

NATO and Russia: A Defensive Expansion?

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JULIAN IZZO, JAN 31 2022

NATO should have died with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. Instead, it is an unlikely institutional success story, now in its 72nd year of life, that adapted its role after its principal threat disappeared. However, despite a move towards a cooperative model with Russia in the early 1990s, it instead contributed to heightened tensions by destabilising the relationship between the two parties. This essay traces the expansion process through memos, conversations, and academic debates of the period to show that despite its opposition to eastwards expansion, Russia made numerous concessions on the question and, despite nominally shifting to a more political role after the end of the Cold War, NATO continued to act as a realist military institution seeking zero-sum gains. Further, by focussing on realist strategic outcomes rather than their political context, it was not only expansion itself that damaged NATO's relationship with Russia, but how it was conducted: the United States did not accord due importance to the perspective of its counterpart and ignored the political implications of how the expansion process unfolded. If expansion had been more politically aware and tactful, tensions between Russia and the West may have been tempered.

NATO's Post-Cold War Reorientation

In *The Origins of Alliances* (1986), realist scholar Stephen M. Walt used traditional balance of power theory, or "the belief that states form alliances in order to prevent stronger powers from dominating them,"[1] to examine the changing nature of alliances post-World War II. The preface to the 1987 edition contained considerations formed in the intervening year as the Cold War seemed destined to draw to a close: he accurately predicted an internally divided, weakened Soviet Union and a unified Germany bordering an independent Eastern Europe. However, his predictions on the future of NATO were wholly inaccurate, despite military alliances being the central focus of his book: "the optimistic rhetoric about maintaining the 'Atlantic Community' should be viewed with some skepticism;" no one would want the continued presence of the United States in Europe.[2] Before asking whether the expansion was a mistake, then, it is also necessary to examine why it survived at all.

In the early 1990s, the Alliance stated an intention to move from a military to a more political and economic role. Two NATO documents illustrate this shift in focus: the 6 July 1990 London Declaration and the 7 November 1991 New Strategic Concept. The London Declaration stated that NATO needed to be "even more an agent of change;"[3] thus, the decision was made "to enhance the political component (...) as provided for by Article 2 of our Treaty." [4] Article 2 of the founding document had envisioned a mode through which collective security and friendly relations would be promoted by "strengthening their free institutions (...) and by promoting conditions of stability and well-being." [5] NATO states adopted its New Strategic Concept on 7 November 1991. Future risks were individuated in "instabilities that may arise from the serious economic, social and political difficulties." [6]

An orientation away from militarism is also borne out by the contemporary communications both between NATO members, as well as with Soviet leadership. In February 1990, the U.S. Embassy in Bonn informed the State Department of a speech by German Foreign Minister Genscher of a future architecture of Europe where alliances would assume "more of a political than a military role," [7] and the CSCE (later OSCE) would take a major role through the political aims in a "partnership of stability." [8] In May of 1990, US Secretary of State James Baker reported to President Bush about his meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, informing him of aims to readapt NATO "politically and militarily, and to develop CSCE to reassure Shevardnadze that the process would not

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yield winners and losers,”[9] which was welcomed by his counterpart.[10] In a meeting between Baker and Gorbachev, the Soviet statesman warned that a unified Germany within NATO would “create a serious shift in the correlation of forces, the entire strategic balance.”[11] At this point, it seems that the interlocutors were largely in alignment, but a political misplay might jeopardise the new aims and strategy that NATO was formulating during the period.

The Promise (?)

By shifting towards a political, cooperative mode of engagement, NATO was ostensibly transitioning away from a zero-sum military alliance. However, this shift was jeopardised at birth due to what could be seen as the original sin in NATO-Russia relations: the question whether Western leaders promised not to expand eastwards.

In a May 1990 meeting, Baker met with Gorbachev to discuss the process of German unification. Baker was in full understanding of the importance of the NATO question, stating that he knew that “it is important to have guarantees that if the United States keeps its presence in Germany within the framework of NATO, not an inch of NATO’s present military jurisdiction will spread in an eastern direction.”[12] The discussion was relayed to West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, with Baker stating Gorbachev’s position “‘Certainly any extension of the zone of NATO would be unacceptable.’”[13] The ‘win’ in these talks was Gorbachev agreeing that US troops would remain in Europe in a unified Germany. For his part, Kohl was ecstatic about this development, and himself communicated to Gorbachev that he did not believe NATO should expand eastward.[14]

In March 1991, the British ambassador wrote in his diary about a meeting between Gorbachev, Soviet General Yazoand, and British Prime Minister John Major. The General explained his worries about eastern European states joining NATO, and the British PM “assure[d] him that nothing of the sort will happen.”[15] Russian Supreme Soviet officials then travelled to Brussels to meet with NATO Secretary-General Woerner in July 1991. They wrote back to Russian President Yeltsin, stating that “expanding NATO to [include] new members, as we emphasized, would be seen negatively in the USSR and the RSFSR. Our statements were met with understanding by our interlocutors.”[16] The Secretary-General of NATO, according to them, “stressed that the NATO Council and he are against the expansion of NATO (13 out of 16 NATO members support this point of view).”[17] At the eve of the New Strategic Concept, then, Russian officials were of the belief that their concerns had been well-accepted, demilitarisation of NATO was occurring, and disagreements would be conducted politically. To Russian eyes, NATO did not intend to expand eastward: as stated by former CIA Director Robert Gates, “Gorbachev and others were led to believe that wouldn’t happen.”[18] Given these assurances, while a future expansion would not be in violation of law, it would be a breach of trust that could sour NATO-Russia relations.

The Clinton Administration

With the change of administration, some Clinton officials began to petition strongly for NATO expansion. A September 1993 memo for Secretary of State Warren made clear that although the European Community (EC) and CSCE were “better positioned to promote democracy and cooperation in Europe (...) neither is today capable of fulfilling that role,”[19] and thus “a more fundamental transformation would be for NATO now to commit to expansion.”[20] For the memo’s writers, rather than a new NATO direction, “The challenge for NATO over the next generation – containing and co-opting Russian power – is similar to one of NATO’s core purposes in the last generation.”[21] The memo went as far as proposing a four-stage timeline for expansion to most of Eastern Europe while stating that “this need not be seen as a threat to Moscow.”[22] Elements within the Clinton administration seemed reticent to abandon Cold-War thinking of containment, yet seemed unable or unwilling to understand how this would appear to Moscow.

Problems of perspective resurfaced in 1995 in a meeting between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin. Yeltsin stated, “How do you think it looks to us if one bloc continues to exist while the Warsaw Pact has been abolished? It’s a new form of encirclement if the one surviving Cold War bloc expands right up to the borders of Russia.”[23] Clinton reassured that Russia would be included through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) and continuing NATO-Russia dialogue, but that “NATO is open to admitting new members.”[24] Again, Yeltsin repeated the political implications:

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“What is involved here besides a strategic issue is that there’s an overlay of political problems (...) one false move now could ruin everything. So please postpone this issue;”[25] Clinton persisted: “don’t ask us to slow down (...) or we’ll just have to keep saying no.”[26] This conversation is illustrative of the differences between the United States, Russia, and NATO. The United States prioritised strategic gains of expansion while ignoring the optics of the move, even though Yeltsin had gone as far as accepting a delayed expansion. This raises the possibility that if greater political tact had been adopted, NATO expansion could have been achieved without antagonising Russia if Yeltsin had been afforded the time to manage the domestic fallout.

A subsequent memorandum by National Security Advisor Anthony Lake outlined European attitudes toward NATO expansion. Allies saw “NATO and EU enlargement as part of the same general process of integration (indeed, the two institutions are linked.)”[27] This approach did produce the intended gains of the New Strategic Concept, as joining NATO often paved the way to EU membership. However, it also contributes to ongoing suspicions by confounding moves towards liberal democracy with anti-Russian military aims. Lake’s memorandum continued, “only a handful of allies (...) are serious about seeing the first new NATO members admitted during this decade,”[28] as they were concerned about the impacts such a speedy enlargement might have on Moscow. The proposal was made to enlist allies to change “outdated Russian views of NATO.”[29] After the first round of expansion in 1997, Russia stated that any further enlargement – particularly in the Baltic States – would be “taken as an intolerable affront to Russia;”[30] they joined in 2004. NATO’s intervention in Kosovo and airstrikes on Yugoslavia in 1999 confirmed Russia’s realist framing of the Alliance, leading it to suspend its participation in PfP, withdraw its representative from Brussels, and end talks on establishing a NATO mission in Moscow. [31]

Imbalance

Following the first round of NATO expansion, academics debated the effects it would have in the region. In 1998’s January issue of the *Review of International Studies*, Michael McGwire and Christopher Ball wrote back-to-back articles arguing each side of the question. Against expansion, McGwire made a crucial point: “While paying lip service to the inclusive concept of *cooperative security*, [NATO] focused in practice on the exclusionary concept of security as a *defence against an external threat*.”[32] This had antagonised Russia, with potential future downsides: “security in Europe will depend largely on how successful the West is in managing its relationship with Russia.”[33] In other words, the liberal-institutionalist rhetoric masked what instead remained a realist, zero-sum competitive advantage model. Even the pro-expansion Ball conceded that “American academics have been almost unanimous in opposing NATO expansion.”[34] However, he proposed that “NATO expansion can provide greater security to all European states, provided that the proper balance among deterrence, reassurance, and diplomatic linkage is maintained.”[35]

In its strategies of military cooperation, peace in Europe, expanding democracy, and paving the way for states to join the EU, NATO largely succeeded. However, NATO confounded the message of friendly intentions repeated by the organisation, U.S. President Clinton, and member states by depicting Russia as a continuing potential threat: in the Clinton administration’s responses to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee criticism, it stated that “the alliance must be prepared for other contingencies, including the possibility that Russia could abandon democracy and return to the threatening behaviour of the Soviet period.”[36] This conflicted directly and publicly with the reassurances of security cooperation the Clinton administration had offered to Yeltsin.

NATO, then, appeared to be hedging its bets and never wholly committed to a stable relationship with Russia. Nevertheless, Putin did not begin his tenure as hostile to Western military interests: he was the first head of state to call President Bush after 9-11 and consented to the US using Central Asia as a base for the war in Afghanistan. This attitude had radically changed by 2007 when he delivered a speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy. In his address, Putin spoke directly about the implications to Russia of NATO enlargement:

I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact?[37]

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This returns to the 'original sin' question and, as we have seen, claims of a supposed NATO oppositional stance towards Russia are not wholly unfounded. Sincere or not, NATO's actions provide Putin with rhetorical ammo, domestic justification to escalate tensions, and gain him the support of other states on the receiving end of real or perceived Western aggression. In his defence of NATO enlargement, Ball had stated that "an expanded NATO's value rests on its ability to *reassure* its new members, Russia, and other countries in the region that they are secure from intimidation and attack from each other."^[38] Considering Putin's speech, clearly, this reassurance was not communicated successfully. In 2008, following US deployment of missile defence systems in Poland and the Czech Republic, mutual threats were thrown, multilateral agreements stalled, and while proposing a binding treaty to France and Germany on European security, Russia threatened to target Ukraine and stir nationalism in Crimea, while cutting its energy supplies.^[39] Georgia was also at the receiving end of energy supply cuts, and Putin used Tbilisi's attempt to reassert control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia to invade the country.^[40] While NATO expansion in no way justifies the use of force on third parties, as this essay has shown, all parties knew that the enlargement of the Alliance risked provoking Russia if it was not inclusive, and these concerns were minimised from the Clinton administration onwards. NATO states risk heightening tensions by not engaging with the Russian perspective on expansion, and policymakers must have a historical understanding of the question to conduct effective diplomacy as flash points arise: recent developments in Ukraine and Russian fears of it joining NATO cannot be understood without this history.

Conclusion

An exclusive NATO expansion created lopsided gains, violating the strategic balance between Russia and the West. Nonetheless, if NATO aimed to survive as an alliance, it has been a spectacular success: in theory, it should not have survived the Cold War, and there is no indication that it will collapse any time soon. The United States still has a military presence in Europe and, incidental or not, there has been no intra-NATO conflict, and European states have deepened political ties. The EU has solidified the New Strategic Concept goals of political and economic cooperation: NATO membership has often laid the foundations for accession to the EU. Where NATO did not succeed was in normalising West-Russia relations, and this remains a threat to European security. If indeed NATO was searching for cooperation and a new relationship with Russia, it should have been invited into the economic fold and assisted in its democratic path, as post-World War II West Germany was with the Marshall Plan. Yeltsin had been enthusiastic about security cooperation through the PfP, OCSE, and made repeated concessions to the United States: Russia "expected NATO somehow to atrophy and championed the emergence of a new European security structure (...) and declared their identification and wish to align with the West."^[41] Despite these displays of openness, Russia was not socialised as a like-minded partner, and Western reassurances were muddled by oppositional rhetoric and exclusive security aims.

This oppositional stance, however, might also have been an additional success for NATO as an institution: returning to Walt's *The Origins of Alliances*, Walt had stated that "only a resurgence of the Soviet threat is likely to preserve NATO in anything like its present form."^[42] Renewed tensions with Russia revive and strengthen its purpose and, by failing to normalise relations, make membership and NATO's expansion policy more appealing than it was three decades ago. But will this make Europe more secure?

Notes

[1] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 18.

[2] Ibid, vii.

[3] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "The London Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance (6 July 1990)," CVCE (University of Luxembourg), accessed October 28, 2021, https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/the_london_declaration_on_a_transformed_north_atlantic_alliance_6_july_1990-en-9c5fa86b-12a0-4f59-ad90-e69503ef6036.html.

[4] Ibid.

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[5] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "The North Atlantic Treaty (1949)," NATO, April 1, 2009, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.

[6] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "The Alliance's New Strategic Concept (1991)," NATO, August 26, 2010, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23847.htm.

[7] "U.S. Embassy Bonn Confidential Cable to Secretary of State on the speech of the German Foreign Minister: Genscher Outlines His Vision of a New European Architecture," February 1, 1990, Bonn. *U.S. Department of State, FOIA Reading Room*, Case F-2015 10829. Available at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16112-document-01-u-s-embassy-bonn-confidential-cable>

[8] "Bonn Confidential Cable," *U.S. Department of State*.

[9] "James A. Baker III, Memorandum for the President, 'My meeting with Shevardnadze,'" May 4, 1990. George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, NSC Scowcroft Files, Box 91126, Folder 'Gorbachev (Dobrynin) Sensitive 1989 – June 1990 [3]'. Available via *National Security Archive*: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16131-document-17-james-baker-iii-memorandum>, 3.

[10] *Ibid.*, 4.

[11] "Record of conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and James Baker in Moscow," May 18, 1990. Gorbachev Foundation Archive, Fond 1, Opis 1. Available via *National Security Archive*: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16132-document-18-record-conversation-between>,

[12] *Ibid.*, 5.

[13] "Letter from James Baker to Helmut Kohl," February 10, 1990. *Deutsche Einheit Sonderedition und den Akten des Bundeskanzleramtes 1989/90*, eds. Hanns Jurgen Kusters and Daniel Hofmann (Munich: R. Odenbourg Verlag, 1998), pp. 793-794. Available via *National Security Archive*: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16119-document-08-letter-james-baker-helmut-kohl>, 794/

[14] "Memorandum of conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl," February 10, 1990. *Mikhail Gorbachev i germanskii vopros*, edited by Alexander Galkin and Anatoly Chernyaev, (Moscow: Ves Mir, 2006). Available via *National Security Archive*: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16120-document-09-memorandum-conversation-between>.

[15] "Ambassador Rodric Braithwaite diary," March 5, 1991. Rodric Braithwaite personal diary. Available via *National Security Archive*: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16142-document-28-ambassador-rodric-braithwaite-diary>, 3.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*, 2.

[18] "NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard," National Security Archive (The George Washington University), accessed November 2, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>.

[19] "Strategy for NATO's Expansion and Transformation," September 7, 1993. U.S. Department of State. Date/Case ID: 07 JUL 2004 199904515. Available via *National Security Archive*: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16374-document-02-strategy-nato-s-expansion-and>, 3.

[20] *Ibid.*

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[21] Ibid., 7.

[22] Ibid., 11.

[23] "Summary Report on one-on-one Meeting Between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin," May 10, 1995. 'Declassified Documents Concerning Russian President Boris Yeltsin,' William J. Clinton Presidential Library & Museum, Mandatory Declassification Review Case Number 2015-0782-M-1. Available via *Wilson Center Digital Archive*: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/209785>, 6.

[24] Ibid., 8.

[25] Ibid., 9.

[26] Ibid., 10.

[27] "Memorandum for the President [William J. Clinton] From Anthony Lake, 'European Attitudes Toward NATO Enlargement,'" July 17, 1995. Available via *Wilson Center Digital Archive*: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/209781>, 1.

[28] Ibid., 2.

[29] Ibid., 2.

[30] Luca Ratti, "Back to the Future?," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 64, no. 2 (2009), 402.

[31] Ibid., 402-403.

[32] Ibid, 27.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Christopher L. Ball, "Nattering NATO Negativism? Reasons Why Expansion May Be a Good Thing," *Review of International Studies* 24, no. 1 (January 1998): pp. 43-67, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210598000436>, 43.

[35] Ibid., 67.

[36] Arms Control Association, "The Debate Over NATO Expansion: A Critique of the Clinton Administration's Responses To Key Questions," *Arms Control Today* 27, no. 6 (September 1997): pp. 3-10, 4.

[37] Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," The Kremlin (The Government of the Russian Federation, February 10, 2007), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

[38] Ball, "NATO Negativism," 44.

[39] Ratti, "Back to the Future?," 415.

[40] Ibid., 416.

[41] Ratti, "Back to the Future?," 400.

[42] Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, vii.

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