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Between East & West: NATO Enlargement & the Geopolitics of the Ukraine Crisis

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EDWARD W. WALKER, APR 13 2015

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With the breakup of the Soviet Union on 31 December 1991, the United States and its Western allies faced a critical challenge: building a post-Cold War security architecture for Europe that would prevent conflict and institutionalise cooperation in what former Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev had called 'our common Europe home.' In particular, a decision had to be made about what to do with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the purpose of which had been to defend Western Europe from invasion from a Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact that no longer existed.

The question of NATO's post-Cold War role had already come up in 1990 during negotiations between Western and Soviet officials over German reunification. Initially, Moscow insisted that a unified Germany within NATO was unacceptable. When it became clear that Western governments would not accept, and Moscow could not block a unified Germany within the Alliance, Moscow pushed for guarantees that NATO forces would not move eastward into the territory of the former German Democratic Republic.

As it turned out, negotiations over reunification were effectively mooted by the rapid collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and growing political and economic turmoil in the USSR. Unification took place with Germany as a NATO member and without formal restrictions on NATO's conventional or nuclear force dispositions on German territory (Sarotte, 2014a; Sarotte, 2014b; Shifrinson, 2014). The Alliance also made clear at its July 1990 London Summit that it had no intention of dissolving itself even if Soviet troops pulled out of Central Europe (NATO London Summit Declaration, 1990). The consensus in Western capitals was that NATO, and America's military presence in Europe, should remain the cornerstone of Western security.

Nonetheless, Washington and its allies tried to accommodate Moscow's security concerns by advocating new arms control measures that would entail deep cuts in conventional and nuclear forces in Europe. They also called for the strengthening of the conflict prevention and cooperation functions of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, since renamed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE), which included all NATO and former Warsaw Pact countries as members. Finally, they indicated that NATO would gradually become a political rather than military organisation, and that it would commit to regular consultations with Soviet officials on security and political matters. To that end, a North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) was established on 20 December 1991, with participation by all NATO and former Warsaw Pact member-states, including (eventually) all 15 of the Soviet successor states.

That was more or less where matters stood when the Soviet Union dissolved at the end of 1991. As the USSR's legal

successor, Russia faced a host of internal problems, including a collapsing economy that diverted attention from national security concerns and increased Moscow's already considerable need for Western financial assistance. Nevertheless, Russian foreign policy officials, the bulk of whom had served as Soviet officials, continued to suggest that NATO be disbanded, but if not, that it should at least refrain from moving forces further east or engaging in 'out of area' operations in Europe without Russian permission, notably in the Balkans, which by then was descending into violence.

The extent to which NATO was a sore point for the new Russian leadership was highlighted at the end of December, when Russia's pro-Western foreign minister, Andrey Kozyrev, made a startling speech at a CSCE meeting in Stockholm that The New York Times' William Safire would characterise as a 'peek at Cold War 2' (Safire, 1994). Pretending to be an anti-Western successor to himself, Kozyrev complained, inter alia, about,

the strategies of NATO and the WEU [the West European Union, a now defunct military arm of the European Community – EWW], which are drawing up plans to strengthen their military presence in the Baltic and other regions of the territory of the former Soviet Union and to interfere in Bosnia and the internal affairs of Yugoslavia (Rotfield, 2009).

As Kozyrev later explained, his mock speech was intended as a warning about what might happen should the West fail to help Russia economically, isolate it politically, or contain it militarily.

In fact, Russian suggestions for a new European security's architecture based on the Europe-wide CSCE/OSCE received little consideration in the West at the time, positive or negative. In part, the reason was that Western officials were preoccupied with other problems, notably the violent unravelling of Yugoslavia. But Western officials also assumed that Russia was, and would remain, too weak to become a serious security problem for the foreseeable future, and that as a result its security concerns could be safely ignored.

Another critical decision was made by Western governments in this period that would have important, and unforeseen, consequences. On 7 February 1992, just a few weeks after the Soviet dissolution, the European Community (EC) signed the so-called Maastricht Treaty, which entailed a commitment to 'deepening' the organisation and transforming it into what would become the European Union (EU). Among other measures, the treaty would lead to the establishment of a common currency, the Euro, in January 1999.

This commitment to deepening came, to no small degree, at the expense of 'widening.' In part, this was because deepening raised the bar for accession, but it was also because deepening used up political capital that might otherwise have been spent on widening. As the historian John Lewis Gaddis would put it in a 1998 article, the EU's 'single-minded push to achieve a single currency among its existing members' meant that it was 'left to NATO to reintegrate and stabilise Europe as a whole, which is roughly the equivalent of using a monkey wrench to repair a computer' (Gaddis, 1998, p. 147). A decade later, design flaws with the Euro would also make Europe's Great Recession all the worse and threaten to undo the entire European project.

It was not until mid-1993, however, that the question of NATO enlargement began to be seriously discussed in the West. The issue was raised by Presidents Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic and Arpad Goncz of Hungary, who, on a visit to Washington in April 1993, informed US President Bill Clinton that their countries wished to join NATO as soon as possible. Other Central European governments, notably Warsaw, followed suit. Their reasoning was clear. As Lennart Meri, the Estonian president, told one of Clinton's senior foreign policy advisors, 'the only way to keep Russian troops from reoccupying his country when Yeltsin gave way to a more traditional Russian leader was for Estonia to be in NATO and protected by the American nuclear umbrella' (Talbott, 2002, p. 94).

Russian President Boris Yeltsin was preoccupied at the time by an intensifying struggle with oppositionists in the Russian parliament, and initially he seemed to take the possibility of NATO enlargement in stride. On a trip to Poland in August, he indicated that he 'understood' Warsaw's desire to join NATO, and he would make similar statements on trips to Prague and Bratislava. As it turned out, this would be the only moment when the Kremlin expressed anything but firm opposition to enlargement.

Yeltsin's position changed after the violent showdown with the opposition on 21 September 1993. Reportedly under pressure from the Russian military, whose support had been critical to Yeltsin in his victory over his opponents, Yeltsin wrote to several Western leaders, including Clinton, that his earlier 'understanding' of NATO expansion was conditional on Russia having a central role in the new European security system. While he had indicated previously that Russia might be willing to join the Alliance at some point, his government would not accept membership for Poland or other East European countries without simultaneous admission for Russia.

Yeltsin's letter caused considerable debate within the Clinton administration, and it ultimately convinced the White House to postpone offering membership to particular countries (Talbott, 2002). Instead, Washington proposed that NATO adopt a 'Partnership for Peace' (PfP) programme for the former communist countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet successor states. PfP members would carry out joint military exercises with NATO, work on 'interoperability' with NATO equipment and procedures, participate in joint peacekeeping and humanitarian operations, and consult with NATO in the event of security threats. The White House hoped that the PfP would mollify Russia, which would be encouraged to join, but it also described the program as a kind of 'halfway house' for eventual membership and enlargement down the road (Chollet and Goldgeier, 2008). And it was clear, given that the demand for enlargement was driven by fears of a resurgent Russia that NATO membership was off the table for Moscow.

Not surprisingly, PfP was received coldly by most Central European governments, which continued to push for full and rapid accession. This was particularly true after a far-right nationalist party, Vladimir Zhirinovsky's LDPR, won an unexpected 17% of the party list vote in Russian parliamentary elections on 12 December 1993. The strong performance by Russian nationalists raised new alarms in Poland, the Baltic states, and elsewhere about Russian efforts to carve out a sphere of influence not just on the territory of the former Soviet Union – what Russians were calling 'the Near Abroad' – but in Central Europe as well.

Nonetheless, the PfP was approved at NATO's Brussels Summit in January 1994. The Alliance also made clear that it expected to take in new members on its eastern borders in the reasonably near future, as stated in its Final Declaration:

We expect and would welcome NATO expansion that would reach to democratic states to our East, as part of an evolutionary process, taking into account political and security developments in the whole of Europe (NATO Brussels Summit Declaration, 1994).

By then, NATO enlargement had become an important partisan issue in Washington, with Republicans pushing the White House to offer membership to Central European countries in short order. Leading Republicans also argued that enlargement was needed to protect democratic governments in Central Europe from Russia intimidation and military pressure. The White House, they asserted, was adopting a 'Russia first' policy that mistakenly assumed that 'as went Russia, so went the rest of Eurasia.' Accommodating Moscow on security matters, they argued, would do nothing to keep Russia from 'backsliding' on democracy and engaging in neo-imperialist policies in former Soviet space and East-Central Europe.

Pressure on the administration to come up with a firm plan for enlargement intensified in the lead up to the November 1994 Congressional elections. Newt Gingrich, soon to be Speaker of a Republican-controlled House, included a demand in his 'Contract for America' that a first round of enlargement take place no later than 1999. Of particular concern to the administration was the possibility that Republican criticism of its 'Russia first' policy would undermine support for Democrats among Central European heritage voters, particularly Polish-Americans, in important swing states in the mid-West.

As a result, Clinton stated repeatedly over the course of 1994 that he expected PfP to lead eventually to full membership for countries that met NATO's criteria as democratic, law-governed states with institutionalised civilian control of the military. He also argued that the PfP was open to all former Warsaw Pact countries, including Russia, and that as a result, enlargement would neither isolate Moscow nor lead to a new division of Europe. Why Russian participation in the PfP programme but enlargement for post-communist countries other than Russia would be

acceptable to Moscow was never made clear.

At any rate, by the end of 1994, the Clinton administration had effectively committed to NATO enlargement, even if it left open the timing and extent of the process (Goldgeier, 1999). Pressured by post-communist countries in Central Europe that were worried about Russian aggression down the road, concerned about a loss of political support from Central European heritage voters, but hoping at the same time not to provoke Russia unduly, it settled on PfP and delayed enlargement as the least-worst option. The fact that domestic political considerations were an important factor in driving the most important strategic policy for the United States after the collapse of the Soviet Union was widely recognised at the time.

As it turned out, the Democrats lost control of both houses of Congress in the November elections regardless, and the PfP failed to placate Moscow. The intensity of Russian opposition to enlargement was made clear by Yeltsin in September 1995, when he asserted that it 'will mean a conflagration of war throughout Europe for sure' (Erlanger, 1995). These objections only intensified after the pro-Western Kozyrev was replaced by the 'realist' and former FSB director Evgeny Primakov as Russian Foreign Minister in January 1996.

NATO moved ahead with its enlargement plans nonetheless. In September 1995, it issued an Enlargement Study laying out criteria for accession. Applicant countries were invited to start a dialogue on accession early the next year, and the Alliance confirmed that it would announce its decision on the first round of accession countries at its July 1997 summit. As it turned out, the first round was limited to Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, which joined in early 1999. Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined in March 2004, and Albania and Croatia did so in April 2009, bringing the total to 28 member states today.

It is important to emphasise that enlargement was opposed, in many instances passionately, by many influential American foreign policy experts, Democrats and Republicans alike (Kupchan, 1994; Ikle, 1996; Rosner, 1996; Mandelbaum, 1996; Kline, 1997; Lieven, 1997; Kennan, 1998; Gaddis, 1998; Waltz, 1998). Most notably, more than 40 influential foreign policy experts, including former US Senators from both sides of the aisle, former ambassadors, former cabinet officials, and academics who were not known as particularly pro-Russian or dovish, wrote an open letter to President Clinton dated 26 June 1997, which began as follows:

We, the undersigned, believe that the current US-led effort to expand NATO, the focus of the recent Helsinki and Paris Summits, is a policy error of historic proportions. We believe that NATO expansion will decrease allied security and unsettle European stability' (Burton et al., 1997). It went on to list a host of reasons, all of which were by then familiar to anyone following the controversy, why NATO expansion was a mistake of 'historic proportions.'

Moscow's continuing objections to enlargement, along with widespread domestic criticism of the policy establishment, led the Clinton administration to make another effort to arrive at an institutional arrangement that would square the enlargement circle. On 27 May 1997, NATO and Russia signed the Founding Act of the Russia-NATO Permanent Joint Council. Among other provisions, the Act called on the signatories to support the conflict prevention efforts of the CSCE and respect the UN Security Council's sole right to authorise the use of force against a sovereign member state. In a key passage on NATO force dispositions, it also stated that NATO agreed that,

in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces (Russia-NATO Permanent Council Founding Act, 1997).

NATO would interpret this to mean that it could send 'rotational' forces to the territory of new member states but not establish permanent bases there 'in the current and foreseeable security environment.' Again, the hope was that the Council would allow enlargement to proceed with Moscow's acquiescence.

Initially, there were indications from Moscow that it might go along with a first round of enlargement if the Council gave Russia real discretion over NATO's force dispositions and out-of-area operations (Simes, 1998). That this was

not going to be the case was soon made clear by NATO's bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999. Washington and its allies pressed the UN Security Council to authorise NATO to use force to prevent what Western governments considered the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Albanians by Serbian forces. When China and Russia vetoed the resolution, NATO proceeded regardless, on the grounds that it was exercising its right of collective self-defence, despite the fact that it was clearly engaging in an out-of-area operation. For Russia, NATO's bombing campaign without UNSC authorisation made clear that the Alliance had no intention of allowing Russia a meaningful veto over NATO operations. For Western governments, the episode suggested that Russia had no interest in a peaceful, democratic, and stable Europe.

NATO was again a critical factor in the next major crisis in Russia's relations with the West, the August 2008 Russo-Georgia war. In late 2007, it became clear that the George W. Bush administration was pressing its allies to offer Membership Action Plans (MAPs) to Georgia and Ukraine at NATO's April 2008 Bucharest Summit. The plan was rejected by key NATO members, including France and Germany, among other reasons because they were aware that doing so might well cross a red line for the Kremlin (Lieven, 2008). But the Bush administration did manage to convince its allies to accept a compromise whereby MAPs would be offered to Ukraine and Georgia in the future. As the summit's concluding declaration made clear, that day might well come soon:

NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO… Therefore we will now begin a period of intensive engagement with both at a high political level to address the questions still outstanding pertaining to their MAP applications (NATO Bucharest Summit Final Declaration, 2004).

Not surprisingly, Moscow concluded that NATO membership for Georgia or Ukraine might well happen in the not-so-distant future.

The Bucharest Summit came on the heels of another event that the Kremlin considered a serious and gratuitous provocation. With encouragement from the United States and many of its European allies, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia on 17 February 2008. Washington, London, and Paris announced they were affording Kosovo diplomatic recognition the next day, and most European countries, including Germany, followed suit over the course of the next month.

This was the first and only time that United States and its allies offered recognition to a government that was seceding unilaterally from a UN member state. The Western argument about recognising the successor states of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia had been that these three federations dissolved into their constituent units, not that any one of the latter was seceding from a surviving rump state (Walker, 2004). That, however, was clearly not the case with what the State Department by then was referring to as 'the Former Republic of Yugoslavia,' because rump Serbia was not a formal federation and Kosovo had never had equal status with Serbia proper.

As Serbia's traditional patron, Russia reacted sharply to Western recognition of Kosovo's independence. It made clear that it would use its Security Council veto to block UN membership for the region, and it argued that recognising Kosovo would serve as a destabilising precedent. To emphasise the latter point, it indicated that it might well follow the Western lead and recognise the independence of some or all of the breakaway regions in its neighbourhood – Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

After more than eight years of robust economic growth and the consolidation of Russian President Vladimir Putin's 'power vertical,' the Kremlin was signalling that its security concerns and political interests, particularly but not only in post-Soviet space, could no longer be ignored. Accordingly, 2008 witnessed a ratcheting up of Russian pressure on Georgia. Among other measures, Moscow increased military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, intensified its already harsh criticism of the Georgian government, and carried out large-scale military exercises along its border with Georgia. As the summer progressed, artillery exchanges and small-scale skirmishes escalated along the line of control separating South Ossetian and Abkhazian forces from Georgian troops. Despite multiple warnings against using military force against South Ossetia or Abkhazia from Western officials, the Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, finally took the bait and ordered his military into South Ossetia in August. The result was a Russian

invasion and a decisive military defeat for Georgia, which ended any hope that Tbilisi had of reasserting its sovereignty in Abkhazia or South Ossetia for the foreseeable future.

The August 2009 Russo-Georgia War marked the low point in Russian relations with the West in the post-Cold War era. A number of factors, including the election of Barack Obama as US president and his administration's commitment to a 'reset' with Moscow, contributed to a reduction of tensions over the next several years, but little was done to address the underlying cause of those tensions, which was a security system for Europe that Russia rejected. The result was an even worse crisis at the end of 2013.

The immediate trigger for the Ukraine crisis was not, however, NATO enlargement. Rather, it was an EU plan to offer association agreements, coupled with so-called Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements, to Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine at its Vilnius Summit in late November 2013. Ukraine was politically unstable, highly corrupt even by the standards of the region, and in dire economic straits at the time, and as a result, European government and EU officials assumed that Moscow realised that EU membership for Ukraine was a very distant prospect at best. This was particularly true because the EU was itself in serious trouble, thanks to the 2008 global financial crisis, design flaws with the Euro, and the rise of Eurosceptic parties. The last thing the EU needed at the time was a larger, poorer, and more economically distressed Greece on its hands.

The Kremlin, however, viewed EU accession very differently. From its perspective, association agreements for Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine were direct challenges to Putin's principal geopolitical objective in his third term as president, which was the establishment of a 'Eurasian Union' of former Soviet republics, one that would institutionalise Russia's sphere of influence in post-Soviet space. This would be accomplished by creating, and then deepening and widening, a Eurasian Economic Union that, like the European Community before, would lead eventually to a full-blown economic-political union. The Eurasian Union, along with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), would become a Russian-dominated equivalent of the EU and NATO. It would also become one pole in what Russian officials described, correctly, as an increasingly multipolar world.

Central to this project – not only for security, but also for economic and cultural reasons – was Ukraine. Particularly galling to the Kremlin was the EU's insistence that signing the association agreement would preclude Kiev from joining the Eurasian Economic Union. It also viewed EU accession as an irrevocable step toward full-blown incorporation into the Western institutional order and a backdoor path to eventual NATO accession.

As a result, Moscow responded by using all means at its disposal short of war to put pressure on Armenia, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine to reject EU membership. Russia's leverage was varied but powerful, including offers of financial assistance, threats of economic reprisals, below market prices for natural gas, and political pressure, some open and some covert. Its task was made easier when financial tightening by the US Federal Reserve Bank – so-called tapering – caused a spike in interest rates on emerging market debt, including Ukraine's. The rate spike turned what was an already serious economic slowdown in Ukraine into a debt-servicing crisis over the summer of 2014 (Steil, 2014).

The first country to change course on EU accession was Armenia, which announced in early September 2013 that it was no longer interested and would join the Eurasian Economic Union. For whatever reason, the Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, held out, perhaps because he hoped to get the best economic deal possible from Russia or the EU. Nevertheless, in the end Kiev followed Armenia and announced that it was accepting a generous aid package from Russia and would not sign the EU association agreement.

The result was the Euromaidan uprising in Kiev, violence on the streets of Kiev, the mobilisation of anti-Maidan forces in eastern and southern Ukraine, the fall of the government, and the flight of Yanukovich, who was by then hated across Ukraine, to Moscow. With a government taking power in Kiev that would be hostile to Moscow, that would seek to join the EU and reject membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, and that might press to join NATO at some point, the Kremlin reacted by putting into place what were doubtless long-standing contingency plans for the occupation of Crimea and the destabilisation of Ukraine's already volatile eastern and southern regions.

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There can be no doubt that NATO enlargement has brought many benefits to its new members. It has helped integrate former Warsaw Pact members into Europe, reduced the risk of interstate conflict among the former communist countries of Central Europe, and allowed new member-states to spend less on security while modernising their defence forces. Above all, it has meant that the small and militarily vulnerable Baltic states can be reasonably confident that NATO membership will deter Russia from intimidating, or invading, their countries in the current standoff between Russia and NATO.

That said, it is also true that NATO expansion has contributed to – indeed, one can reasonably argue that it has been the principal cause of – a dangerous geopolitical struggle for influence in the countries to Russia's West and South, above all Ukraine. The Russian political elite is virtually unanimous in viewing NATO as Russia's most serious security threat and a direct challenge to its interests as a Great Power. It likewise views enlargement as an unjust and unnecessary incursion into Russia's rightful sphere of influence, and EU expansion and democracy promotion as stalking horses for NATO and Western hegemony in post-Soviet space.

One cannot know with confidence what would have happened had the Clinton administration rejected NATO expansion in favour of a concerted effort to build a European security architecture that included, rather than excluded, Russia. The obvious mechanism for doing so was the CSCE/OCSE. As many Western foreign policy experts advocated at the time, NATO could have remained in place, with a reunited Germany as a member, and it could have assisted with the transformation of post-Communist countries through a PfP-type program. At the same time, Western governments could have worked with Russia to transform the OSCE/CSCE into an authoritative organisation overseeing dispositions, arms control measures, monitoring missions, and armed peacekeeping operations. Above all, the West could have postponed enlargement unless and until a genuine security threat to Central Europe emerged from Russia.

As is turned out, NATO enlargement eventually ran up against the countervailing power of a resurgent Russia with a preponderance of hard power along its borders. It did so first in Georgia in 2008, and it did so again in Ukraine in 2014.

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