, and London shouting all at once. European intervention in the Balkans ended up dead in the water, as did any semblance of a European defense policy independent of the United States.

The absence of a unified European power to compete with the U.S. made it much easier for the latter to impose its own decisions, especially with respect to NATO. Leading EU and NATO member states were already constrained by their own architecture of liberal norms and institutions, which made it hard to justify closing off membership to interested outsider states. If those outsider states in Central and Eastern Europe were willing and able to adopt liberal, democratic norms, why say no? The sense of guilt over the postwar division of Europe further tightened this normative knot. Yalta’s legacy was both a serious motivator and a rhetorical weapon for Central and Eastern European leaders. In uncertain times, these countries had a strong interest in getting far away from Russia’s influence, especially as the vast country faced crisis on several fronts. In the end, however, the Western Europeans’ influence on the new geopolitical order was dwarfed by the Americans’, especially as their own security and influence

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relied in good part on Washington’s. The U.S., rather than Germany, France, or the U.K., would hold the most sway over any debates over NATO’s new scope.

**Washington Decides**

As the U.S. stood at the core of NATO, any discussions of the alliance’s future had to go through Washington. At first, President Bill Clinton did not show much of an interest in NATO enlargement. He had campaigned on the economy, not foreign policy. In 1993, as Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott put it, “NATO enlargement itself was not yet the stuff of headlines.” Senior officials in both the Pentagon and State Department were lukewarm toward extending NATO’s security guarantee, especially with Russia in such sharp decline. Opponents in the military saw the end of the Cold War as an opportunity to reduce their presence in Europe, while those in the State Department worried about overstretching American commitments and diluting the Alliance’s cohesion. How, then, did NATO enlargement gain traction in American politics? How did its proponents win out over the opponents?

There were two prongs to the domestic effort to enlarge NATO. First, there was the commitment of President Bill Clinton and his cabinet, especially National Security Advisor Anthony Lake and Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Richard Holbrooke. The latter two’s position gave them significant leverage over the domestic debates on enlargement. Strobe Talbott and Secretary of State Warren Christopher later warmed to the idea as well. Second, there was the pressure of the Republican-controlled 104th Congress. Under Newt Gingrich’s wing, the Republicans had included NATO expansion in their Contract with

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America. Senior officials in the Clinton administration already leaned in favor of NATO expansion. Once in power, the Republicans turned up the heat, raising the stakes in the domestic enlargement debate. Though enlargement certainly had a range of detractors, the Clinton administration and congressional Republicans were more committed, better positioned, and better organized. With the 104th Congress in session, the U.S. government was vigorously debating enlargement not as an *if*, but as a *when* and a *how*.

The “narrowing” of the NATO enlargement debate can be tied to broader trends in American grand strategy. Since the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union, the standard U.S. conception of interests and responsibilities only broadened. American grand strategy encompasses how key policymakers identify those interests, the threats those interests face, and how they may allocate primarily military resources to secure those interests.\(^46\) No longer facing a Soviet threat, the U.S. could, in theory, take several paths. It could withdraw from its commitments in Europe and Asia, intervening only when necessary to prevent a hegemon from emerging in Eurasia.\(^47\) It could “come home” and forgo engagement altogether.\(^48\) Either scenario would necessitate withdrawal from NATO, which appealed to few in Washington or Brussels. The scope of U.S. commitments showed little sign of contracting. Instead, policymakers were more interested in either maintaining or expanding that scope, knowing they no longer had to worry about a rival superpower.

Bolstered by optimism and unipolarity, the Clinton administration was especially attracted to broadening U.S. commitments, seeing “engagement and enlargement” as a means to secure peace, prosperity, and democracy abroad. In Anthony Lake’s words, “the successor to a


doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement—enlargement of the world’s free community of market democracies.” Warren Christopher, as well as his successor Madeleine Albright, spoke the same language: markets, human rights, and democratic spread were integral to American influence and international security. Democracies, the argument went, are much less likely to fight other democracies, prove more reliable in diplomacy, treat their citizens better, and help build an international order rooted in the rule of law, dialogue, and stability. Spreading and securing the world’s democracies and market economies was in American interests. With their threats becoming more diffuse, encompassing terrorism, ethnic conflict, environmental degradation, nuclear proliferation, and economic stagnation, Americans could not just “come home.” Per the grand strategy of enlargement, American security and credibility demanded more international commitment than before, and not just within the sphere of American influence established at Yalta.

Securing emerging democracies in Central and Eastern Europe lay within this new scope of American foreign policy interests, and an expanded NATO was the means to achieve that goal. With membership increasingly contingent on democratic, economic, and military reforms, the administration saw an expanded Alliance as an instrument to spread democratic values and American influence. At a reelection rally in October 1996, Clinton summed up the mindset:

I came to office convinced that NATO can do for Europe's East what it did for Europe's West: prevent a return to local rivalries, strengthen democracy against future threats, and create the conditions for prosperity to flourish. That's why the United States has taken the lead in a three-part effort to build a new NATO for a new era: first, by adapting NATO with new capabilities for new missions; second, by opening its doors to Europe's emerging democracies; third, by building a strong and cooperative relationship between NATO and Russia.


NATO enlargement was not simply about geopolitical and economic advantage, though this advantage undoubtedly helped the cause. Instead, for the president and many in his administration, NATO was “no longer directed against Russia but against the new threats to peace and stability in Europe.”\textsuperscript{51} It was not an artifact of the Cold War, but a path to peace, prosperity, and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe.

Still, straight-away enlargement was unfeasible, and not simply because aspiring NATO members had not yet met its benchmarks. The U.S. also had to consider Russia. Already shaken by the Soviet collapse, the country was staggering through a decade of economic chaos, political confrontation, and an uncertain democratization. Expanding NATO up to the Russian borders—the natural consequence of Polish and Baltic membership—could prove toxic for U.S.-Russia relations, as well as for Yeltsin’s shaky presidency. By the end of 1993, he had faced two attempts at impeachment, the second culminating in a violent stand-off in October. If NATO moved eastward in 1994 or 1995, it could end up without Yeltsin at all in 1996. Engaging Russia while enlarging NATO would become more akin to squaring the circle. There was also the matter of Russian cooperation on removing nuclear warheads from Ukraine, as well as any NATO-Russia coordination in the former Yugoslavia. U.S. leverage had its limits. If it wanted Moscow’s cooperation, it would have to tread carefully on the NATO question.

This also raised the question of Russia’s future relationship with the Alliance. For one, where would enlargement end? Would it rule out former Soviet republics as members? Though the U.S. and its allies had never recognized the Baltic states as part of the Soviet Union, the Russians did not see it that way. Ignoring the reality of Russian perceptions, however much one

\textsuperscript{51} Bill Clinton, \textit{My Life} (New York: Random House, 2004), 750.
might contest them, was a dangerous game. Ukraine was an even thornier matter. In 1997, not long before the March 20-22 summit, Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov privately warned Talbott that “if any countries of the former Soviet Union are admitted to NATO, we will have no relations with NATO whatsoever.” As the administration saw it, this was not Russia’s call. Even so, it wanted some amount of NATO-Russia coordination—“a voice, but not a veto.” This would later be put into writing through the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, with a NATO-Russia Council established in 2002. Whether Russia itself could one day be eligible to join, as Yeltsin hoped, was murky. The Central and Eastern Europeans certainly did not want Russia in NATO. It was also unclear whether Russia could enact the necessary reforms.

With these competing interests in mind, the administration found an “interim step” toward enlargement in the Partnership for Peace (PFP). Proposed in October 1993, PFP would encompass not only the former Warsaw Pact members, but also former Soviet republics, including Russia itself. In Washington, the Clinton administration attempted to meet enlargement’s proponents and skeptics halfway. In October 1993, when the logistics of enlargement were fairly vague, this was a feasible stopgap. Much of the Pentagon preferred PFP, worrying that expansion might weaken NATO and alienate Russia. As far as interests abroad were concerned, PFP was also an attempt at compromise between Russian and Central and Eastern European anxieties. The compromise was hardly cosmetic. PFP also worked as a “training program” and “probationary stage” for aspiring members, guiding them through the military exercises and political reforms necessary to qualify for membership. Through PFP, the

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52 Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 236.
55 Goldgeier, 4.
56 Schimmelfennig, 93-94.
administration could spread its liberal democratic ideals, kick the NATO membership can down the road, and, hopefully, appeal to both sides.

In fact, though PFP appeared to smooth over thorny issues, it also set the stage for more friction. The Central and Eastern Europeans were determined to become NATO members, not stop at PFP. An October 22, 1993 memorandum of conversation, however, suggests that Yeltsin believed PFP to be a substitute for enlargement. The Russian president asked Warren Christopher to clarify whether “all countries in CEE and [the Newly Independent States] would be on equal footing and there would be a partnership and not a membership.” Christopher responded positively, to Yeltsin’s apparent enthusiasm. Yet one year later, Richard Holbrooke was pushing the Pentagon to discuss NATO enlargement. The Kremlin’s response was harsh, but shaky, as Yeltsin condemned the Alliance for “sowing the seeds of mistrust” and warned that Europe was “in danger of plunging into a cold peace.” By December 1994, though, the enlargement process was officially underway, and there was only so much Yeltsin could do about it. Clinton wanted Yeltsin to accept enlargement into the former Warsaw Pact states as unavoidable. By early 1996, Yeltsin’s cabinet apparently had.

So long as enlargement was administration policy, this two-track approach—engaging Russia while enlarging NATO—was always going to be an uphill battle. After January 1995, when the Republicans gained control of the House and Senate, it became much harder. The new wave of Republicans came into Congress with their foreign policy preferences in tow, and per

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57 See “Secretary Christopher’s meeting with President Yeltsin, 10/22/93, Moscow.” Was this a promise not to enlarge? This conversation can be coupled with Baker’s earlier “not one inch eastward” assurance to Gorbachev, a parallel Yeltsin himself drew in a September 1993 letter to Clinton. How serious or binding that assurance was—and whether these conversations show Russian misinterpretation or American duplicity—is controversial. See Asmus, Opening NATO’s Door, pp. 4-6, 53-54; Goldgeier, “Promises Made, Promises Broken? What Yeltsin Was Told About NATO in 1993 and Why It Matters,” War on the Rocks, July 12, 2016; Maxim Kórshunov, “Mikhail Gorbachev: I am against all walls,” Russia Beyond the Headlines, October 16, 2014.

58 Asmus, 87-88.


60 Talbott, 217-218.
Newt Gingrich’s Contract with America, that included a fast-track enlargement policy. The June 4, 1996 news conference encapsulates the Republican platform and approach. Joined by Wałęsa, they lambasted the administration for acting slowly. Fast-trackers like Gingrich, John McCain, and presidential candidate Bob Dole rejected the Russia factor as a reason—an “excuse,” rather—to delay. PFP was a “cruel detour” from the responsibilities of enlargement, which, Chris Smith emphasized, was “a matter of when, not if, but now.” Gingrich declared the process “several years behind the appropriate schedule,” and Sen. John McCain condemned the “unending delay which the Clinton administration has orchestrated in not implementing this much-needed expansion.”

This pressure from Congress, ever at odds with the president, put serious strain on the two-track approach. Congress wanted enlargement to go faster, and further—not limiting itself to the Visegrád states of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, but also considering the Baltic states and Ukraine in the near future. As far as the Republicans were concerned, NATO enlargement dwarfed Russian engagement by far. Talbott had been castigated in his February 1993 confirmation hearings as an enabler of Russia’s hardliners. Around that same time, fast-trackers in Congress were bringing out legislation “to force the administration to commit to a timetable on enlargement and to provide assistance to the leading candidates.”

Though the NATO Expansion Act of 1994 could die in committee, its spiritual successors—the National Security Revitalization Act of 1995, the NATO Enlargement Facilitation Act of 1996—were harder to ignore. As executive-legislative relations grew more fraught, the gradual approach was becoming less viable. Clinton could not satisfy Yeltsin and Congress at the same time.

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63 Goldgeier, 62.
This confluence of factors in the executive and legislative branch narrowed the official scope of the debate; that is, the debate that the government itself held. This is not to say that there was no public debate over enlargement. Indeed, enlargement had its share of domestic opponents. George F. Kennan called it “the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold war era,” while an open letter from fifty foreign policy experts, among them Jack Matlock, Robert McNamara, and Paul Nitze, warned against a “policy error of historic proportions.”64 Outside of the experts, New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman bemoaned NATO expansion as a “silly decision” based on a “cynical effort to attract votes from Polish, Czech and Hungarian Americans by promising their motherlands membership.”65 These critics were fatefully not in the White House, and there were few like them in Congress. Their criticism came after enlargement had already won enough momentum in the executive and legislature. Enlargement’s entrepreneurs had taken the initiative and run with it.

Conclusion

On December 16, 1997 in Brussels, Alliance members signed the Protocols of Accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to the North Atlantic Treaty. The accompanying press release emphasized an interest both in working with Russia and in keeping NATO’s door open. On May 1, 1998, the Senate voted to ratify Polish, Hungarian, and Czech accession to NATO with a supermajority—89 to 10. On November 21-22, 2002, NATO invited another round of states: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Again, the new protocols were signed, then ratified soon after with an overwhelming majority in the Senate.

Russian frustrations notwithstanding, Baltic membership was to be expected. Once NATO’s door was open, it was hard to justify closing it, especially not to republics the West had never recognized as Soviet. So NATO continued eastward, its expansion spurred on by American leverage, liberal norms, and—for the time being—a bipartisan commitment to NATO.

Was this such a good idea? Was expanding NATO to include the former Warsaw Pact countries a responsibility and an inevitability, as the Clinton administration and Gingrich’s Republicans claimed? Was it a critical policy error, made in haste without serious regard for the backlash it could provoke in Russia and within NATO, as Kennan, Nitze, and other critics charged? In retrospect, how have these arguments fared? In the chapters ahead, I examine and evaluate the different dimensions of these arguments, starting with NATO’s role in stability, confidence-building, and spreading liberal norms.
Chapter 2: Whole, Free, and at Peace: NATO Inclusion and Democratic Consolidation

Introduction

On March 21, 1991, Czechoslovak President Václav Havel addressed the North Atlantic Council in Brussels with cautious optimism. The de facto disbanded Warsaw Pact was set for formal “self-liquidation” in July. A destabilized Soviet Union was slowly withdrawing troops from its former satellites. Emboldened Czechoslovak, Hungarian, and Polish governments were pressing for association with the European Community. Even so, mused Havel, “the paths of history are more winding, and more complicated, than we believed them to be.” Communist institutions had left their successor regimes fragile and vulnerable to “political and social upheavals, material privations, criminality, a growth of social despair and, thus, also the danger of populism.” To the east, they feared a disintegrating, potentially revanchist Soviet state. In summary, Havel said, the post-communist states were “dangerously sliding into a certain political, economic and security vacuum … without appropriate external links the very existence of our young democracies is in jeopardy.”

Havel did not then urge publicly for full, fast-track membership, but stressed that NATO should, sooner rather than later, open its door to other countries committed to its ideals. His central argument—that Europe’s nascent post-communist democracies needed the support of Western institutions—only became more salient and categorical as the decade wore on. In the words of sociologist Claus Offe, the post-communist regimes faced a “triple transition,” in which long-standing debates over borders, democracy, and economics had to “be traversed nearly simultaneously.” Anxieties remained high over the Soviet Union, exacerbated especially by the

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August 1991 putsch. The former superpower’s dissolution in December could only do so much to alleviate those fears. There was no guarantee that promises Moscow made in 1993 would apply twenty or thirty years later.

Yet, some argued, NATO’s collective defense mandate in Article 5 could both deter a resurgent Russia and assuage the “social despair” described by Havel. An expanding NATO, acting in parallel (if not always in tandem) with a likewise expanding EU, would consolidate the gains of 1989 and 1991. This democratic consolidation, sometimes called “democratic spread,” would flow from two streams. First, given the uncertainties and difficulties of democratic transition, NATO membership could serve the same psychological function for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as it had for postwar Western Europe. Yet, some argued, NATO’s collective defense mandate in Article 5 could both deter a resurgent Russia and assuage the “social despair” described by Havel. An expanding NATO, acting in parallel (if not always in tandem) with a likewise expanding EU, would consolidate the gains of 1989 and 1991. This democratic consolidation, sometimes called “democratic spread,” would flow from two streams. First, given the uncertainties and difficulties of democratic transition, NATO membership could serve the same psychological function for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as it had for postwar Western Europe.68 Stabilizing the CEECs would ease their path to democratic consolidation. This never involved NATO alone, but NATO membership was tightly interwoven with EU membership. Accession to either hinged on the aspirant country’s commitment to adopting liberal democratic norms; the credible prospect of membership could thereby incentivize reform. Moreover, the Partnership for Peace program could function as both a “training program” and a “probationary stage,” guiding countries on the path to reform.69 Working in tandem, the enlarging institutions could consolidate CEE democracies and bring about a unified, peaceful, democratic Europe.

Many contemporaneous critics of enlargement charged that such gains would be outweighed by the cost of souring Russia’s relationship with the West. The stakes were not high enough to warrant a move so risky as moving NATO eastward. For one, argued Michael Mandelbaum, democracy was not in danger in those countries best positioned to join NATO, and

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69 Ibid., 93.
the Alliance would be “irrelevant” to solving their post-communist problems.70 On a similar note, others argued, the Visegrád states—Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic—would have moved toward democracy even without the incentive of NATO membership. Would NATO really strengthen democracy as effectively as the proponents claimed, or would the EU do the job just fine? What would NATO do about new members who later regressed into illiberalism?71

To attempt to answer these questions, I will start by defining just what proponents of the new NATO meant by “democratic consolidation.” After that, I will untangle NATO’s prescribed role in democratic consolidation from the EU’s. The two enlargement processes are strongly correlated and, in some respects, interconnected. Still, they differ enough in their origins, underlying motives, functions, and scope that they must be considered distinctly, though not in isolation from one another.72 What were the contemporaneous arguments for and against NATO membership as a means for democratic consolidation, and how has inclusion in NATO been used to achieve that? Have these arguments reflected the reality of Central and Eastern Europe?

It is worth noting that “post-communist Central and Eastern Europe” encompasses a wide range of countries with distinct histories before, during, and after communism. If we are to examine a relationship between NATO membership and democratic consolidation, we need to acknowledge the massive amount of variation between the former Warsaw Pact member states, the Soviet-occupied Baltic states, the post-Soviet states, and the post-communist states that were outside the Soviet sphere. Croatia’s communist history, post-communist experience, democratic transition, and path to NATO and EU membership are markedly different from Latvia’s or Poland’s. There is also substantial variation among the former Warsaw Pact states. As there is no

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one “post-communist experience,” so too is there no neatly defined “one size fits all” path to
democratic consolidation.

The two cases I have chosen, Poland and Romania, demonstrate this. Both were once
members of the Warsaw Pact. Both were part of the revolutionary wave of 1989, and both were
generally considered democracies by the end of the 1990s. Both have since joined the
European Union and NATO. Beneath the surface, however, this veneer of similarity comes apart.
Warsaw and Bucharest had markedly different relationships with Moscow and the Warsaw Pact
itself. While the Poles welcomed Gorbachev’s perestroika, Nicolae Ceaușescu’s Romania
remained highly repressive to the bitter end. Polish communism died peacefully; Ceaușescu’s
regime was overthrown, with Ceaușescu and his wife executed in the only bloody regime change
of 1989. Moreover, while post-communist Poland enjoyed relative pluralism in the 1990s,
Romania’s new system was dominated by Communist Party apparatchiks and Securitate
officers. Poland, the high achiever, joined NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. Romania, the
“laggard,” joined in 2004 and 2007, respectively. Did NATO membership factor into these two
countries’ democratic consolidation? If so, to what extent, and in what respects?

Concepts and Context

What do we mean when we talk about democratic consolidation? Following Przeworski’s
definition, we can call a democracy consolidated when its system of institutions becomes “the
only game in town.” It is self-enforcing; its alternatives, unimaginable. Outcomes in a democracy
are not predetermined by any one party or individual, but by a confluence of competing groups

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73 Per Freedom House’s Freedom in the World reports, going back to 1999, and Polity IV’s data sets. [unsure how to cite]
74 Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, “The Unbearable Lightness of Democracy: Poland and Romania after Communism,” Current
History 103 no. 676 (November 2004): 383-388; Jeffrey Simon, Poland and NATO: A Study in Civil-Military Relations
and interests. The most fundamental outcome in the democratic process, the free and fair election, provides indications and prescriptions to the political actors who have won or lost. Losers do not seek to override that outcome, but “to try again within the same institutions under which they have just lost.” Public opinion strongly favors democratic institutions and procedures. The odds of the country reverting to an alternative become slim, and those who would have it otherwise end up on the margins.

Following Linz and Stepan, for a democracy to be consolidated, five interconnected, mutually enforcing conditions must be met. There must be a healthy environment for an independent, thriving civil society. In other words, there must be a venue for people, groups, and movements to self-organize, come together, voice their concerns, and advance their interests. Complementing this, there must be a space for political society, where citizens compete for power and influence in the new democratic government. Both require that key actors uphold the rule of law, follow a clear legal framework, and let an independent judiciary interpret those laws. To meet these goals, the new democratic government also needs to be able to use an existing bureaucracy to provide basic services to its citizens. It must be able to protect, regulate, and tax. Finally, it must have an economic society—a system of accepted norms, regulations, and institutions that allows for relative market autonomy—to fund state functions and the material base for independent civil and political societies. Regular elections are not enough; the polity must be willing, able, and eager to influence policy beyond a few appointed dates.

What would this look like in countries that had inherited command economies and unresponsive institutions controlled not by a polity, but—with the general exception of

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76 Ibid., 26.
Romania—by Soviet High Command? It was not clear how these countries would make free markets “work,” or democratic institutions, for that matter. Some, like the Czechs, could draw on their interwar democracies. Others could not. Poland’s had been short-lived; Romania’s had been even weaker. Additionally, there was the question of what to do about the massive militaries carried over from the Warsaw Pact era, especially amid security concerns over a resurgent Russia. Civil-military relations under communist rule had been deeply fraught, as the military itself often served as an “instrument of external or internal oppression.” Military equipment, training standards, and resources also fell well below Western standards. All told, the “return to Europe” was going to be an ambitious and uncertain venture. It would not come cheap. Even so, there seemed to be no alternative.

**Enlarging Democracy**

What did NATO have to do with this? As I discussed in chapter 1, the CEECs had a strong security-based interest in NATO membership. However, the argument most frequently put forth in public, especially by the Clinton administration, was the case for democratic consolidation. This was, in fact, the administration’s driving rationale for enlargement: the belief that NATO, working in tandem with the broadening and deepening European Union, could help to bring about a Europe “whole, free, and at peace.” Its intellectual bedrock was the democratic peace theory—the notion that democracies are much less inclined to go to war with one another. Key players in the administration, including Madeleine Albright, Warren Christopher, Anthony Lake, and the president himself, tied NATO enlargement to democracy, democracy to

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78 Simon, 3.
peace, and all three to the national interest. Expanding NATO, in Albright’s words, meant expanding “the area of Europe where wars do not happen.”

NATO would achieve this, the argument went, by providing new members with a security guarantee that they would otherwise pursue unilaterally. Poland cannot be certain of Russia’s intentions now, nor twenty years in the future. Likewise, Romania cannot be confident that Hungary will not lay claim to Transylvania, home to an ethnic Hungarian minority, now or later. The pains of economic and political transition could inflame these underlying insecurities by bringing nationalist and irredentist forces to power. Former Yugoslavia did not have a monopoly on ethnic violence, argued “RAND boys” Ronald D. Asmus, Richard L. Kugler, and F. Stephen Larrabee; rather, the region was “littered with potential mini-Weimar Republics.” Their nascent democracies could only survive if they were brought into “a secure European and Western political, economic and military community”—that is, NATO and the EU.

Moreover, NATO would not only be a stabilizing force, but—working in parallel with the EC-turned-EU—a socializing one. Socialization refers to the internalization of a given community’s rules—that is, the “adoption of [that community’s] social identities, values and norms into the actor’s repertoire of cognitions and behaviors.” The most critical period would be before accession, as membership in both NATO and the EU hinged on democratic reform.

Aspiring NATO members would have to resolve their ethnic and territorial disputes peacefully.

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83 Ibid., 30.
84 Frank Schimmelfennig, The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 73.
and establish civilian control of their militaries. They would also have to bring those militaries up to NATO’s standards if they were to be integrated into its command structure. Finally, per the Washington Treaty, they needed to uphold “democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.”

Through political accession conditionality—that is, credibly hinging the juicy membership carrot on given reforms—Brussels could ease these countries’ paths not only into the organizations that they sought to join, but also towards democratic consolidation.

When analyzing the impact of accession conditionality, it is extremely important to distinguish between the role of NATO and that of the EU. While the two have moved in parallel and used similar conditions and incentives, NATO conditionality has tended to be less demanding than EU conditionality. Like the EU, NATO can be said to have its own acquis communautaire—a “body of common rights and obligations” required of all member states, and which aspiring members must adopt and implement prior to accession. Nonetheless, most of the tools to incentivize democratic consolidation belonged to the EU.

During the 1990s, opponents of NATO enlargement criticized this stance on several fronts. Perhaps the most common reason was that the possible benefits of consolidating democracy in the CEECs would not outweigh the almost certain costs of alienating Russia. As I explore the Russian alienation argument in the next chapter, I do not need to delve into it here. More important are the arguments that NATO would not help strengthen democracy, or would have minimal impact, which Dan Reiter lays out in a 2001 article. He bases this on three points. First, he says, the new members—Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic—were committed

87 Ibid., 198.
to democracy and did not need NATO’s help on that front. Second, the EU and other international institutions would be a much more effective instrument for democratic consolidation than NATO. Third, NATO lacks a legal framework for punishing members for backsliding into authoritarianism. Extending NATO membership to the CEECs was therefore unnecessary, relatively ineffective, and potentially dangerous.

To what extent do these competing arguments hold water in my two cases? Was the potential for conflict in Poland or Romania as dire as Asmus, Kugler, and Larrabee argued? Were their democracies precarious enough to need membership in NATO as a stabilizing measure? Was the potential of NATO membership an effective incentive for reform? To answer this question, I start by studying the state of Polish and Romanian democracies in the 1990s. I especially look at how they had already progressed (or not) before early 1995, when political accession conditionality became more explicitly tied to democratic consolidation. In February, Secretary of Defense William J. Perry laid out the “Perry principles,” stipulating that new members uphold democracy, free markets, human rights, respect for neighbors’ sovereignty, and civilian control of the military. NATO listed those same principles in its September 1995 study of enlargement. Did the introduction of accession conditionality impact democratic consolidation in these countries, and in turn their road to NATO membership?

**Between Solidarity and Integration: The Case of Poland**

It is fitting to start with Poland. From the emergence of Solidarity in 1980 to the movement’s triumph in the semi-democratic 1989 elections, Poland had spearheaded the region’s break with communism. Likewise, it had been one of the first in the region to come knocking at

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NATO’s door. With the 1990 election of its first noncommunist president, Lech Wałęsa, and subsequent appointment of Prime Minister Jan Krzysztof Bielecki, the country began moving toward an EU Association Agreement. As the last Russian troops left Poland in 1992-1993, the prospect of NATO membership became less “taboo.”92 In September 1993, Wałęsa wrote to NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner that membership was “a top priority.”93 The Polish National Security Bureau described “unification with the European Communities,” including NATO, as the country’s “best hope to consolidate an independent statehood, democracy and favourable economic development.”94

In 1993, Polish democracy lacked a strong history and had an uncertain future. The Second Polish Republic had existed as a turbulent parliamentary democracy from 1919 to 1926, when the May Coup brought the autocratically-inclined Marshal Józef Piłsudski and his Sanation (Sanacja) movement to power. Decades later, post-communist Poland was in an uneasy position again. Solidarity had fractured, Wałęsa was losing support, and the transition to capitalism through controversial “shock therapy” reform was bringing unemployment and inflation. The question also remained of what to do about the massive Warsaw Pact-era military. About a decade later, Poland was widely considered a success story, with high foreign investment, sustained economic growth, and fairly sturdy democracy. Some called it a model for its neighbors.95

Did NATO have much to do with this? In fact, the case of Poland highlights several problems with the argument for NATO membership as a force for democratic consolidation.

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First, expansion had settled in as policy for Washington and Brussels by the end of 1994. Poland’s size, location, economic capacity, history, and determination to join NATO put it first in line for the first wave of enlargement. It was postponed not because the Visegrád states had insufficiently consolidated their democracies, but because the Clinton administration feared pushing relations with Russia over the edge.  

While NATO did provide important incentives and guidance for military reform in Poland, as I discuss below, there was not much question over the Poles’ place in the first enlargement wave. Second, and relatedly, the Poles’ core impetus to join NATO was the security guarantee against Russia. The notion of “dismantling Yalta” and erasing “the line drawn in Europe by Stalin’s bloody boot” appealed to both Warsaw and Washington, and it predated the “Perry principles.”

Third, it is not clear that the incentive of NATO membership helped to consolidate Polish democracy to the extent that it was advertised. The plainest indicator of NATO’s limitations lies in the actual levers used to incentivize democratic consolidation, especially in comparison to those of the EU. While restyled as a norm entrepreneur, NATO remained at its core a military alliance, with little resources beyond the military realm. It has largely lacked the staffing and finances that the EU can draw upon, pre- and post-accession, to entice, guide, or threaten countries into meeting its standards. In part because of this, its acquis has been less stringent and more informal. Particularly on the first round of enlargement, NATO was generally vague about what constituted support for democratic reforms. The prospect of NATO membership has served more as a “blunt instrument” than as a complex technocratic toolbox. A “laggard” country like Slovakia could see its membership kicked down the road, while Poland might be pressured to

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sort out its civil-military relations faster. Nonetheless, there is not much to indicate that NATO had the resources to incentivize broader reform beyond the binary offering or withholding of membership.98

Membership in NATO helped Poland on one critical front: civilian control of the military. As previously mentioned, the aftermath of the communist era left the relationship between the Polish Armed Forces and the Polish population highly strained. The 1981-1983 martial law period had been only the most recent example of repression by what many Poles regarded as an instrument of foreign occupation. Many officers who had enjoyed power then had become entirely too comfortable with it, concluding “that they were better than civilians at managing the government administration and the economy and that society and politics can be governed by orders.”99 From 1991 to 1995, the military worked to limit civilian oversight from both the defense minister and parliament, “seeking instead direct subordination of the military to the authority of the president … Poland drifted during the early transition period toward an arrangement increasingly based on patronage and personal loyalties.”100 In 1995, the issue put the republic on the verge of a constitutional crisis. Pressure from Washington and Brussels helped Warsaw forge a consensus over civilian control of the military.

1997 was a breakthrough year for Poland. On April 2, the National Assembly adopted the new constitution, which codified civilian control of the armed forces and was approved by referendum on May 25. At the July 8-9 summit in Madrid, NATO formally kicked off accession talks with Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Two years later, the three were members. Brussels’ financial incentives and security guarantees, as well as direct training and advising

98 Jacoby, 119-124, 142.
100 Andrew Michta, “Modernizing the Polish Military,” Defence Studies 2, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 42.
through PfP and later NATO, was critical in Poland’s consolidation of democratic oversight and control over its military forces. NATO membership brought not only the guarantee of Article 5, but also access to immense funding from the Security Investment Program—something desperately needed for a country whose military infrastructure, equipment, and training standards fell below Western standards. The dual carrots of security and funding helped to accelerate Polish civilian control over the military, and by 1997, the “fundamental issue … appeared to have been resolved.” Whatever the odds actually were of a military coup in the post-communist era, the military reforms ruled it out altogether.

How has Poland’s democracy held up since its 1999 accession to NATO, and its 2004 accession to the EU? If we fast forward to the present, Polish democracy is in dire straits. Under the Law and Justice Party (PiS) of Jarosław Kaczyński, Poland has followed a similar route to Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, cracking down on independent media, constraining the judiciary, inflaming nationalist sentiment, and condemning critics at home as genetically-predisposed “Poles of the worst sort.” In 2017, amid the ruling party’s efforts to limit the Constitutional Court, the European Commission launched the unprecedented Article 7(1) procedure against Poland for violations of the rule of law. “It is hard to avoid the feeling that Central Europe is living 1989 in reverse,” wrote one analyst. While Poland is hardly the only case of democratic decay worldwide—Ankara, Brasília, Tel Aviv, and Washington have also raised alarm bells—this is nonetheless a good moment to address the elephant in the room. Was the West too quick to call Poland a consolidated democracy?

101 Simon, 78.
As Linz and Stepan laid out, a democracy needs a thriving civil and political society to endure. While Poland undoubtedly has made impressive economic and political strides since the fall of communism, it is a democracy in a rather limited sense. Democracies involve more than just free and fair elections, which have existed in Poland since 1991. In terms of civil society and policy-making accountability, the Polish electorate and elites, respectively, have fallen short. Inadequate policy-making accountability—the condition where a government’s policies reflect the population’s needs and interests—has occurred in Poland alongside a relatively passive, disengaged, even disillusioned public. These weaknesses feed into one another, polarizing politics. Elites face less pressure to engage with their opponents and the broader public, which itself lacks the levers for input outside of elections. Voters go to the polls fixated more and more on “their” party getting into power. This analysis, though written in 2005, adds some context for Poland’s current situation. Its democracy is not dead, but it is in danger.

Poland’s ongoing democratic backsliding cannot be pinned on NATO. The Alliance did not have the leverage or resources to help consolidate its democracy beyond civil-military relations. Given the longstanding mutual distrust in Poland between civilians and officers, that achievement is nothing to sneeze at. NATO deserves credit for solving that problem. Even so, civilian control of the military is only one component among many in democratic consolidation. Fostering civil society, political society, economic society, and the rule of law could better be described as above NATO’s pay grade. Insofar as the current crisis suggests limits to international organizations’ capacity to socialize norms and consolidate democracies, it is

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predominantly an EU problem. NATO played a limited but significant role in Poland’s
democratic consolidation, and by extension has played only a minor part in its backsliding.

**An Ambiguous Path: The Case of Romania**

Post-communist Romania presents a markedly different situation from Poland. In many
respects, it was the exception to the rule in the entire region. Its transition came last, with no
“round table talks” like those in Poland or Hungary. Instead, Nicolae Ceaușescu’s totalitarian
regime ended violently, with the successor regime of Ion Iliescu swiftly bloodying its hands in
violent crackdowns on citizen protests. Iliescu’s party, the National Salvation Front (FSN), drew
heavily from the Communist *nomenklatura* and the infamously repressive secret police known as
the Securitate. From the execution of Ceaușescu and his wife in 1989 to the republic’s accession
to NATO and the EU in 2004 and 2007, respectively, “Romanian exceptionalism” has been a
constant.¹⁰⁶ Beyond accession, Romania has generally been considered an “exception” and a
“laggard” within the EU for its problems with corruption and judicial reform, subject (alongside
Bulgaria) to the special Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM).¹⁰⁷

As with any country, the nature of Romania’s transition was intertwined with its past—in
this case, the personalistic, nationalistic, and restrictive “totalitarianism-cum-sultanism” of the
Ceaușescu era.¹⁰⁸ From 1965 to 1989, the dictator, his wife Elena, and a tight inner circle
dominated virtually every aspect of Romanian society, leaving little room for a society beyond
the state. There was no united civic opposition in the vein of Poland’s Solidarity, nor any

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¹⁰⁶ Linz and Stepan, 344.
¹⁰⁸ Linz and Stepan, 349-356.
The December 1989 revolution was sparked by popular protest, most notably in Timișoara, but the eventual power transfer was not determined by “the people,” or even opposition elites. Securitate officials and Communist apparatchiks ousted the dictator, put him and his wife on trial, and executed them via firing squad, and then seized the revolution for themselves. Those who came to power in December 1989, as one writer puts it, “rejected communism less than they rejected Ceaușescu.”

This is not to deny the obvious changes under the interim regime led by Iliescu. It abolished many of Ceaușescu’s worst policies, such as mandatory gynecological exams, the destruction of peasant villages, and the required registration of typewriters. It allowed for freedom of movement, worship, and association, as well as multiple political parties and independent media outlets. Yet the political parties that did emerge were fragmented and disorganized, with the system dominated by the old communists, who benefited from the existing state apparatus. The judiciary was not independent. Instead of a “return to Europe,” Iliescu spoke of a “third way,” situating Romania somewhere between totalitarianism and capitalistic liberal democracy. Reform would move slowly the first six years of post-communism—Iliescu and his party appeared lukewarm on Westernization and integration, and the West reciprocated.

There was another concerning aspect of Romanian post-communism: the condition of ethnic minorities. Remarks over the post-communist “ethnic conflict potential” did not make much sense in the highly ethnically and religiously homogeneous Poland of the 1990s, but they were quite salient in Romania. It had a substantial Hungarian minority in the Transylvania

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109 Ibid., 351-354; Florin Abraham, Romania since the Second World War (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 106.
110 Ibid., 112-115; Stepan and Linz, 358-360.
region, which had been part of Budapest’s portion of Austria-Hungary prior to 1918. The status of both the minority and the region was (and to an extent remains) a bone of contention between Romania and Hungary. Fueled by grievances over the past and uncertainty over the future, the March 1990 interethnic clashes in the Transylvanian city of Târgu Mureș raised fears that similar violence could ripple across the region.\(^{113}\) There also remained the issue of the long-marginalized Romani people. Iliescu and the FSN’s appeals to nationalist rhetoric and ideals, in good part meant to coopt and control the nationalist opposition, added some fuel to the fire.\(^{114}\)

What changed in Bucharest? First, international and domestic actors urged Romania to get its house in order, especially on the matter of human rights. Its accession to the Council of Europe in 1993—a necessary prerequisite for EU membership—hinged on addressing its issues with minorities and human rights. For those first few years, in light of ethnic violence in Târgu Mureș and domestic political repression through the Mineriads, Romania had been internationally isolated, wedged between the integrating Visegrád states and the disintegrating Yugoslavia. The pressures of isolation made Bucharest shift gears, but slowly. One breakthrough came on September 16, 1996, when Romania and Hungary signed a bilateral agreement renouncing territorial claims against one another and vowing to respect the rights of their ethnic minorities—a prerequisite for either country to join NATO.\(^{115}\) Even so, Iliescu was playing the nationalist game at home. His party had partnered with the ultranationalist Romanian National

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Unity Party and (to a lesser extent) Greater Romania Party, and Iliescu himself showed no qualms about stoking anti-Hungarian sentiment for political gain.116

A notable shift toward democratization and Western integration, albeit an unsteady one, came on November 17, 1996, when Emil Constantinescu of the Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR) uprooted Iliescu from the presidency. After campaigning on reform and improving Romania’s international standing, Constantinescu’s new government made greater strides on economic reforms, ethnic issues, and talks with NATO and the EU on membership.117 Still, decades of repressive governance—especially followed by about seven years of political corruption and continuing economic decline—had put Romania on an uneven and ambiguous path toward “joining the West.” Actual reforms and economic performance lagged and stagnated, and the CDR fractured ahead of the 2000 election. With Iliescu pitted against Corneliu Vadim Tudor, an irredentist nationalist reminiscent of Russia’s Zhirinovsky, voters reluctantly returned Iliescu to power. However, Iliescu’s second term showed continuity with Constantinescu’s, as his party evidently used the results of 1996 to retool its platform to include liberal-democratic reforms and Euro-Atlantic integration. Reforms still came slowly, and corruption persisted, but Bucharest’s trajectory toward the West was clear.118 The carrot of EU membership was especially enticing. In the long run, 1996 brought Bucharest and Brussels closer together on the former’s prospects for Western integration, including into NATO.

Romania would not follow the same path as Poland. NATO’s membership requirements, while not as demanding as the EU’s accumulating acquis, had changed since 1994. At the Madrid Summit in July 1997, NATO formally invited Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic;

reaffirmed its open door policy; and expanded on the role of the Partnership for Peace program. PfP had been both a bureaucratic stopgap and a training program since its creation in 1994. After 1997, the latter aspect would be “enhanced,” giving non-NATO members in the program more room to participate in certain NATO activities, internalize NATO’s norms, and better meet its standards ahead of future waves of enlargement.119

Complementing this was the issuing of Membership Action Plans (MAPs) at the Washington Summit in April 1999, which “thickened” the rudimentary acquis laid out in the 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement and provided aspiring members with individualized roadmaps. MAP partners like Romania would have to submit annual reports on preparations for potential membership, receive feedback and advice on its progress through meetings and workshops, and meet roughly higher standards than those laid out for the first round of enlargement. Still, these new standards were informed in good part by where preparations ahead of that round had fallen short—the first enlargement wave had brought in militaries that, while firmly under civilian control, had equipment, infrastructure, and training that fell slightly below NATO’s standards.120

While the pro-Western leadership in Bucharest was hard-pressed to get into NATO by July 1997, desperately seeking a security guarantee and perhaps an external source of legitimacy, most of the Alliance’s members (save for the French) were wary.121 From both purely strategic and norms-based standpoints, the case for Romanian membership was not that strong. Its democracy was making progress, but it remained flawed, dogged by pervasive corruption and a constrained political culture. Its military, which had operated relatively independently from

Moscow in the Cold War years, suffered from familiar dysfunctional relations with the civilian leadership.\textsuperscript{122} Bringing the armed forces up to Western standards would be expensive, and actual resources fell well below what was needed to meet MAP objectives.\textsuperscript{123} Finally, strengthening NATO’s southeastern flank did not appear urgent at the time.\textsuperscript{124} While the 1996 elections brought Bucharest’s interests more in line with Brussels’, they were not enough to get Romania into NATO.

How, then, did Romania finally get in? Strategic interests, rather than democratic norms, ultimately consolidated Romania’s spot in the 2002 “Big Bang” of NATO enlargement. Unlike its predecessor, which prioritized aspiring members’ capabilities, the Bush administration factored in their actual contributions.\textsuperscript{125} Soon after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the Romanian Parliament voted overwhelmingly to guarantee NATO access to its airspace, airports, and land and sea facilities if requested for the war in Afghanistan. In April 2002, Romania began contributing troops to Operation Enduring Freedom and the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. While not yet in NATO, Romania was, in its own words, a “de facto NATO ally.”\textsuperscript{126} Its location in the Balkans, factored in with its participation in peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and Kosovo, also improved its odds for membership.

Moreover, bringing more countries from “New Europe” could also help to counterbalance “Old Europe,” which bristled more at Washington’s leadership and policies. Elites in Poland and Romania supported the U.S.-led Iraq War far more than their French and

\textsuperscript{122} Larry L. Watts, *Romanian Military Reform and NATO Integration* (Palm Beach: Center for Romanian Studies, 2002), 14-15.
\textsuperscript{123} Simon, 10.
\textsuperscript{124} Abraham, 183.
\textsuperscript{125} Thomas S. Szayna, *The Future of NATO and Enlargement: Testimony for the Subcommittee on Europe of the Committee on International Relations, United States House of Representatives on April 17, 2002* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2002).
German counterparts, who would not deploy their own troops there.\textsuperscript{127} Given the substantial Romanian contributions to the War on Terror, it is not a stretch to argue that after 2001, NATO’s new membership requirements “reflected demands for policy loyalty more than for military competence.”\textsuperscript{128} Where the MAP process had “thickened” the Alliance’s acquis, American policy after September 11 thinned it out again.

This is not to say that NATO did not incentivize military reform in Bucharest. Compared to Poland, Romania started out in a much more precarious situation, owing to the legacy of an especially brutal dictatorship and a much tighter budget. Still, as with Poland, the prospect of Alliance membership was critical to spurring military reform, including civilian control of the military. The strengthened PfP and the newly introduced MAP laid out a more defined, if still rocky, path to reform. From 2000 to 2002, the MAP process gained clarity, laying out “clear, specific, and universally-accepted indicators” of partners’ statuses in the reform process. NATO members’ military and civil-military advisors also became more closely involved with those reforms, for example by attending weekly defense planning meetings.\textsuperscript{129} Despite serious financial and political constraints, Bucharest generally improved military professionalism and civilian oversight, motivated and guided by the carrot of NATO membership.\textsuperscript{130} There is an unfortunate caveat: before and after accession, Romania’s intelligence services have still seen human rights abuses, limited civilian oversight, and the politicization of their services and their application.\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{128} Jacoby, 211.
\textsuperscript{129} Watts, 20.
\textsuperscript{131} Lavinia Stan and Marian Zulean, “Intelligence Sector Reforms in Romania: A Scorecard,” \textit{Surveillance & Society} 16, no. 3 (2018): 298-313; Epstein, 142-143.
However, there is not enough evidence to suggest that this incentive played a strong role in the consolidation of Romanian democracy beyond the military realm, much less since its accession in March 2004. These responsibilities and resources belong to the EU. Even so, the EU’s “transformative power” has not entirely met expectations, as its *acquis* has provided limited guidance on issues regarding minorities, human rights, and corruption. Unfortunately, corruption and lack of government accountability feeds political alienation and polarization, and Romania is no exception. The EU has also struggled to address “post-accession hooliganism”—the rollback of EU reforms, deteriorating regard for the rule of law, and a general weakening of EU leverage in domestic politics. Given how weak the rule of law is in Romania, there is not enough evidence to suggest that democracy has been fully consolidated there, much less by NATO.

**NATO as a Consolidating Force: An Evaluation**

What do these two case studies suggest about NATO’s power to stabilize and consolidate democracy in post-communist states? The Alliance has done well in incentivizing and guiding new members toward civilian control of the military. For all of the issues Polish democracy faces today, its institutional framework leaves little room for death by military coup. Romanian civil-military relations have also generally improved, owing much to the incentives and roadmaps that came with PfP and the MAP process. The NATO carrot also helped Hungary and Romania with their dispute over Transylvania. Beyond that, the argument that NATO has helped consolidate these particular countries’ democracies is suspect. If anything, these two cases suggest limits of

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133 Ganev; Tanja A. Börzel and Frank Schimmelfennig, “Coming together or drifting apart? The EU’s political integration capacity in Eastern Europe,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 24, no. 2 (2017): 278-296.
NATO’s leverage and mechanisms in the spurring of reform, to say nothing of guiding the actual process.

Putting aside its current backsliding, Polish democracy made far more apparent gains through domestic political dynamics and EU support than by NATO incentives or norms. While the NATO security guarantee certainly provided stability and some political unity in an uncertain time, in the long run, its impact on democratic consolidation is ambiguous, but has probably been overstated. The outcome is even more muddled in Romania, where reforms have generally stalled, high levels of corruption have persisted, and anti-corruption campaigns have become hotly politicized. In both countries, two key arenas of democratic consolidation, civil society and respect for the rule of law, are under strain.

However, addressing these issues has not been NATO’s job. Insofar as they are any one international organization’s “job,” they are the EU’s. Across multiple waves of enlargement, EU conditionality has generally been much more demanding than NATO conditionality. The impact of Romania’s contributions to the War on Terror on its accession to NATO is a glaring example. Bucharest’s technical capabilities and solidarity with Washington mattered far more ahead of the 2004 enlargement wave than any “thorough embrace of democratic values.” Finally, the EU provides more financial incentives and legal guidance than NATO does.

Proponents of NATO enlargement knew that NATO alone would not help consolidate democracy. The Clinton administration acknowledged the EU would be essential to bringing about a Europe “whole, free, and at peace,” and that it was not a matter of one or the other, but both. However, EU expansion would take longer, would not provide NATO’s security guarantee,

135 Epstein, 143.
and was not a matter that the United States had a great say in, unlike NATO. The second point is the most crucial: Europe lacked, and still lacks, a broad security architecture independent of Washington. NATO’s security guarantee, they argued, was essential to any post-Cold War stability in Europe, as it pushed countries to forgo any unilateral attempts to preserve their security. The incentive and support of NATO membership, combined later with an enhanced PfP and MAP, would spur aspiring members to consolidate civilian control over the military. In the short term, it could also unite otherwise divided political elites behind a common interest: the pursuit of NATO membership and its security guarantee.

Events have so far conformed to those predictions, but NATO’s transformative or palliative power—whatever one calls it—stops there. If the Alliance has been a force for democratic consolidation, whether by premising accession on aspiring members’ capacity to make real political reform or by helping them to internalize its norms after accession, it has been a weak one, circumscribed in part by its history as a military alliance. The cases above show how, beyond the crucial stability afforded by a security guarantee, NATO inclusion does not factor much into the “fundamentals” of democratic consolidation. While the introduction of the MAP process may have promised a higher threshold to accession, the admission of Romania (as well as Bulgaria) in 2004 shows that serious democratic shortcomings need not hinder a country’s path to inclusion.

In the end, NATO’s accession conditionality is thin, and its post-accession conditionality even flimsier. While the bulk of the responsibility for democratic consolidation has fallen on the EU’s shoulder, it too has struggled to grapple with countries reverting to authoritarianism within

its borders. NATO has no equivalent to Article 7 of the EU’s Lisbon Treaty. There are few if any provisions for addressing democratic backsliding within the Alliance, and, for better or for worse, no provision for outright expulsion. For all of its political mandates, “it does not possess the necessary mix of carrots and sticks to compel wayward allies to change course.”

As Reiter points out, if we look at the Cold War era—the only historical precedent that proponents have to go by—NATO does not have a strong track record for spreading or consolidating democratic norms. The stability afforded by inclusion in NATO provides a bedrock on which democracy can be built, but whether democracy will be built is up to a multitude of other factors. NATO membership may have limited war between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus, but it did not help them on the path to democracy. Nor could NATO’s carrots and sticks be said to have pushed founding member Portugal’s clerical fascist regime over the edge. If anything is to be gleaned from the Cold War era on the matter, it is that treating NATO membership as a force for democratic consolidation was treading uncharted waters.

Conclusion

Poland and Romania can be said to represent two ends of the spectrum of post-communist modernization and development. A unified opposition emerged in communist-era Poland well before 1989; Romania had no analogue for Solidarity. Fears of ethnic conflict were far more salient in Romania than Poland. Warsaw’s democratization and liberalization kicked off years before Bucharest’s, and despite ongoing democratic decay, the former’s democracy and

economy have fared much better since 1989. The list goes on. Even so, the otherwise dissimilar
cases of “trailblazer” Poland and “laggard” Romania have a common theme: beyond the crucial
provision of security and incentivization of civilian control over the military, NATO inclusion
had a limited impact on the condition of their democracies.
Chapter 3: Dizzy with Success: NATO Expansion and the Russian Reaction

Introduction

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, the U.S.-Russian relationship has vacillated between cooperation and crisis. Painted in the broadest strokes, the scene tends to unfold as follows: a new president comes into office, hoping to turn the page in the shaky partnership, and walks out wondering if he has moved several pages back. Four resets have come and gone, frustrating leadership in both Washington and Moscow. The last attempted reset, carried out by the Obama administration, disintegrated spectacularly in 2013-2014 into what some have likened to another Cold War. From there, it has only unraveled further, with conflict after conflict either simultaneously laying bare longstanding disputes or building up new grievances. Each side charges the other with misunderstanding and undermining the world order.

This deterioration cannot be studied independent of NATO expansion. Similarly, any evaluation of NATO’s open-door policy cannot leave out the primary argument put forth by its critics: that it would alienate Russia. In 1998, George F. Kennan called the decision a “tragic mistake” that could spell “the beginning of a new cold war.” In 2018, citing Kennan, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called expansion “the root cause of the systemic problems that afflict Russia’s relations with the United States and Europe.” The question of NATO expansion has dogged U.S.-Russian relations, whether concerning past or future waves. Was letting in the Baltics a red line that should not have been crossed? Was the open-door policy a disaster waiting to happen, finally made manifest with the wars in Georgia and Ukraine?

142 Sergei Lavrov, “Russia’s Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective,” Russia in Global Affairs, 2018.
While NATO expansion has been a critical factor in the Russian reaction, the current state of affairs cannot be chalked up to Western folly alone. Nor can it be blamed wholly on the personal character of Russian President Vladimir Putin or some immutable contours of Russian foreign policy. As relevant as these three facets may be to a holistic analysis, they cannot tell the whole story. In overstating the role of the individual (Putin), analysts neglect the domestic circumstances that enabled both his rise and staying power, along with long-standing geopolitical pressures feeding into Russian policymaking. Moreover, Russia’s geopolitical interests and concerns should not be treated as immutable, even if they are long-standing and deeply entrenched. There are patterns in foreign policymaking, but they are not set in stone. France does not conduct its foreign policy today as it did under Louis XIV or Napoleon, nor does Germany follow the lead of Wilhelm II or Adolf Hitler. Great shifts in foreign policy doctrine do not come solely from weakness and defeat on the international stage, but also from ideological and domestic power shifts.

These factors complicate the question of responsibility, especially with respect to NATO. Is enlargement to blame for Russia’s alienation from the West? Could the West have avoided the current crisis by not expanding NATO, or at least not into the Baltic states? Would this crisis have occurred anyway, all else unchanged, regardless of what NATO did? Any attempt to answer these questions will have to follow changes in the principles of Russian national security over time. How have attitudes towards the West and towards NATO enlargement shifted among Russian political elites, and why? In this chapter, I will answer such questions, expanding on Kimberly Marten’s similar counterfactual analysis.143

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This chapter begins with an overview of the contours and trends of Russian foreign policymaking, with special attention to consequences of the Soviet collapse. This provides crucial context for understanding the Kremlin’s ideologies and policies. The second section discusses the presidency of Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), during which NATO expansion emerged and eventually succeeded as policy. This section addresses changing attitudes towards expansion both among a broader Russian political elite and within Yeltsin’s cabinet. The third section encompasses Putin’s first two terms (1999-2008), during which the Baltic states joined NATO, “color revolutions” broke out in former Soviet republics (notably Georgia and Ukraine), and unilateralism and democracy promotion defined U.S. foreign policy. Next, the fourth section discusses the Obama years, consisting of Medvedev’s presidency (2008-2012) and the first four years of Putin’s third presidential term (2012-2016). The final section synthesizes all of this information and considers whether this backlash could, indeed, have been prevented if NATO expansion had stopped at a united Germany.

Contours and Trends

Russia’s unique geography, as with any country, shapes its unique geopolitical position. Its borders touch on multiple regions with diverse and competing interests, drawing Russia’s own foreign policy interests in multiple directions. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Westernization and expansion brought Moscow from the edge of Europe into its center, most explicitly with the Concert of Europe that emerged from the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. Simultaneous expansions into Central Asia, the territory of the collapsing Ottoman Empire, and

144 Because the Trump presidency and ongoing investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 United States elections have thrown a unique wrench into both Transatlantic and U.S.-Russia relations, I consider the end of 2016 an appropriate cut-off point for this chapter. The state of the Transatlantic relationship under Trump will be explored in the next chapter.
the Far East established Russian presence and interests in those regions. With multiple foreign policy “vectors,” Russia could not (and still cannot) prioritize one at the others’ expense.\textsuperscript{145} Its proximity to the Middle East, for instance, makes fear of instability south of the Caucasus far more acute, especially in light of Moscow’s fraught relationship with Muslims in Chechnya. Since the Soviet collapse, Russia has also enjoyed a closer and deeper relationship with China.

In this light, formulating the Russian national interest, and the policies used to meet that interest, involves more than simply orienting towards or against the West. While Russia’s relationship with the West is undeniably important, it does not explain every decision Moscow makes. A Western-focused lens is inadequate for understanding its stake in the Middle East or relations with a rising China. This brings us to another point, more central to the broader argument of this paper: the debate over “who lost Russia” suffers when it focuses disproportionately ("solipsistically,” as one analyst put it) on what the West did, did not do, or could have done.\textsuperscript{146} Developments in Russian domestic politics are inseparable from developments in Russian foreign policy. While external events can deliver a “shock” to the domestic system, how that shock is received depends in good part on the inner workings of that system.

Making sense of Russian foreign policy, then, means looking not simply at Western policies or Russian individuals, but at the relationship between three levels of analysis, or “images”—the individual, the domestic situation, and the international system. As Waltz puts it, “the vogue of an image varies with time and place, but no single image is ever adequate.”\textsuperscript{147} Furthermore, the confluence of experiences, interests, and pressures that feed into a given group

\textsuperscript{147} Kenneth Waltz, \textit{Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 225.
or actor’s conception of these images, and how their own country fits within them—how the President of Russia impacts Russian domestic politics, how a post-bipolar international system informs both—will always be in flux.

With this framework in mind, we can study the primary schools of thought in the Kremlin’s post-Soviet foreign policy. Drawing on Tsygankov’s analysis, I focus on two groups: westernizers and statists.148 Westernizers see Western civilization, institutions, and ideals as a road map for Russia. Boris Yeltsin, Andrei Kozyrev, Yegor Gaidar, and Gennady Burbulis, for example, saw the country’s future in “learning from the European experience” by joining Western institutions and adopting liberal democratic norms.149 In contrast, statists prioritize power, stability, and independence—including from the West, with which they may seek partnership, rather than membership. Russia’s great power status is essential to such statists as Yevgeni Primakov, Vladimir Putin, and Sergei Lavrov. These two currents have long overlapped and clashed, sometimes simultaneously according to political conditions. Generalizations about imperial urges, an inferiority complex, or the pursuit of warm water ports do not tell the full story. Such broad strokes mask both the variation in foreign policy visions and the circumstances that turn one vision from theory into policy.150

Post-Soviet Russia’s democratic transition made this dynamic especially clear, as it exposed the state to pressures that it could have previously ignored or repressed.151 However committed Yeltsin and Kozyrev were to bringing Russia into the West, they still had to grapple

with those who saw their country’s future elsewhere. They and their American negotiators knew that economic volatility and political turmoil damaged their domestic position, to the benefit of an opposition less interested in following Washington’s lead. Yeltsin and Kozyrev repeatedly raised the specter of the “reds” and “browns” seizing power.¹⁵² In the end, they could not ignore those who accused them of capitulating to the West.

NATO enlargement was core to this perception of Russian capitulation and Western exploitation. In its 1991 Strategic Concept, the Alliance had expanded the scope of security threats. It now included the possible fruits of economic, political, and social “difficulties,” which could produce “crises inimical to European stability” that could draw in or spill over into other countries, including NATO members.¹⁵³ This reconfiguration set the stage for both enlargement into former Soviet satellites and “out of area” operations in the remnants of Yugoslavia. Many Russians could not stomach either. Losing control over Central and Eastern Europe was distressing enough for those who had prided themselves on Russia’s great power status. That a former adversary could bring its troops right up to their borders or intervene against an ally—and that Moscow could do nothing about it—raised fears of encirclement, powerlessness, and irrelevance. It also outraged those who felt that the West in general, and the Americans in particular, did not take their interests seriously.

This frustration is intertwined with the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, especially with respect to the rest of the post-Soviet space—what many in Moscow call the “near abroad.” The newly independent states had been part of the Soviet Union for decades; many of them had been within the Russian Empire for centuries more. “It was difficult for many Russians to let go of

memories of these places as parts of their country, just as it was difficult for some beyond Russia to reconcile themselves to living in a separate new country.”154 Just as Russian elites clashed over their country’s relationship with the West, so too were many of their counterparts in Ukraine or Georgia sharply divided over their relationship with Moscow—particularly those who did not see themselves as Ukrainian or Georgian.

It is here that Russian political anxieties over its great power status become dangerously tied up with NATO expansion. Expanding NATO into the “original” Soviet Union—that is, pre-World War II—meant moving into lands and conflicts “intimately entwined with Russian and Soviet history, identity, and territory.”155 Since the early 1990s, with mixed levels of commitment and success, the Kremlin has used economic, political, and military levers to keep its neighbors in an uneasy sphere of influence.156 Keeping these countries within its sphere meant, among other things, keeping all of them out of Western institutions like NATO. If one country joined, it could set a precedent for its neighbors. It could strike a blow to the entire notion of Russia as a great power. After conceding Central and Eastern Europe—including, most reluctantly, the Baltic states—Moscow refused to go any further.

**Between Washington and Moscow**

The Yeltsin years laid the foundation for much of today’s current tensions, especially over NATO. It is worth noting, however, that Yeltsin’s foreign policy approach shifted markedly between 1991 and 1999, starting with the Western-oriented liberal internationalism of Foreign

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155 Ibid., 7.
Minister Andrei Kozyrev and ending with the more pragmatic power politics of Yevgeni Primakov and Igor Ivanov.\textsuperscript{157} Opposition to NATO expansion, however, was a constant. The liberal westernizers saw NATO expansion as toxic to domestic politics, where it would shore up enough communist and nationalist support to unravel reform. Primakov and the statists shared the domestic concerns, but also argued that the move had serious psychological and security implications. It would draw old dividing lines further east, feeding into a “bloc mentality” and isolating Russia from the post-Cold War institutional architecture.\textsuperscript{158}

What did the westernizers want? In Kozyrev’s words, Russia’s future was in “the global family of democratic states” and the “mainstream of human development”—an idealistic vision that went hand-in-hand with freedom of expression, private property, and political pluralism.\textsuperscript{159} Bringing Russia into the West meant membership in prestigious institutions like the Council of Europe, International Monetary Fund, and G-7. Yeltsin’s relationship with U.S. President Bill Clinton was crucial—from the constitutional crisis in 1993 through the collapse of the ruble in 1998, Washington backed Yeltsin, partly out of fear of the alternatives.\textsuperscript{160} This support meant more aid from the IMF and a smoother path into a future G-8, even amid swelling debt to the IMF and G-7 members’ banks.\textsuperscript{161} With enough outside support for reform, the Clinton team hoped, Russia could at last become “a truly democratic, stable, non-imperial nation.”\textsuperscript{162}

Yeltsin’s presidency did not meet these lofty expectations. The massive aid, integration, and partnerships that the westernizers dreamed of did not materialize. As NATO and the EU

\textsuperscript{160} James Goldgeier, “Bill and Boris: A Window Into a Most Important Post-Cold War Relationship,” \textit{Texas National Security Review} 1, no. 4 (August 2018): 42-54; Stent, 8-17.
\textsuperscript{161} Talbott, 124-125.
moved eastward, Moscow felt increasingly isolated and insecure. After a violent confrontation between the executive and legislature, the constitution of 1993 reconsolidated power into the former’s hands, setting the stage for further backsliding. Elections came and went, but with questionable freeness and fairness, including Yeltsin’s reelection in 1996. Economic reforms saw the price of goods skyrocketing, people’s savings destroyed, wages and pensions withheld, and immense wealth transferred to a select few. Corruption was widespread. Chechnya, having declared independence in 1991, became the site of a bloody war with Moscow from 1994 onward. The average Russian appeared to be living a worse life than the average Soviet citizen.

At first blush, these issues do not have much to do with Yeltsin’s foreign policy or NATO enlargement. However, the impact of economic turmoil on Russia’s democratic transition is impossible to ignore. Like the Central and Eastern European states aspiring to join NATO and the EU, Russia faced a “triple transition” that put territorial, political, and economic issues on the table all at once. Painful economic reforms that coincided with the “frictions, uncertainties, and discontinuities” of democratization could deter an already wary population from both. So it went with Russia. As with more democratic regimes, economic conditions affected public opinion. When the ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s party won an alarming 22.92% plurality in the elections of 1993, he benefited more from economic and

165 Kozhemiakin, 52.
political distress than from some nationalistic impulse. The far-right had not won, per se, but the
democrats were losing.168

However little say the average Russian had in the foreign policymaking process—and
however much or little the average Russian cared about where NATO went—the politicians they
elected could constrain Yeltsin’s pro-Western agenda. They could refuse to ratify treaties, as
they did with START II. They could impeach him, as they tried to do three times. Yeltsin, of
course, could lose reelection to a second term. Economic and political uncertainty fueled
polarization, nationalism, and a broadening coalition of forces frustrated with Yeltsin’s policies
and mercurial personality.169 As one Russian analyst saw it, foreign policy had become the
“victim of bitter infighting among rival forces of society,” with stances not coming from a “sober
analysis of the state of the nation and its relations,” but serving as a means to achieve domestic
political and economic agendas.170

These clashes also point to an unfortunate fact about Russian foreign policy in the 1990s:
it was not consistent, coherent, or based on any consensus. Unlike the other post-communist
states, Russia could more accurately be described as facing a “quadruple transition.”171 It
confronted not only questions over its economy, territory, and political system, but also its place
in the international system. The Yeltsin administration’s own infighting and disjunction also
often made for an incoherent foreign policy.172 One hand in the Foreign Ministry did not know
always what the other hand in the Kremlin was doing. On August 25, 1993, for instance, Yeltsin
appeared to approve a Polish bid for NATO membership. Stunned, Kozyrev and Grachev pushed

169 Talbott, 409.
171 Angela Stent, Russia and Germany Reborn: Unification, the Soviet Collapse, and the New Europe (Princeton: Princeton
172 Marten, 149-152. See also F. Stephen Larrabee and Theodore W. Karasik, Foreign and Security Policy Decisionmaking
Under Yeltsin (Santa Monica: RAND, 1997).
him to sign a letter walking this back, to not much avail. By December 1994, enlargement had solidified as policy. The westernizers felt disillusioned with the West and isolated at home. Things were not going as planned.

By January 1996, with Kozyrev’s sacking, the westernizers had lost their remaining leverage over Russian foreign affairs. His successor, Yevgeni Primakov, came from the statist school of foreign policy thinking. For the new statists, Russia’s “vital interests” lay in her military strength, territorial integrity, integration of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and ability to “to join the world economy as an equal participant.” In the post-Cold War world, Primakov argued, it was neither tenable nor desirable for one power—that is, the United States—to dominate the international agenda. Russia needed to restore its status as a great power and a partner, rather than continue following the West’s lead. Its national interests lay not solely in relations with Washington and Brussels, but also with Kiev, Tbilisi, New Delhi, and Beijing.

With Yeltsin’s health and popularity faltering, Primakov’s appointment marked a decisive shift in Russian foreign policy doctrine, though not its capabilities. Like Gorbachev, Primakov had hoped for something like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to replace NATO, or at least work alongside it. By 1996, however, the “NATO-centered model of European security” was a fact of life. Washington, and to a lesser extent Brussels, put the OSCE several rungs below NATO as a European security instrument. The Clinton administration, Congress, and Central and Eastern Europeans were all set on NATO

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173 Talbott, 96.
176 primakov, Russian Crossroads, 144.
177 Hill, 101.
enlargement. Primakov aimed instead to alleviate the effects of enlargement, which he likened to “sleeping with a porcupine.”178 However, Washington refused to give Russia any “veto” over major decisions, including on future expansions, lest they undermine NATO’s role as a unifying and pacifying force in the new Europe.179 NATO’s door remained open not only to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, but also to Georgia and Ukraine.

Russia did receive some concessions. The 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act postponed the stationing of nuclear weapons on new members’ territories, and Clinton promised to ease its path into the new G-8 and World Trade Organization.180 The Founding Act also established a NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) aimed at “increasing levels of trust, unity of purpose and habits of consultation and cooperation.”181 Still, the PJC more of an attempt to put a band-aid on what the Kremlin saw as a gaping wound. It did not help that the Kremlin, Capitol Hill, and the White House all had different ideas of what the Founding Act meant.182 Secretary of State Madeleine Albright testified that “any discussion with Russia of NATO doctrine [would] be for explanatory, not decisionmaking, purposes.”183 It was a “way [for Russia] to be part of a discussion about issues of mutual interest,” while “mak[ing] it very clear that the new NATO is not directed against them.”184

At best, the Clinton administration was walking a tightrope, trying not to alienate Russia while still satisfying those who accused it of appeasing Russia and abandoning Central and Eastern Europe. At worst, the tightrope was a fantasy of those who thought such a compromise

178 Talbott, 218.
179 Ibid. See also Clinton, My Life, 750; Ronald D. Asmus, Opening NATO’s Door (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 104, 171, 191.
180 Clinton, My Life, 750.
183 U.S. Congress, The Debate on NATO Enlargement, 19.
184 Ibid., 30
was possible. The administration was already backed into a corner by its doctrine of “engagement and enlargement,” which expanded both Washington and Brussels’ strategic and geographical scope. It was getting harder to justify closing NATO’s door within the confines of doctrine and increasingly charged rhetoric. As chapter 1 showed, the people who most strongly opposed enlargement were also in a poor position to do anything about it.

In Moscow, however, Yeltsin had already gone too far. Fearing that moving too soon would bolster support for the opposition, NATO saved announcing enlargement publicly for after the 1996 Russian presidential election. This might have saved Yeltsin’s reelection campaign, but it did little to address the underlying problem: that the broadening scope of U.S. strategic interests, most vividly represented by NATO enlargement, was antithetical to the growing foreign policy consensus in Moscow. Talbott describes the negotiations with Russia as “finding a way to coax them into being part of an outcome that they would regard as something other than a strategic defeat.” In essence, this was starting with a non-starter and hoping that the Russians could swallow it without any lasting consequences—something that could and would not happen.

As the American strategic scope expanded, the Russian room to maneuver on the international stage narrowed. The tipping point came in the spring of 1999, when NATO intervened in the Kosovo War against Slobodan Milošević. NATO intervention against the Bosnian Serbs in 1994 had already angered many in Russia. Where the West saw a necessary intervention to stabilize a region torn apart by ethnic cleansing, critics in the Kremlin and especially the Duma saw a biased, systematic campaign against the Serbs and Russian influence

186 Talbott, 146.
To add insult to injury, the campaign in Kosovo brought military force to bear beyond its members’ borders, without a “a UN mandate, or tacit Russian consent” as “a necessary precondition.” Once the air-strikes had begun, Russia suspended cooperation with NATO. As Moscow saw it, NATO had already reneged on any promises of cooperation with this act of “open aggression.” Backing Kosovar separatism could also set a dangerous example within Russia’s own borders, especially in Chechnya.

Outrage over the intervention in Kosovo, like the resistance to NATO expansion, was limited to just that: outrage. The Kremlin lacked the leverage to oppose policies that an increasing majority of elites saw as anathema to the Russian national interest. The impulse to restore and maintain great power status remained entrenched, if not intensified, among the political class. For them, NATO expansion was exploiting a weakened Russia to curtail that status in the long haul. For the weakened westernizers, NATO expansion was a threat to their reforms. Both groups, for different reasons, saw the West as shrugging off their interests and concerns. Intervention in Kosovo was a breaking point both for the frustrated, flimsy U.S.-Russia relationship and the personal dynamic between Yeltsin and Clinton that propped it up. When Yeltsin resigned in December 1999, the tumult of the past eight years had left many in Moscow feeling disillusioned, excluded, humiliated, and misled.

Illusions of Partnership

Yeltsin’s handpicked successor, Vladimir Putin, aimed to reverse course on what many Russians saw as a humiliating decade. Relations during the 1990s had been “tainted” by the

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187 Talbott, 77. See also Anatoly Adamishin, “The Yugoslav Prelude,” Russia in Global Affairs, October 26, 2013.
190 Tsygankov, 98.
widespread perception that Yeltsin’s team had followed Washington’s lead on every critical
domestic and foreign policy decision, from economic reforms at home to NATO expansion
abroad, culminating in a “de facto loss of sovereignty.” Getting Russia’s house in order meant
addressing, among other things, the asymmetry in relations with the United States, corruption
among the oligarchs, violence in Chechnya, and relations with the former Soviet republics—
issues on which previous policies were perceived as either inadequate or wrongheaded. In 2016,
Sergei Karaganov, a close advisor to Putin, remarked that Moscow’s “politics was focused for
too long on fixing past mistakes—fixing the mistakes made in the 1990s.”

In tune with the statist political tradition, the new doctrine put stability, the exercise of
power, and Russia’s cultural and geopolitical distinctiveness above westernization and
democratization. The National Security Concept of 2000 demonstrates the continuing shift
towards statism. It criticizes a U.S.-led international order as counter to international law and
security, an issue intertwined with “attempts to ignore Russia’s interests when resolving major
issues.” Most pertinent to this analysis, it identifies the greatest threats to global security with
“particular states and intergovernmental associations” attempting to undermine existing security
mechanisms, “above all the United Nations and the OSCE”; waning Russian influence across the
world; bases and troops along Russia’s borders; conflicts in and around CIS member states; and
“the strengthening of military-political blocs and alliances, above all NATO's eastward
expansion.” NATO was one issue among many, as it had been in the 1990s. However, the
Kremlin was far less willing to side with the West where their interests were incompatible.

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At first, Bush’s first term appeared to bring the United States and Russia closer together. In the early to mid-2000s, thanks to massive oil and gas exports at rising prices, the Russian economy was rebounding. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, Bush and Putin found a common area of cooperation in the global war on terror. In 2002, an energy partnership appeared to be on the horizon. Putin closed Russian bases in Cuba and Vietnam and, to the consternation of many of his generals and foreign policy advisors, supported the opening of American bases in Central Asia as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.194

However, the mismatch of American and Russian interests, ideals, and prioritizes persisted, and the criticisms levied in the National Security Concept became ever more salient. While the Russians focused on regaining lost leverage through “pragmatic cooperation” with the West, the administration of President George W. Bush had already downgraded Russia as a foreign policy priority, notably bundling its bureau into the sprawling Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs.195 Washington, though also interested in improving relations, was far less concerned about Moscow than Moscow was about Washington. The administration was also divided on whether it was possible or desirable to improve relations with a Russia whose democratization not only fell short of what Clinton’s team had promised, but appeared to be in retreat.

The Bush administration’s doctrine of unilateralism and “preemptive” war clashed directly, if absentmindedly, with its counterpart’s vision of a multipolar world and an integrated post-Soviet space. The White House dismissed or circumvented institutions and treaties where Russia and the United States remained equals, such as the United Nations Security Council and nuclear arms control treaties like the ABM Treaty. As in the 1990s, the administration rejected

195 Tsygankov, 139; Stent, *Limits of Partnership*, 59; Talbott, 404.
that the Russians had any special right to a sphere of influence in the “near abroad.” Meanwhile, NATO expansion remained a sore spot for Russia. The “Big Bang” of 2004 brought in seven more countries, including the Baltics, to Moscow’s (restrained) chagrin.

Yet perhaps the greatest strain came from the Bush administration’s Freedom Agenda, first manifest in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Moscow, along with France, Germany, and China, strongly opposed the U.S.-led military intervention in Iraq. Having already encountered radical Islamic terrorism at home, it also feared that the Iraq War would foster far more terrorism than it claimed to dismantle. Destabilizing Iraq would reverberate not only throughout the Middle East, but also into the North Caucasus. Additionally, by 2003, Iraq owed Russia around $10-12 billion. This did not make a difference: without a Security Council resolution to authorize force, American, British, Australian, and Polish troops went into Iraq on March 20, 2003. Kosovo was not quite repeating itself, but it certainly was rhyming.

The most explicit clash between the Freedom Agenda and Russian national security interests came with the “color revolutions,” most significantly the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004-2005). On November 23, 2003, after weeks of nonviolent protest against electoral fraud, the long-serving Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze resigned. Mikheil Saakashvili, his opponent and successor, was markedly more pro-Western. One year later in Ukraine, protests over the results of the November 21 runoff election brought another more Western-oriented regime to power, with Viktor Yushchenko and Yuliya Tymoshenko at the forefront. While Tbilisi and Kiev’s ties to Moscow had been tense before then, the color revolutions marked a break with the post-Soviet past, including the notion

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of a post-Soviet sphere of influence altogether. After all, both Yushchenko and Saakashvili wanted NATO and EU membership.

The color revolutions unnerved the Kremlin, which feared both the sudden contraction of what had long been its sphere of influence and the precedent it could set for Russia. While the Bush administration lent moral support and a certain legitimacy to civil society movements in the post-Soviet space, those movements were also receiving funding from non-governmental organizations like the Open Society Institute and the National Endowment for Democracy. George Soros’ status as a private citizen was not much comfort to the Kremlin, which perceived a coordinated effort by the U.S. government to barge into its neighborhood and oust the regime itself. Moreover, Washington’s criticism of Russian “managed democracy” persisted. In December 2005, when Saakashvili and Yushchenko launched the Community of Democratic Choice to promote democratization in the former Soviet republics, “their adversary was clear.”

By February 10, 2007, when Putin spoke before the Munich Security Conference, frustration and anxiety over NATO expansion, democracy promotion, regime change, and missile defense had converged into growing anger and isolation in Moscow. All of these issues, whether pursued on parallel or crossing tracks, seemed to stem from one central issue: American unilateralism. The unipolar world, Putin stated—as Primakov had before—was impossible and unacceptable. Where the Cold War had brought at least some restraint and stability, he continued, the post-Cold War international order was being dominated by a “greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law.” One power, “first and foremost the United States,” had “overstepped its national borders in every way” to impose its policies on others,

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197 Stent, 102-103; Tsygankov, 179.
199 Toal, 151.
whether through military force in Iraq or color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. “It results in
the fact that no one feels safe,” argued Putin. “I want to emphasize this—no one feels safe!
Because no one can feel that international law is like a stone wall that will protect them.”

These criticisms were not new. Nor was the opposition to NATO expansion, which Putin
considered a provocation that reduced trust. Military infrastructure near Russia’s borders irritated
it just as it had in the 1990s, when Primakov urged against stationing nuclear weapons on new
NATO members’ territory. It was not surprising that Moscow opposed plans to build a missile
defense complex in Poland or the Czech Republic. Even if meant to counter Iranian or North
Korean missiles, as Washington had also argued in its withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, it
sounded more to Moscow like a way to weaken its strategic deterrent. It was not enough to
insist that these moves were not aimed at Russia, Putin said: “National security is not based on
promises. And the statements made prior to the bloc's previous waves of expansion simply
confirm this.”

What was changing was not the Kremlin’s ideology, but its ability and willingness to act.
Dmitri Medvedev’s taking of the presidential helm (with Putin in the premiership) in May 2008
did not change that. The issues remained, as did Putin’s input in the “tandemocracy.” That year,
Russia found an opening to act. Three critical events—the independence declaration of Kosovo
in February, NATO’s Bucharest summit in April, and the deterioration of already frayed Russia-
Georgia relations—converged into outright war in August. On February 17, Kosovo unilaterally
declared its independence from Serbia. Though it won recognition from the United States and
most of the EU, a swath of countries, including Russia, China, India, Spain, and Israel, refused to

200 Vladimir V. Putin, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” Speech,
202 Vladimir V. Putin, “Press Statement and Answers to Journalists’ Questions Following a Meeting of the Russia-NATO
Council,” Bucharest, April 4, 2008.
follow suit, citing it as a dangerous precedent for separatist and irredentist movements elsewhere. Georgia agreed—namely because it feared that Moscow might weaponize that precedent in its own breakaway republics. Soon after, Moscow lifted CIS sanctions on Abkhazia, easing the flow of weapons into the region, and moved to deepen ties with separatists in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.203

Meanwhile, NATO kept its door open. At the April 3 summit in Bucharest, the Alliance invited Croatia and Albania. Though Bush and some of the newer NATO members had planned to extend Membership Action Plans to Ukraine and Georgia, others—France, Germany, Hungary—urged against it, citing Russian opposition.204 Membership for post-Soviet republics, which Russia had become increasingly nervous about keeping within its traditional sphere of influence, was a sensitive matter. Georgia and Ukraine did not get the MAPs, but were assured that they would eventually become members.205 Again, it was framed not a matter of if, but when. “I am sure that we will become a NATO member before my presidential term expires,” remarked Saakashvili.206

Yet the situation was far more dangerous than the West had realized. Russia had tied Georgia’s pursuit of NATO membership to the status of its breakaway republics.207 On April 16, Putin issued a presidential decree to establish relations with the regions. From there, the situation worsened. On August 7, citing aggression from Tbilisi against South Ossetia, Moscow launched its five-day military campaign. When the dust had settled, Russia’s conventional, cyber, and

207 “Russia’s NATO envoy says offering Georgia membership track would bolster separatists,” International Herald Tribune, March 11, 2008.
information warfare had won out. Georgia had lost South Ossetia and Abkhazia, along with its prospects for NATO membership. NATO expansion seemed, if for a moment, to have hit a dead end in the former Soviet republics. Moreover, in August 2008, the Kremlin learned a valuable lesson: the use of force was its best bet to deter NATO expansion.208

Overload

In 2009, the newly inaugurated administration of U.S. President Barack Obama tried to thaw the post-Georgian War freeze and rework relations with Russia. On March 6, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov symbolically exchanged a red “reset” button. The button’s Russian transliteration, it turned out, did not mean “reset” (perezagruzka), but “overload” (peregruzka). Gaffes aside, the Obama administration had no claims to renovate relations overnight. Putin seemed cautiously optimistic. In July, speaking before students in Moscow, Obama acknowledged how hard it would be to shake ingrained habits and mindsets on both sides. Nonetheless, “on the fundamental issues that will shape this century, Americans and Russians share common interests that form a basis for cooperation.”209 Nuclear nonproliferation, economic development, and countering violent extremism mattered to Moscow and Washington. On NATO expansion, where their views were incompatible, the Obama administration was pragmatically vague.210 Plans to deploy a missile defense system in Europe were deferred to 2018.

Still, the mismatch between Russian and American interests made it hard to isolate areas of common interest from those of competition. By the end of 2011, with the Arab Spring rippling

210 Stent, 217-218.
through the Middle East and North Africa, the two were butting heads over counterterrorism. In Libya and Syria, protests had escalated into bloody civil war. On February 26 and March 17, 2011, the UN Security Council passed resolutions to impose sanctions and a no-fly zone in Libya. Though ambivalent about the latter, Russia and China withheld their vetoes. On March 19, a NATO-led coalition intervened against Muammar Gaddafi’s regime. Putin compared the intervention to “a medieval call for the Crusades,” and, more tellingly, the bombing of Belgrade in 1999 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. To him, it was another manifestation of “a persistent tendency in U.S. policy.” On October 20, after being dragged out of a drainage pipe, the ousted dictator was brutally murdered on video. As Libya descended into chaos, the Kremlin made it a priority to prevent the same scenario from unfolding in Syria—both to reestablish Russia as a counterweight to the United States and to curry favor with other regimes fearing Western intervention.

Putin retook the presidency in March 2012. His third term kicked off amid protests at home over faulty elections and intensifying hostility towards Western policy. His regime still benefited from broad popular support, mostly motivated by fear of the alternative. Yet the large-scale protests angered and upset many in the Kremlin, which had linked stability, security, and sovereignty with the Putin regime. Whether sincerely or opportunistically, the Kremlin labeled the protestors traitors and accused the West of trying to foment another color revolution. Color revolutions were being painted more and more as a new form of warfare—one that sought regime change “by outside manipulation of the protest potential of the population.” Per this new logic, the early-2000s revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan belonged to the same

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dangerous family as the 2011 uprisings in Syria, Egypt, and Yemen.\footnote{Anthony H. Cordesman, \textit{Russia and the ‘Color Revolution’: A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the US and the West (Full Report)} (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 28, 2014.)} Protest at home, unrest in former Soviet republics, and violence in the Arab world all stemmed from the same country, with the same agenda and the same consequences.

This framework, along with long-standing Russian hostility to the West moving into the post-Soviets space, underlies the violent rupture that came in 2014 with the Ukraine crisis and the confrontation that persists to this day. Unlike in Georgia, this crisis was sparked by the Europeans, rather than Americans; it was not a Membership Action Plan being offered, but an Association Agreement. EU-Russia relations had chilly well before 2014, owing to the growing discrepancy between the two parties’ interests. Moreover, the EU had been marching east since the 1990s, and largely in tandem with NATO. Its Eastern Partnership initiative, launched in 2009, alarmed Russia especially—again, the West seemed to be creeping into its sphere and setting dangerous precedents for its own regime.

At the Vilnius Summit on November 28-29, 2013, the EU expected to sign agreements with Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Armenia quickly backed away under pressure from Russia. More importantly, after substantial economic wooing and arm-twisting, Moscow convinced Ukraine’s Viktor Yanukovych to back down. On November 21, when the news broke, protests dubbed the “Euromaidan” erupted in Kiev; by the end of the year, they had escalated into riots. In February 2014, after a series of violent clashes between riot police and protestors, Yanukovych and his government were overthrown. Shortly after, “little green men” tied to the Russian special forces and military intelligence service took control of Crimea, organized a referendum, and made the peninsula’s annexation by Russia a \textit{fait accompli}.\footnote{Hiski Haukkala, “From Cooperative to Contested Europe? The Conflict in Ukraine as a Culmination of a Long-Term Crisis in EU-Russia Relations,” \textit{Journal of Contemporary European Studies} (2015): 10.} Citing the
Kosovo precedent, Putin justified the referendum as a reaction to the Western-backed “coup” in Kiev, carried out “by extremists, by nationalists and right-wingers, including neo-Nazis.”

Pro-Russian uprisings, meanwhile, were ripping throughout the country’s eastern Donbass region.

On March 17, the United States, EU, and Canada brought targeted sanctions against Russia; Russia swiftly imposed counter-sanctions, including an embargo on sanctioning countries’ exports. As the War in Donbass escalated, the sanctions regime became more onerous, soon combining with a fall in the price of crude oil to trigger a financial crisis in Russia. On April 1, NATO suspended cooperation with Russia over the war in Ukraine, stating, “Our goal of a Euro-Atlantic region whole, free, and at peace has not changed, but has been fundamentally challenged by Russia.” A little over a month later, pro-Russian separatists pronounced Donetsk and Luhansk capitals of their respective “people’s republics.” By the end of 2014, relations between Russia and the West in the post-Cold War era were at an all-time low. From there, they would continue to get worse.

The Blame Game

The preceding analysis attempts to understand how Russia and the West have ended up so dramatically at odds. Could this have been prevented? If so, how, and by whom? Who is responsible? While counterfactuals are a tricky area to navigate, the above discussion of U.S.-Russia relations, as well as competing perceptions of those relations on both sides, makes clear that the recent course of events cannot be blamed on one actor, faction, or country. Russian wariness and weariness with the West did not start under Putin, and that alienation was not rooted in NATO expansion alone. Nor could it be blamed wholly on Washington’s foreign

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policy decisions. The course of Russian domestic affairs during the 1990s made Yeltsin and Kozyrev’s initial Western-oriented stance politically toxic by the end of the decade, to the benefit of the statism of Primakov, Putin, and Lavrov. An assertive, even aggressive Russia was not inevitable, but it was extremely hard to avoid.

As such, analyses that pin the current state of U.S.-Russia relations on geopolitical principles or one individual are inadequate and misleading. The exchange between John Mearsheimer and Michael McFaul on the 2014 Ukraine crisis conveys the shortcomings of these arguments. For instance, Mearsheimer is correct to say that the “pushback” should not surprise the West, as Primakov and Putin repeatedly drew a red line along the old Soviet borders. His linkage between NATO expansion and democracy promotion as part of the same foreign policy doctrine that has incensed the Kremlin is also appropriate. By not so much as discussing Russia’s domestic politics, however, Mearsheimer takes its “core strategic interests” for granted and oversimplifies the Yeltsin administration’s attitude towards expansion.217 Despite the incoherence in Russian foreign policy at the time, the westernizers’ perception of the West and NATO expansion was clearly not the same as that of the statists. While they all broadly opposed NATO expansion, Kozyrev and Grachev did not have the same attitude as Lavrov and Putin do.

McFaul responds that the Russian resurgence was not “in response to U.S. policies,” but stemmed from “Russian internal political dynamics.”218 The turning point came not in 1993 or 1996, claims McFaul, but in the large-scale protests of 2011. With his regime under threat, Putin sought to bolster legitimacy and undermine critics at home by demonizing the West and especially the United States, which he already saw as a dangerous force in international affairs.

McFaul concludes: “This crisis is not about Russia, NATO, and realism but about Putin and his unconstrained, erratic adventurism.”219 Yet Putin did not create this issue. NATO expansion had already incensed Yevgeni Primakov, Sergei Karaganov, and others in the 1990s—some of the very people, moreover, that Yeltsin or Kozyrev fretted about the policy bolstering. Whatever the latter two felt about expansion on principle, both saw the manner and speed with which it unfolded as undercutting their vision of reform in a tumultuous time.

The Clinton administration was aware that NATO expansion would be detrimental both to Russian domestic politics and U.S.-Russia relations. “Nonetheless,” Talbott writes, “it was the right thing to do. The challenge was how to do it right.”220 While there was perhaps a “right” way to do it for Poland, Romania, or Estonia, there was simply no “right” way for the Kremlin. The former was a higher priority. Clinton’s team instead concentrated on getting Russia (specifically, Yeltsin) to “internalize” what they had designated a win-win situation. Talbott’s aide, Victoria Nuland, likened it to persuading children to eat their vegetables.221 The administration could say that NATO expansion did not threaten Russian interests until they were blue in the face. It would not change the growing faction in the Kremlin and Duma that thought otherwise. Nor would it curb the growing hostility to American input in Russian policy, domestic or foreign, amid economic collapse and political corruption—something which Washington underestimated.

Given all of the domestic events underpinning Russian foreign policy shifts during the 1990s, it is unlikely that an eventual souring of U.S.-Russia relations could have been avoided. The Western-oriented vision of Kozyrev was not going to last, especially not as domestic politics

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219 Ibid., 171.
220 Talbott, 92.
221 Ibid., 76.
turned the Russian elites and much of the public against any notion of emulating the West. In 1992-1993, Yeltsin and the other liberals had bitten off more than they could chew and promised more than they could actually achieve. Though the elites had coalesced among a statist consensus by Yeltsin’s second term, their great-power goals were out of sync with the country’s military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities. Those would take time to recoup. Until then, Russia would have to grit its teeth as the United States and its allies pursued policies that it found intolerable, whether in Yugoslavia, Iraq, or Libya. Democracy promotion in the post-Soviet space, regardless of any good intentions involved, set Moscow’s teeth on edge most of all. There, it saw a threat both to its reduced great power status and to its own survival.

In retrospect, then, it was not NATO enlargement *alone* that alienated Russia. Domestic politics also played a significant role, as did American unilateralism, interventionism, and democracy promotion. The latter three must be considered alongside NATO enlargement. The policies of the United States and its allies, whether in Yugoslavia, the Arab world, or in the post-Soviet space, were frequently at odds with Moscow’s own interests. These interests involved far more than sticking it to the West, as the dual Kosovo incidents show. Even without enlargement, these would likely have put Russia and the West on a rocky path; the fact that they have coincided with enlargement has, of course, put Moscow even more on edge. However, because NATO is so integral to the United States’ superpower status, military might, and ties to Europe, enlargement has massively raised the stakes on both sides.²²²

It is tempting to ask whether this could have been prevented if Russia had been invited to join NATO to begin with, if the OSCE could have been given oversight over NATO, or if the Clinton administration had used PFP to delay enlargement. Yeltsin, Putin, and former Secretary

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of State James Baker all brought up the “Russia-in-NATO” option. However, that hinged on Russia meeting the same requirements as its neighbors. It would have had to sort out a whole slew of territorial disputes, consolidate its democracy and free markets, and seriously renovate its military. At no point has it met these criteria. After 1993 especially, the Russian push for membership was viable only as a hedging tactic against expansion. Additionally, “NATO-under-OSCE” and “Russia-in-NATO” would have both given Russia the power to veto or otherwise obstruct NATO’s use of force. Neither the United States nor the countries aspiring to join NATO could have accepted that. Similarly, pressure from the Central and Eastern Europeans (and later, Congress) made PFP unsustainable as a stalling tactic. NATO expansion was not inevitable, but these counterfactuals were highly unlikely to happen.

Conclusion

Enlargement alone does not explain current tensions between Russia and the West. It has, however, been uniquely counterproductive. Its architects hoped to bring about a Europe “whole, free, and at peace” through a process that would alienate one of its key players. There was no room for Russia in the new NATO, as neither the Central and Eastern Europeans nor many in Washington wanted it there. Moreover, Russia could not meet the requirements for membership. However, a post-Cold War European security structure that estranges or makes an enemy of Russia, even if unintentionally, ultimately defeats its purpose. The Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations insisted that Russia perceive NATO expansion in a way it could not, which “precluded compromise and genuine diplomacy.” Additionally, the political chaos and

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223 Marten, 154.
224 Art, 399.
225 Pouliot, 229.
disappointments of the Yeltsin years made Western input much less attractive to his successors.

Finally, that enlargement occurred alongside other policies contrary to what had emerged as Russia’s core security interests—unilateralism, democracy promotion, missile defense—made the stakes much higher for both parties.
Chapter 4: NATO at a Crossroads: Cohesion and Commitments in the 21st Century

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I analyzed the most prominent arguments for and against the expansion of NATO. The former linked NATO inclusion for post-communist states with democratic consolidation; the latter tied NATO expansion with deteriorating relations with Russia. Proponents of the policy—namely those in Central and Eastern Europe who had first agitated for it—frequently couched their arguments in terms of both security and moral justice. Extending Washington and Brussels’ security guarantee to Warsaw was not simply hedging against a resurgent Russia, but righting the historic wrong committed at Yalta. By late 1993, key figures in the Clinton administration had warmed to the idea, later fitting it into a doctrine of “engagement and enlargement.” Critics argued that bringing in former Warsaw Pact member states, and especially the Soviet-occupied (if unrecognized) Baltic states, was not simply unnecessary but crossing a redline for NATO-Russia relations.

As I explored in chapter two, proponents in the administration claimed that the incentive and (eventual) actuality of NATO membership would spur reform, enable stability, and help to consolidate democracy in post-communist states. Serious shortcomings in NATO’s ability to incentivize and socialize democratic policies and norms pre- and especially post-accession indicate that the Alliance’s transformative power was far more circumscribed. Inconsistencies in the accession process, most notably with Romania’s entry in 2004, further weaken the case for the NATO carrot as a motivator for reform. In chapter three, I argued that the breakdown in NATO-Russia relations stems from grievances beyond NATO enlargement alone, even beyond

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Mearsheimer’s neat “triple package” of NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion.\textsuperscript{227} This does not mean that NATO played a minimal role in the current crisis. If anything, developments in Russian politics in the 1990s signified just how dangerous expanding NATO, especially into former Soviet republics (recognized and unrecognized), would be.

In this chapter, I synthesize previous analysis to explore two other issues in the enlargement debate. Broadly speaking, both concern the Alliance’s ability to meet its commitments, and the question of whether enlargement has run counter to that goal. The first argument contends that expanding NATO would weaken its ability to act decisively, given that it operates by consensus. At the end of the Cold War, it had sixteen members; today, it has twenty-nine, and its door remains open. The second point concerns NATO’s willingness and capacity to defend its new member states. This issue has only become more pressing since the Ukraine crisis in 2014, and especially so for the tiny Baltic states. Both Estonia and Latvia have a substantial ethnic Russian minority, hovering around a quarter of the population.\textsuperscript{228} All three are wedged between Russia and the Kaliningrad exclave. They are connected to the rest of NATO only by a narrow, hard-to-defend strip of land along the Poland-Lithuania border. In the event of a Russian attack, conventional or hybrid, could NATO defend these states? Would it?

There is no satisfying way to answer these questions head-on. While there is substantial literature on Russian foreign policy in the 1990s and democratic consolidation in Poland (and to a lesser extent, Romania), it is less straightforward to study NATO’s internal rifts, and especially its capacity or willingness to defend the small Baltic states. The evidence to support either side of the debate is murky, not least because it is highly classified and highly abstract. In the case of


the Baltic states, it is hard to measure a concept as fluid and complex as credibility or willingness. Instead of trying to answer questions of commitment and credibility directly, we must answer surrogate questions.

To analyze NATO’s internal dynamic, I look at whether enlargement has weakened the United States’ capacity to effect alliance-wide cohesion and action on issues that it has deemed vital. I consider four cases: the controversy over the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, NATO’s role in the Afghanistan War, the NATO-led intervention in Libya, and the longstanding issue of burden-sharing. While the invasion of Iraq was not a NATO-led effort, it laid bare the fault lines within both the Alliance and Europe itself. NATO’s mission in Afghanistan (2003-2014) was a major counterinsurgency operation, going beyond Europe and its conventional foundations. It also showed serious unevenness in capabilities, commitments, and even strategies, between the United States and its European allies. Libya was a “successful” operation in the sense that NATO achieved its stated objectives, albeit without German support, but demonstrated similar disparities. The question of burden-sharing encompasses the cases of Afghanistan and Libya, as well as broader problems with funding the Alliance. All of these issues are, in some form or another, intertwined with the question of the Alliance’s post-Cold War purpose.

My analysis of NATO’s commitment and capabilities in defending the Baltic states will be relatively short and descriptive. I will discuss NATO’s deterrent posture and steps taken to enhance the credibility of the Article 5 guarantee. I examine the European Deterrence Initiative and Russia’s anti-access area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. Finally, while the “Trump factor” bears mentioning, most obviously over questions of the Alliance’s willingness to meet its expanded list of commitments, I will save this wild card for the conclusion. The current chapter concerns the impact of enlargement itself. These debates over NATO’s purpose, scope, and
ability to function in the post-Cold War era did not start with Trump’s election, though it undeniably complicated them.

Transatlantic Divides and Alliance Cohesion

Following Walt, “an alliance is a formal or informal arrangement for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states.”

States will align with or against one another in the face of external threats. Remove that threat and, in the vast majority of cases, the alliance comes apart. In the Cold War era, the United States and its partners found their greatest threat in the Soviet Union, and balanced against it accordingly through NATO. As with most alliances, NATO’s pragmatic considerations usually outweighed or at least downplayed its ideological divides. Even so, NATO was never strictly a military alliance. Overlapping with its aims to counter the Soviet threat were also efforts to constrain Germany and otherwise stabilize Europe, stretching it “beyond the limits of a traditional alliance toward a novel type of functional organization.”

How would this unorthodox alliance-organization survive in the post-Cold War era? With the collapse of the Soviet threat, Walt predicted, NATO would eventually follow suit, stalled more by elaborate, “sticky” institutional structures than by any staying ideological consensus. Short of a renewed Soviet (or post-Soviet) threat, members would struggle to keep the Alliance coherent and cohesive, though its deep institutionalization would ensure its survival. A serious

231 Walt, 38-40.
European challenge to NATO’s security guarantee had not emerged by the end of the 1990s, and still has not today. Nor, however, has an explicit, well-defined purpose for post-Cold War NATO. “No longer geared to countering a specific and clearly identifiable threat,” NATO has taken on a broader range of responsibilities since its 1991 Strategic Concept, partly to adapt to a new international environment with more diffuse threats.234

Having now expanded the scope of its relevant security threats, NATO added to its commitments further by bringing in new members. This also meant bringing in their national security interests and issues. For the vast majority of the former Warsaw Pact members, the most critical threat was the potential for a revanchist Russia, the fear of which drove them to seek membership in the first place. Conditional accession could help these countries to get their houses in order with civil-military relations and border disputes, but Brussels could do little about Russia’s own house. They did not know if the house might catch fire, potentially setting its neighbors aflame. NATO enlargement, to paraphrase Walter Slocombe, would help to “hedge against the possibility” of that house catching fire.235 With memories of Soviet domination fresh in their minds, NATO’s new members were understandably on edge over that possibility. They were less interested in compromise or partnership with Moscow, which they saw little reason to trust, and more inclined to side with Washington.

On many key issues, however, the United States diverged from important NATO members, namely France and Germany. At the core of the burgeoning European Union, the two former rivals sought to build an integrated Europe for a post-Cold War era of interlocking, multilateral institutions, laws, and norms. The Soviet collapse had opened up a new and

promising future, if an ambiguous one: Moscow’s absence left the Europeans with only
themselves to balance against the Americans, with whom they suddenly had more room and
reason to disagree.236 While Washington was no stranger to unilateralism, the Bush
administration’s withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, non-ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, and
hostility toward the International Criminal Court jarred the Europeans.237

These divides became especially glaring in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. The
devastating attacks on September 11, 2001 had brought Washington widespread support and
solidarity, most visibly (if symbolically) with NATO’s first invocation of Article 5. One year
later, that seeming consensus had splintered over Washington’s response to the attacks, and
especially the looming invasion of Iraq. The Bush White House charged that Saddam Hussein
was part of an “axis of evil,” with weapons of mass destruction that rendered a “containment”
doctrine moot. Its agenda asked not whether regime change should happen in Iraq, but how.238

France and Germany, the core countries of the European Union, thought otherwise, as did
nearby Russia. Toppling Saddam could destabilize an already turbulent region, undermine the
already overambitious Global War on Terrorism, and ensnare Washington in a bloody
insurgency for which it was not prepared. In ousting one enemy, Washington would create many
more.239 This was not so much a reflexive, irrational “anti-Americanism” as it was a genuine
disagreement over the threat that Saddam posed and the consequences that regime change might

237 Peter H. Merkl, The Rift Between America and Old Europe: The Distracted Eagle (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 18;
Philip H. Gordon and Jeremy Shapiro, Allies at War: America, Europe, and the Crisis over Iraq (New York: McGraw Hill,
2004), 195-196.
238 Gordon and Shapiro, 96.
239 Elizabeth Wood, Friendly Fire: The Near-Death of the Transatlantic Alliance (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution,
2004), 47, 55; David Kilcullen, Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism (Oxford University Press, 2016), 7-
bring. The fact that Washington was the only superpower did not mean that the Berlin, Paris, or Moscow had to accept its leadership, much less where they thought it misguided.240

In early 2003, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld brushed off a question about “European” opposition to the use of force in Iraq as a question of “old Europe”—that is, France and Germany. “If you look at the entire NATO Europe today, the center of gravity is shifting to the East.”241 In January and February 2003, “New Europe”—that is, the Visegrád and Vilnius Groups—called for transatlantic solidarity against the threats of terrorism, dictatorship, and weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.242 French president Jacques Chirac castigated them for having “missed a good opportunity to be quiet”; German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder staunchly opposed the use of force.243 That “Old Europe” was siding with Russian President Vladimir Putin against the war was especially offensive to “New Europe.”

However much the French, Germans, and Russians opposed the Iraq War, they could not do anything to stop it. With or without the blessing of the UN Security Council, Washington would topple Saddam Hussein, and it would do so under its own terms, with its own ad-hoc “coalition of the willing”—a coalition determined by the mission, and not vice versa.244 Even if NATO and its members were to give it a seal of approval, Washington would likely not have wanted Brussels as a key player.245 From the American point of view, disunity and delay in the Kosovo campaign showed that it was best off avoiding NATO involvement (and therefore

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240 Gordon and Shapiro, 80.
245 Gordon and Shapiro, 63-64.
European interference) in its military operations.\(^\text{246}\) It shrugged off Brussels’ initial offers to get involved in Afghanistan. Where NATO was involved, namely over the defense of Turkey during the Iraq War—a war about which Turkey itself had deep reservations—France, Germany, and Belgium attempted to prevent it from acting.\(^\text{247}\)

NATO’s role (or lack thereof) in Iraq spoke volumes about the state of transatlantic relations. U.S. Ambassador to NATO R. Nicholas Burns characterized the dispute over Turkey as a “near death” experience.\(^\text{248}\) In April 2003, France, Belgium, Germany, and Luxembourg met to discuss a potential European Defense and Security Union, a meeting derided both as a summit for “chocolate-makers” and as a threat to the future of NATO.\(^\text{249}\) Whatever the prospects of a credible European counterweight to NATO, the Western Europeans were plainly unhappy with the new American way of doing business. In 2007, four analysts observed that “the Bush administration’s visionary pursuit of ultimate ends with hardly any ballast of strategic reckoning has clearly damaged the alliance.”\(^\text{250}\) Unilateralism had also brought into question the Alliance’s purpose—after all, it was neither needed nor wanted in Iraq, and faced no apparent security threats in Europe. NATO, critics said, had become irrelevant.\(^\text{251}\)

In the end, Washington got what it wanted in ousting Saddam, and NATO did not come to pieces over it. Neither side had an interest in living without the Alliance. As Mark Webber and others have pointed out, NATO has long been more than a military alliance, especially in the post-Cold War era. It is “\textit{sui generis} … an alliance without precedent” that “has come to


\(^{249}\) Moore, 97-98.

\(^{250}\) Dana H. Allin, Gilles Andréani, Philippe Errera and Gary Samore, \textit{Repairing the damage: Possibilities and limits of transatlantic consensus} (Glasgow: Routledge, 2007), 90.

constitute a form of international organization that is one of a kind."^{252} Were it to fall apart, it is not clear what would replace it. Nonetheless, the crisis over Iraq seriously threatened its cohesion, and even its existence. There was a clear difference between the United States’ coalition and their opponents in threat perception, values, and strategy. The invasion of Iraq laid bare a schism not only between the United States and Europe, but within Europe itself, all while raising the specter that the alliance might have outlived its usefulness.

With transatlantic relations at a dangerously low point, both Washington and its critics within NATO needed to preserve some amount of solidarity. If NATO was to survive, it needed to adapt as an institution and be put to use somewhere, somehow, to justify its continuing existence in a world that seemed fundamentally different after September 11. Ultimately, this took place in Afghanistan, whose geography and military situation fell well outside the Alliance’s comfort zone. The United States had initially rebuffed allied offers of assistance after September 11 beyond the symbolic, reluctant to cede any input or influence to an organization whose consensus-based decision-making process could bog down the mission.\(^{253}\) The invasion of Iraq and ensuing insurgency made this mindset untenable. Bringing NATO into the War in Afghanistan would lighten Washington’s self-imposed burden and promote institutional endurance.\(^{254}\) On August 11, 2003, NATO took over the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) meant to assist the Afghan Transitional Authority in securing Kabul and its environs. In October, the mandate was extended to cover the whole country.\(^{255}\)

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\(^{253}\) Gordon and Shapiro, 64.


Initially, there appeared to be a consensus. After butting heads with the Bush administration over Iraq, France and Germany sought to patch up relations for the sake of solidarity, with Germany, in fact, being first to propose NATO leadership in ISAF. Yet it became clear that Washington’s ability to effect Alliance-wide cohesion was constrained by a lack of readiness or consensus on how ISAF was supposed to achieve its objectives. After all, Afghanistan was not simply an “out-of-area” operation far from Europe, but also involved an entirely different kind of war from the kind that NATO had been configured to fight. ISAF’s mission was “to enable the Afghan government to provide effective security across the country and develop new Afghan security forces to ensure Afghanistan would never again become a safe haven for terrorists.” Afghanistan’s mountainous terrain and historical lack of a functioning central government made this a tall order. Moreover, while the allies could agree on these general objectives, they were often at odds over how to achieve them.

From the start, members also did not share the burden of the NATO/ISAF campaign evenly. Some countries were reluctant to send troops at all. Most who did—reportedly almost half of ISAF forces—imposed “national caveats,” or restrictions on what their troops could do and where. Some prohibited their forces from being used for combat operations except in self-defense, effectively tying the hands of field commanders, limiting operational flexibility, and shifting the initiative back to the insurgents. Germany in particular was singled out for limiting its contingent of over 3,000 troops to “quiet” northern Afghanistan. In the unstable southern

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257 Johnston, 172.
258 “ISAF’s mission in Afghanistan (2001-2014).”
260 Douglas V. Mastriano, *Faust and the Padshah Sphinx: Reshaping the NATO Alliance to Win in Afghanistan* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2010), 4; Morelli and Belkin, 10-11.
region, the Americans, British, Canadians, and Dutch were doing most of the fighting and
dying. Uneven burden-sharing bred resentment in those countries who were putting in the
most, for whom the war was becoming more and more controversial at home.

The NATO-led mission in Afghanistan was financially and politically costly, and also did
not seem to be making much headway. When the Obama administration took office in 2009, the
Afghan National Army, a “sine qua non for security in Afghanistan,” remained underfunded,
dermanned, and unprepared to take on a dominant role. Contrary to NATO Secretary
General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer’s hope for “considerable progress” by 2008, Afghanistan did not
have a “more stable political architecture in place” or “effective, trusted Afghan security forces
gradually taking control.” The gap between U.S. and European capabilities and contributions
only grew when the Obama administration switched gears, withdrawing troops from Iraq and
sending more resources to Afghanistan. Americans increasingly resented carrying most of the
weight in a war with little end in sight. Even with the end of the NATO/ISAF mission and the
handover of security responsibility to Afghan forces in December 2014, it was not clear what had
been achieved. Ultimately, Afghanistan “provided a reality check” for NATO, whose members’
actual military capabilities, motivations, and levels of commitment fell far short of the lofty
ambitions described in its Strategic Concepts.

The 2011 intervention in Libya reinforced this lesson. On paper, NATO was acting “as
one.” Everyone voted to enforce the UN-mandated no-fly zone and arms embargo. States with
reservations over a possible mission creep into regime change, namely Germany, Turkey, and

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261 Morelli and Belkin, 2.
262 Obaid Younossi et al, The Long March: Building an Afghan National Army (Santa Monica: RAND, 2009), xi, 60.
264 Sloan, 122.
Poland, officially put them aside to avoid a repeat of the ugly institutional infighting over Iraq.\textsuperscript{266} Publicly, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk voiced skepticism and refused to contribute to the operation. Germany, which had abstained from the UN Security Council Resolution approving the no-fly zone, also did not participate. In mid-April, after Barack Obama, David Cameron, and Nicolas Sarkozy jointly declared that Qaddafi “must go and go for good,” strike missions were being carried out only by American, British, French, Canadian, Belgian, Danish, and Norwegian forces.\textsuperscript{267} Two analysts found that the Visegrád states, including the publicly supportive Hungary and Czech Republic, “contributed essentially nothing to the military operation.”\textsuperscript{268}

In June 2011, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates expressed concern that NATO had become a “two-tiered alliance.” One tier would focus on “soft” tasks, enjoying the benefits of membership without worrying about the costs. The other would conduct the “hard” military tasks, “pay[ing] the price and bear[ing] the burdens.” This gap stemmed in part from a “lack of will” and a “lack of resources.” Americans and their elected officials were growing frustrated, Gates warned, and they would eventually lose the appetite and patience for footing the bill.\textsuperscript{269}

Of course, the Europeans faced their own constraints. The global financial crisis of 2008 and sovereign debt crisis that began in 2009 had forced most of their governments to dip into their defense budgets.\textsuperscript{270} To keep pace with EU fiscal rules on deficit spending, states not only reduced their defense budgets, but also shifted resources within those budgets from equipment,

\textsuperscript{270} F. Stephen Larrabee et al, NATO and the Challenges of Austerity (Santa Monica: RAND, 2012).
infrastructure, and readiness to personnel.\textsuperscript{271} The trend away from modernization and research and development dates back to the late 1970s, but increased in magnitude since the end of the Cold War and was compounded by decades of continuing budget cuts.\textsuperscript{272} The result became plain in Libya: twenty out of twenty-eight members abstained from combat, and most of the eight who participated ran out of ammunition, which they restocked by buying from the United States. European capabilities did not live up to Alliance promises and policies and fed into existing resentment over burden-sharing.\textsuperscript{273}

There is nothing unprecedented about Americans chastising their European allies for not paying enough, nor is the transatlantic capabilities gap anything new. Since NATO’s creation, nearly every president has expressed frustration that the United States must, in Kennedy’s words, “pay for the military protection of Europe while the NATO states are not paying their fair share and living off the ‘fat of the land.’”\textsuperscript{274} While the fact of uneven burden-sharing is undeniable, and the Europeans certainly benefited from the “peace dividends” of the end of the Cold War, it is incorrect and unproductive to boil that fact down to Europeans “taking advantage” of a naïve America.\textsuperscript{275} In fact, it is the product of an uneasy attempt to balance control with cost-sharing dating back to the Cold War. Pushing allies to spend more on their own security can spur greater allied autonomy, including where the United States least wants it. Washington has generally been ambivalent towards European attempts at an independent security initiative.\textsuperscript{276} Trying to

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\textsuperscript{273} Michaels, 31.
\textsuperscript{275} Ben Jacobs, “Donald Trump reiterates he will only help Nato countries that pay ‘fair share’,” The Guardian, July 27, 2016.
\end{flushleft}
preserve maximum control and cost-sharing at once tends to reduce cohesion, especially when allies disagree over which threats actually warrant defense spending.

Most of the Europeans did not perceive Qaddafi’s regime as so urgent a threat to Europe or NATO as to justify changing course. It was not until the Ukraine crisis in 2014 that Western Europe perceived a serious security threat warranting serious shifts in defense spending.277 By then, European economies had also recovered enough to make those shifts possible, even if slowly.278 On September 5 at the Wales Summit, NATO allies pledged to aim to spend a minimum of 2% of their GDP on defense, and a minimum of 20% of their annual defense spending on equipment and related research and development.279 According to the Secretary General’s annual report for 2018, European allies and Canada “have made considerable progress” since 2014. Seven countries have reached the 2% guideline. Sixteen have met the 20% guideline, a number projected to rise to twenty-four by 2024.280 While this rise has obviously come alongside pressure from the Trump administration for allies to pay more, changes in threat perception and resources brought about a relative consensus on burden-sharing far sooner and more effectively than long-standing American pressure.

What can Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and the broader burden-sharing debate tell us about cohesion within NATO? Did adding more countries to Brussels’ membership roles stymy Washington’s ability to effect alliance-wide consensus on issues that it deemed vital? All four cases demonstrate some lack of alliance-wide consensus, but not necessarily because of the new members. While NATO as an institution played a minimal role in Iraq, the debate surrounding the invasion was intensely bitter, highly publicized, and destructive to American prestige,

transatlantic relations, and intra-European ties alike.\textsuperscript{281} Yet the invasion was an American initiative with British backing, plus support from a “New Europe” eager to strengthen relations with Washington.\textsuperscript{282} Its harshest critics within NATO were France and Germany, not new NATO members. While the United States achieved its immediate goal of ousting Saddam, it exposed a divide within both NATO and Europe, all while making NATO itself appear irrelevant.

Unlike Iraq, the war in Afghanistan and intervention in Libya directly involved NATO. Notwithstanding initial European support for ISAF, the lack of clarity in strategy and friction over “national caveats” significantly hindered progress in Afghanistan. In hindsight, it is debatable whether that mission could have ever been accomplished, given the country’s historically disjointed governance, difficult terrain, and porous border with a less than helpful Pakistan. This made Afghanistan an ambitious operation for any country, and perhaps prohibitively so for a consensus-based institution like NATO.

As with the intervention in Libya, Afghanistan also demonstrated the disparities in allies’ capabilities and commitments. Both missions left a bad taste in the mouths of members who had expended the most blood and treasure. NATO had taken on both missions primarily for the sake of alliance cohesion, rather than for the missions proper. In Libya in particular, all members officially backed the mission despite constrained budgets and individual reservations. Twenty members did not contribute to the strike mission, whether due to the pressures of austerity or because they sincerely opposed it, after having officially voted for it.

\textsuperscript{281} Sloan, 199.

Uneven burden-sharing is obviously an issue, as it has been since NATO’s inception. While committing to the defense of twenty-eight countries is obviously expensive, the phenomenon cannot be pinned solely or even mostly on enlargement. The United States has long spent more on defense than its allies, both in terms of percentage of its GDP and in absolute terms. The Europeans have not only invested far less, but also allocated less of their defense budgets to modernization and research and development. In a sense, this is the consequence of NATO’s long-standing struggle to balance cost-sharing with control, with control usually winning out. Germany’s chronically underfunded, conflict-avoidant Bundeswehr is the most obvious consequence, particularly when one recalls NATO’s original mandate to keep them “down.”

Still, these gaps have become vastly more frustrating since NATO’s original *raison d’être* ceased to exist. Soaring, vague strategic concepts have not reflected a broader consensus on where the Alliance should go and what it should do in the post-Cold War era. Dissensus, austerity, and a lack of shared urgency have exacerbated the gap and the resentment surrounding it by an order of magnitude. The 2014 crisis over Ukraine, coinciding with gradual economic recovery and continuing pressure from the United States, galvanized NATO members into a relative consensus. The outcome was the Wales Pledge and a real trend towards higher spending, if a slow one. It remains to be seen how long that consensus will hold.

**Dying for Riga: Defending the Baltics**

For NATO’s eastern flank especially, the events of 2014 infused the Alliance with a sense of relevance and urgency. The crisis over Ukraine brought NATO-Russia relations to an all-time low, sparking anxiety above all in the tiny NATO member states of Estonia, Latvia, and
Lithuania. Annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 per the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, their status as Soviet republics was never recognized by the West. In the 1990s, Moscow designated their membership in NATO as an absolute red line. Letting the Baltics in would be humiliating, for one, but would also isolate the Kaliningrad enclave and bring NATO forces up to Russia’s historically vulnerable Western front. By the end of the decade, the Kremlin had reluctantly acquiesced. Today, as members of the EU and NATO, they now occupy a unique position in the “post-Soviet space,” namely because they have steadfastly rejected membership in a common Russian-dominated sphere.

The Baltic states are no strangers to tensions with contemporary Russia. For one, they do not accept Moscow’s interpretation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and what it calls the Great Patriotic War. The Kremlin insists that the Baltic three voluntarily joined the Soviet Union in 1940, and were then liberated from Nazism in 1944. The Baltics accuse Moscow of denying history; Moscow accuses them of Russophobia and rehabilitating fascism. Tied into this is the status of Estonia and Latvia’s significant Russian minorities, many of whom came during the Soviet era and face obstacles to citizenship and integration. In late April 2007, notably, riots and looting broke out in Tallinn over the relocation of a statue honoring Red Army soldiers. Starting on April 27, massive waves of distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) cyberattacks swamped Estonian websites, crippling banks, newspapers, and government offices. Estonia blamed Russia; Russia denied any hand in the matter.

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Given the salience of the issue of Russian minorities in the Baltics, and given their tense relationship with the Kremlin, it makes sense that the events in Ukraine stoked fears of an invasion. Russian saber-rattling, whether through fiery rhetoric or snap military exercises, has certainly not helped. Moscow could invade on the pretext of protecting Russian minorities or breaking a blockade on Kaliningrad.\textsuperscript{287} Were that to happen, a 2016 RAND report argued, NATO would not be able to defend them.\textsuperscript{288} They are small and are highly vulnerable. Connected to other NATO states only by the Suwałki gap, a corridor along the Polish-Lithuanian border, they could be quickly isolated and overrun in a fast-moving attack.\textsuperscript{289} Since the 2008 war in Georgia, Russia’s military investment, modernization, and buildup have given it local conventional superiority.\textsuperscript{290} Its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems—an assortment of air, land, and sea defenses—could hinder NATO’s ability to reach the Baltics or Poland and “increase the attractiveness to Russia of a fait-accompli.”\textsuperscript{291} Similar systems in Crimea could also be used to deny Romania and Bulgaria access to the Black Sea.\textsuperscript{292}

When considering a hypothetical, it helps to remember how much the Baltics do \textit{not} have in common with Ukraine. The situation in Ukraine was unique because of the unstable post-revolutionary context, which muddied the legitimacy of the interim regime in Kiev. As discussed in chapter 3, what happened in Kiev mattered far more to the Kremlin than what happened in Riga or Tallinn. Additionally, corruption and mixed loyalties are more pervasive in Ukraine. Its eastern border is long and porous. Russia had a lease on the Sevastopol Naval Base well before

\begin{footnotes}
\item[287] Nadezhda Arbatova, “Reaching an Understanding on Baltic Security,” \textit{Survival} 60, no. 3 (June/July 2018): 123.
\item[289] “U.S. Army commander warns of Russian blocking of Baltic defence,” The Baltic Times, November 9, 2015.
\item[290] Scott Boston et al, \textit{Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe: Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority} (Santa Monica: RAND, 2018).
\end{footnotes}
the seizure of Crimea, where it could mask troop movements with a snap exercise. The situation lent itself well to plausible deniability, as well as a few high-level defections. If any war involving NATO and EU members would have vastly greater fallout both for their allies and for Russia. In short, were such a war to happen, it would not look anything like the one in Ukraine.

If the Kremlin wanted to employ its A2/AD capabilities and overrun the Baltics, perhaps to regain control over its perceived backyard, to break a blockade on a besieged Kaliningrad, or to call NATO’s bluff and deal a devastating blow to the Alliance, it could. It could do it quickly and “present the Alliance with a fait accompli, dividing the Alliance and paralyzing decision-making before reinforcements could arrive.” Would it want to? Attacking the Baltics, be it conventionally or through some form of hybrid warfare, would effectively destroy political and economic relations with Europe and the United States. There is a sliver of a chance that the conflict could go nuclear. However Russia might attack the Baltic states, the consequences would be grave both for it and for NATO. NATO, meanwhile, would very likely have to put together a substantial force to dislodge Russia, and would have to expect heavy losses. As Rasmussen puts it, this “makes living up to the Article 5 commitment a risk in and of itself.”

Since 2014, Washington and Brussels have attempted to increase the Alliance’s deterrent posture and improve its conventional capabilities. In June 2014, U.S. President Obama announced the European Reassurance Initiative, later renamed the European Deterrence

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Initiative (EDI). The EDI works to fund an increased U.S. presence in Europe, deploying rotational U.S. forces, participating in NATO exercises, improving existing infrastructure, and investing in efforts to improve European allies and partners’ ability to defend themselves.\(^{298}\)

Also in 2014, a spearhead force known as the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) was set up within the NATO Response Force. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, the Alliance agreed to establish an enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland to “unambiguously demonstrate, as part of our overall posture, allies’ solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate Allied response to any aggression.”\(^{299}\) Four multinational rotational battle groups have since been deployed. NATO also plans to reduce the period of time it would take for troops to engage Russia in a hypothetical invasion of the Baltics.\(^{300}\)

Nonetheless, it is impossible to say with certainty whether Russia would invade the Baltics, much less what NATO would do if the situation arose. Some have questioned whether the eFP is substantial enough to signal serious Western resolve and deter Russia. NATO could also be gearing up for the wrong kind of fight. Deni argues that an “unambiguous invasion of allied territory remains low,” and by preparing for “what is arguably the least likely form of aggression from Moscow,” NATO leaves itself “far more vulnerable to the Kremlin’s most likely tactics.”\(^{301}\) There also remains the Trump wild card. It cannot be known for sure whether the United States would abide by its Article 5 commitment in such a crisis until it actually arises.

Conclusion


\(^{300}\) *The Secretary General’s Annual Report*, 13-14.

In 2010, one analyst described NATO as an alliance with “a plethora of global missions but without a common vision.” Since announcing its 1991 Strategic Concept, the Alliance has had to rethink and modify its broad mandate. The Strategic Concept noted then that the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact did away with the threat of a full-scale attack, replacing it with “multi-faceted” and “multi-directional” risks that were “hard to predict and assess.” The most recent Strategic Concept lists nuclear proliferation, terrorism, cyber-attacks, disruption in energy supply, and climate change alongside the usual conventional threat. These soaring promises do not match NATO’s actual functions or accomplishments. Transatlantic splintering over Iraq, foot-dragging in Afghanistan, and frustration over burden-sharing all testify to fundamental disagreements within the Alliance over its purpose. Ambiguity and argument over NATO’s post-Cold War strategy ultimately threatened alliance cohesion far more than enlargement could.

Any reflections on defense of the Baltics will reveal, if anything at all, a situation full of unknowns. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are small, dangerously positioned, and hard to defend. Scenarios that envision a full-scale conventional attack presume a determined Russia swiftly overrunning them and putting the onus on NATO to dislodge it in a bloody counteroffensive. It is impossible to know now if, whether, how, or when a Russian attack on the Baltics would take place, much less how NATO would handle it. At no point in its history has NATO had to follow through on the Article 5 mandate to defend against a territorial invasion. If deterrence

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failed, would NATO be an effective warfighting force? What role might the United States play, given the White House’s increasingly contentious status in the institution that it helped to create? It cannot be known now, but only speculated upon with a hefty dose of humility and uncertainty.
Conclusion: What Is to Be Done?

In the preceding chapters, I studied the origins of NATO enlargement, followed by an analysis of its impact on democratic consolidation in post-communist states, relations with Russia, alliance cohesion, and the ability of the United States to credibly defend its allies under Article 5. First, given the political mood in Washington during the 1990s, it is not shocking that NATO enlargement faced a relatively smooth path from “whether” to “when and how.”\(^{306}\) A relatively benign (at times euphoric) foreign policy context ensured that if Washington wanted such a policy, Moscow could not prevent it. At most, it could postpone it—as Washington prudently agreed to do, to the consternation of Capitol Hill. The increasingly polarized nature of beltway politics greased the wheels of NATO enlargement by making it politically costly to slow down, much less back down. Moreover, the decision to enlarge NATO conformed cleanly to the worldview of key decisionmakers in the Clinton administration, including the president himself:

The role of NATO inclusion in post-communist democratic consolidation has been limited. While NATO’s broader political mandate makes it more than a strictly military alliance, it was (and remains) in a poor position to incentivize aspirants to conform to its standards of democratization beyond wielding the “blunt instrument” of threatening to withhold membership.\(^{307}\) Its standards for accession are weaker than that of the EU, in part by design. While the carrot of NATO inclusion did incentivize critical reforms in Polish civil-military relations, it had a limited impact on democratic consolidation beyond this realm, important as civilian control over the military is. Romania’s accession to NATO was spurred far less by any democratic reforms than it was by Bucharest’s geopolitical position and backing of Washington

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\(^{307}\) Jacoby, 120.
in the Global War on Terror. Both cases call into question claims to NATO’s transformative power.

In the third chapter, I examined the events leading up to the breakdown in relations between Russia and the West. The current state of affairs cannot be pinned on NATO expansion, NATO expansion combined with EU expansion and democracy promotion, or Russian domestic politics. One cannot talk about Kiev and Tbilisi without also discussing Kosovo and Iraq—or Moscow, for that matter, as the turbulent Yeltsin years did plenty to undermine Western-oriented foreign policy agendas for the Kremlin. Moreover, notwithstanding the “Boris and Bill” dynamic, the nature of U.S.-Russian relations in the 1990s was not conducive to any long-term reconciliation. Whether over NATO enlargement or intervention in Kosovo, Moscow was negotiating from a position of deep weakness and insecurity. It could change Washington’s calculus only over when, not whether, to enlarge NATO. Elites broadly agreed that enlargement was detrimental to the Russian national interest, though they disagreed over what that national interest was.

While Washington could say time and time again that Russia’s opposition to NATO was built on “old misperceptions” and “outdated fears,” it would not change the fact that those in Moscow who might agree were rapidly losing ground to those least likely to follow Washington’s lead.308 Nor, for that matter, would it foster a sense that Washington took its former adversary’s interests seriously. That Washington could disregard the UN Security Council and act unilaterally in areas where Moscow saw its interests at stake, as it did in Kosovo and Iraq, only worsened the matter. Many in Russia could not and would not accept their country being reduced to a middle power overnight, or even within a decade. The Kremlin’s red lines did

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308 U.S. Congress, The Debate on NATO Enlargement, 10-11.
not cease to be red lines just because Washington could cross them with relative ease. A country’s national interest is not set in stone, but nor is it easily reshaped like wet clay.

As I discussed in chapter four, alliance cohesion has been strained not because of an expanded new NATO, but because of increasingly divergent worldviews and perceptions of threats within the old NATO. The heated infighting leading up to the invasion of Iraq did not spell NATO’s demise, as some feared at the time. It did, however, make clear how at odds NATO’s members—including its founders—were with one another on how the international order should function. The perennial back-and-forth over burden-sharing, whether in Kabul or Brussels, stems partly from the Cold War-era dependency of Europe on the United States for much of its defense. However, the upswing in military spending after the 2014 crisis in Ukraine shows that this asymmetry is also a function of diverging threat perceptions.

While the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States does not negate these trends, it has thrown a wrench in their trajectory. Democratic backsliding within NATO predates the Trump era, as Poland, Hungary, and Turkey have made clear, but could be exacerbated by democratic decline in the United States. As for Russia, as much as Trump might flatter Putin, his administration is in no position to launch any reset. Russian interference in the 2016 elections and the Special Counsel investigation into possible ties between the Russian government and the Trump campaign have compounded the existing downturn to throw Washington and Moscow into a “permanent crisis.”

Meanwhile, Trump’s criticism of NATO allies as free-riders, reticence about Article 5, and comments that the Alliance was “obsolete” have set teeth on edge on both sides of the Atlantic. Two former ambassadors argue that

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310 Tim Hains, “Trump: NATO Is Obsolete And Expensive, "Doesn't Have The Right Countries In It For Terrorism,，“” RealClearPolitics, March 27, 2016.
“NATO’s single greatest challenge is the absence of strong, principled American presidential leadership for the first time in its history.” 311 Even if Trump does not pull the United States out of NATO, his presidency has undoubtedly complicated transatlantic relations and the future of the Alliance.

What does this tell us about the future of NATO expansion? As of writing, NATO’s door is still open. In February 2019, North Macedonia’s inclusion brought NATO its thirtieth state. At the end of 2018, a MAP was approved for Bosnia and Herzegovina, a deeply divided country with a dysfunctional political system. Milorad Dodik, a pro-Russian Bosnian Serb leader and the current chairman of its tripartite presidency, staunchly opposes Bosnian membership. So, too, does Russia. Though it is not clear whether the accession process will go anywhere, the decision to launch it at all is troubling. Neither ethnic cleavages nor Russian opposition appear to have changed Brussels’ calculus enough to reconsider.

The events that have unrolled since 1991 show precisely why Russian opposition should be taken seriously. While developments in Russian domestic politics were largely outside Washington’s control, they were nonetheless Washington’s problem. The Clinton administration tried to square the circle in enlarging NATO without upsetting Russia. Additionally, it failed to recognize the breadth and depth of Russian opposition to Yeltsin and his policies, and did not provide for a post-Yeltsin Russia in its negotiations. Regardless of intentions, these decisions bred resentment that persists to this day, stoked by insecurity in the post-Soviet space and frustration with American unilateralism. For all of the good that NATO inclusion brought to its new members, the costs of Russian alienation in an already turbulent time outweigh and threaten to negate those benefits.

311 Ambassador Douglas Lute and Ambassador Nicholas Burns, NATO at Seventy: An Alliance in Crisis (Cambridge: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, February 2019), 2.
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