



NATO enlargement and US grand strategy: a net assessment

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Abstract

NATO did not dissolve following the Soviet Union's collapse and the end of the Cold War. Instead, the alliance expanded, in stages—from 16 members at its Cold War peak to 30 in 2020. While NATO enlargement alone did not cause the deterioration of US–Russian relations, it did contribute significantly to that outcome. Champions of NATO expansion aver that it maintains peace in Europe and promotes democracy in East-Central Europe. They add that Russia has nothing to fear. But Russia's leaders have always seen NATO expansion differently. The article also examines NATO's enlargement as it relates to US post-Cold War grand strategy. It contends the policy reflects the abiding US commitment to maintaining its global primacy, which, in part, is ensured by perpetuating Europe's dependence on the USA for an elemental need: security. We conclude by considering the future of NATO and Europe.

Keywords NATO · US foreign policy · Europe · Alliance · Post-Cold War · Enlargement

NATO's purpose, from its founding under the 1949 Washington Treaty until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, can be summarized by recalling the quip widely attributed to its first secretary general, Lord Lionel Hastings Ismay: to 'keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down.' By that standard, NATO has proved to be among the most successful alliances in history. It harnessed US

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power and kept it militarily engaged on the continent to defend Western Europe for over four decades. In the post-Cold War era, the alliance has enlarged dramatically and brought in former members of the Warsaw Pact. Yet with the implosion of the Soviet Union, it has faced an identity crisis and questions have been raised about its continued relevance.

This article assesses NATO's enlargement and its consequences for US post-Cold War grand strategy. It unfolds in eight segments. First, as a prelude to a discussion of enlargement, we consider the basic case for NATO's continuing relevance after the Cold War. Second, we turn to NATO's post-Cold War expansion and the debate surrounding it. Third, we consider the consequences of the alliance's incorporation of states on Russia's border. Fourth, we consider Russian reactions to NATO enlargement and its effects on US–Russian relations. The fifth segment considers a counterfactual: Could post-Soviet Europe's stability have been ensured without NATO expansion, and if so, how? Sixth, we discuss the hazard of continued NATO enlargement, especially in regard to Ukraine and Georgia. Seventh, we explain why a more sober assessment of the threat posed by Russia helps place enlargement, past, present, and prospective, in context. We conclude with a discussion of the future of NATO and Europe.

Case for a post-Cold War NATO

The preservation of the Atlantic alliance has been central to the US post-Cold War grand strategy of maintaining global primacy. NATO ensures that Europe's resources—geographic, demographic, economic, and military—do not supplement the power of an adversary, present or prospective. As long as Europe remains militarily intertwined with the USA and dependent on the latter for its security, Washington will have great influence in Europe. Europe's dependence on the USA for this elemental need will prevent it from becoming a rival center of power either collectively or because one state achieves dominance on the continent (Art 1996). NATO's continued existence ensures that Europe remains a strategic subordinate to the USA, which explains why the USA, though it has complained often about inequitable burden sharing, has never demanded a dramatic increase in European military power, let alone a Europe with an autonomous defense policy. Reliable access to NATO countries' ports, airfields, and intelligence enables the USA to project its military power worldwide, even for missions unrelated to Europe's defense. NATO provides the veneer and sometimes the substance of multilateralism, which makes US military interventions and stability operations more palatable to other countries. By contributing to a stable, prosperous Europe, NATO also sustains a favorable environment for US trade and investments in what is a lucrative global market.

The USA's pursuit of global primacy rather than alternative, and more modest, grand strategies helps account for why NATO endured after the Cold War. Given the depth of support for NATO among powerful US constituencies and Europe's reliance on it for security, the success of those who pushed for the alliance's enlargement should not be surprising.



Unhindered NATO expansion

The proponents of NATO expansion had a significant advantage over the opponents at the outset, for at least three reasons. First, the alliance as a military and institutional enterprise did not need to be created *de nouveau*. In planning for their security, states, like individuals, prefer to build on the familiar rather than venturing into the unknown by building alternatives from scratch. Second, NATO had been demonstrably successful in protecting and ensuring the stability of its member states for almost half a century. Hence, the proposition that NATO could do for its new members—from Eastern and Central Europe, the Baltics, and the Balkans—what it had done for Western Europe seemed plausible. Countries that sought membership in post-Cold War NATO believed that joining the alliance was crucial to realizing their goals of integrating with the West and protecting themselves from Russia, with which many of them had a troubled history. Third, the balance of power after the Cold War overwhelmingly favored the USA. Russia's economy and military were in shambles in the 1990s, and it therefore lacked the wherewithal to prevent enlargement.

Those who insisted that NATO must not merely be preserved but expanded in membership and mission also believed that this could only happen with vigorous US leadership. The USA has far more resources to mobilize and deploy for defending Europe than do its allies collectively, let alone individually. NATO has always been a unipolar pact. Absent that, NATO could not have incorporated states in Eastern and Central Europe, the Baltic countries, and parts of the Balkans without increases in the defense spending on a scale that the alliance's European members would not have been willing to undertake. In particular, defending the Baltic states—small, weak countries that adjoin Russian territory—would have been impossible absent US military might. Although the US military presence in Europe has declined from a Cold War highpoint of 4,000,000 troops to just under 79,011 in 2019, it remains essential barring the emergence of a robust common European defense system. But that would require a substantial increase in military spending and capabilities by European states (US Department of Defense 2019).

Those who championed NATO expansion also believed that it was essential to the promotion and consolidation of democracy in post-Cold War Europe. US leaders in the executive branch, the legislature, and the foreign policy community more generally (i.e., specialists in universities, the media, and think tanks), general agree that a NATO with strong US leadership was essential for democracy's success in the alliance's newest states and that emergence of authoritarian regimes in the states east of NATO's old perimeter would lead to turmoil there or even war, a denouement that would ill serve US interests. The proponents of NATO enlargement also considered it essential for promoting economic reform and bringing militaries under civilian control in countries that had been part of the Soviet bloc for decades (e.g., US Information Agency 1996; Holbrooke 1995, 41–42; Talbott 1997; Albright 1997a). They disagreed with critics who warned that NATO's eastward expansion would eventually provoke resistance from a



resurgent Russia and force the USA to bear the burden involved in protecting several militarily weak states near or adjacent to the Russian border. Beyond that, advocates of reconfiguring NATO after 1991 insisted that it should move out of area to help control conflict, consolidate stability, and advance human rights in countries outside Europe. Included in this new agenda were humanitarian interventions (to stop mass atrocities) and stability operations in countries emerging from civil war.

The proponents of expansion mobilized by forming organizations such as the US Committee to Expand NATO (Goldgeier 1999a, 135–138). They tapped foreign policy luminaries who wielded considerable influence by virtue of their academic expertise, experience in government, and access to the mass media. A prominent example was Zbigniew Brzezinski. A noted authority on the Soviet Union and Russia who served as President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor, Brzezinski (1994) insisted that expansion was an urgent necessity that had to proceed 'with Russian cooperation or without it.' He warned that the Bill Clinton administration's failure to act decisively on expansion 'could compound the danger that the alliance [might] disintegrate.' Brzezinski was not alone in offering such dire predictions. Writing about Eastern and Central European states' desire to join NATO, Henry Kissinger (1994), secretary of state under presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, warned in an opinion piece:

If this request is rejected, and the states bordering Germany are refused protection, Germany will sooner or later seek to achieve its security by national efforts, encountering on the way a Russia pursuing the same policy from its own side. A vacuum between Germany and Russia threatens not only NATO cohesion but the very existence of NATO as a meaningful institution.

He reiterated this claim while testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, a forum at which Brzezinski also spoke (GovInfo 1997).

Other prominent experts fervently opposed expansion; they did not fall into predictable political camps. Consider those who helped to forge a collection of organizations encompassing the political left and right into the Coalition against NATO Expansion (CANE) ('Founding Declaration' 1998). CANE's founding members were Richard Pipes (a preeminent conservative historian of Russia who had favored adopting a hardline toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War and served as director for East European and Soviet Affairs in the National Security Council under President Ronald Reagan), Jack Matlock (US ambassador to the Soviet Union from April 1987 to August 1991), and Fred Iklé (undersecretary of defense during the Reagan administration). Another opponent of expansion was George F. Kennan, the father of containment, who predicted that pushing ahead with expansion 'would inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western, and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion,...have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy,' and 'restore the atmosphere of the Cold War to East–West relations.' It would, he declared, prove to be 'the most fateful error of American foreign policy in the entire post-Cold War era' (Kennan 1997). Michael Mandelbaum, another prominent participant in the debate on NATO expansion, agreed with Kennan's critique and made his case in articles, books, and media appearances (1995, 9–13, 1996; GovInfo 1997).



There were voices of caution within the government as well. Although senior military officers obviously did not express their concerns publicly, some feared that the USA would be committing itself to the defense of additional countries without added resources at a time when the US military presence in Europe would likely be pared down. William Perry, secretary of defense under President Clinton from February 1994 to January 1997, had a different concern. He did not oppose expansion in principle but believed that it should be delayed and pursued slowly thereafter. Perry worried that rapid expansion would damage the US relationship with Russia and make it harder to gain Russia's cooperation for further arms control agreements, which he considered essential. In Perry's view, Russia did not object to the participation of Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet republics in the Partnership for Peace (formed in 1994), which was designed to foster military cooperation between NATO and individual countries that were not part of the alliance, and Moscow was itself eager to join that program. But he was convinced that Russia retained 'its traditional opposition to Eastern European countries, especially those on its periphery, joining NATO,' which it still considered 'a potential threat.' According to Perry, 'We needed to keep moving forward with Russia...and...NATO enlargement at this time would shove us into reverse.' His plea for a delay and slow pace was based on the assessment 'that we needed more time to bring Russia, the other major nuclear power, into the Western security circle,' to him 'an over-riding priority' (Perry 2015, 127).

Despite these critics and voices of caution, there was nothing that could accurately be characterized as a debate within the US government on NATO expansion. Eric Edelman (2017), Strobe Talbott's executive assistant from 1996 to 1998, confirmed this later, noting that 'there wasn't really that much opposition inside the [administration].... It was mostly outside' (Talbott is a prominent, a well-regarded expert on Russia and Clinton's confidant and Oxford classmate, who served as deputy secretary of state from 1994 to 2001). This should not be surprising. The opponents of expansion never acquired the influence to prevent its launch during the Clinton administration, let alone to derail it once it gained momentum. The proponents of expansion within the government consistently held a stronger hand, not least because President Clinton strongly favored the policy and believed that Russian concerns could be assuaged. Vice President Al Gore's views aligned with the president's, and he made them known vigorously. Strobe Talbott also pushed hard for the policy, and his views carried weight for reasons professional (his knowledge of Russia) and personal (his closeness to Clinton) (Talbott 1995, 1997; quoted in Fitchett 1997).

Talbott was joined by other senior officials. Madeleine Albright, Clinton's ambassador to the United Nations (UN) (January 1993–1997) and later secretary of state (January 1997–January 2001), was an impassioned proponent of expansion. In her April 1997 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, she offered a spirited defense of the policy and a point-by-point rebuttal of its critics (Albright 1997b). Likewise, according to William J. Burns, Obama's ambassador to Russia from 2005 to 2008, Anthony Lake, Clinton's national security advisor, was 'an early exponent of expansion.' Lake argued that it represented 'a rare historical opportunity to anchor former Communist countries like Poland, Hungary,



and the Czech Republic in a successful and democratic and market economic transition' and to assuage their fears of a 'revanchist Russia.' This view prevailed because other influential officials shared it, and especially because 'it struck a chord with [President] Clinton,' the man who mattered the most (Burns 2019, 107). As Lake (2002) later recalled, NATO enlargement was among the issues President that Clinton 'cared about...which is why I was able to keep pushing the way I did within the bureaucracy and with my colleagues.' Likewise, Lake's successor, Samuel (Sandy) Berger (2005), who in any event deemed NATO expansion 'extraordinarily important,' knew exactly where Clinton stood, and that increased the weight of his opinions.

Richard Holbrooke, another advocate of expansion within the administration, was (unlike Perry and Lake) famous—some would say notorious—for pressing aggressively and relentlessly for policies he held dear. Holbrooke served in top posts within the Clinton administration, including ambassador to Germany (1993–1994), assistant secretary of state for Europe (1994–1996), and ambassador to the UN (1999–2001). He spoke often and with authority. Whereas Perry and the Department of Defense may have fretted about the pace and implications of NATO expansion, Holbrooke brimmed with confidence. According to Goldgeier (1999b), in September 1994, soon after having been appointed assistant secretary of state for Europe, Holbrooke 'told a stunned group from the Pentagon the president had stated his support for enlargement and that it was up to them [*sic*] to act on it.... Over the next three months, as skeptics inside the administration realized that the president, vice president, national security advisor, and secretary of state all supported NATO expansion, the bureaucracy fell into line' (Goldgeier 1999b, 20). Perry notes in his memoirs that 'Holbrooke...proposed in 1996 to bring into NATO at once a number of the PfP [Partnership for Peace] members, including Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states.' In opposing Perry's counsel for delay Holbrooke 'was irrepressible and his proposal moved forward,' especially because 'neither Secretary of State Warren Christopher nor National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, spoke out.' On top of that, Perry recalls, 'Vice President Gore...made a forceful argument in favor of immediate membership, an argument more persuasive to the president than mine' (Perry 2015, 128). Perry observes that 'the rupture with Russia may have occurred anyway [*i.e.*, even if he had won the day]. But I am not willing to concede that.'

Although there was skepticism and apprehension about NATO expansion within the administration and among some senior military officers, the policy was never in peril. President Clinton, Vice President Gore, and the administration's top foreign policy officials backed it strongly. By the time that the first stage of expansion occurred in 1999, Russian objections were well known within the administration. They just did not count enough to make a difference, especially given the existing imbalance of power between the two states. Despite Lake's talk of 'pushing' NATO expansion, it is not evident that much exertion was required. When it came to NATO expansion, the question was, to borrow from the title of James M. Goldgeier's book on the subject, 'not whether but when' (Goldgeier 1999a).



NATO on Russia's border

At its January 1994 Washington Summit, NATO agreed, on the basis of Article X of the 1949 Washington Treaty, to admit more members into its fold. At its July 1997, Madrid conclave the alliance formally invited the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to initiate talks on accession. They gained membership in March 1999 (NATO n.d.; von Moltke 1997). At the Madrid meeting, NATO also reaffirmed that its door remained open to other aspirants, subject to their fulfilling membership criteria. The alliance did not tarry; in 2002, it gave even more states—Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia—the green light to start accession negotiations. They entered the alliance in 2004 during George W. Bush's administration. Following accession talks, which commenced in 2008, Albania and Croatia joined in 2009, during Barack Obama's presidency. Montenegro was admitted in 2017, soon after President Donald Trump's inauguration, and North Macedonia will join in 2020, increasing NATO's membership from a Cold War highpoint of 16 to 30 in the space of two decades. Georgia and Ukraine are also eager to join. Although the alliance did not offer either country a Membership Action Plan (MAP) during its 2008 Bucharest summit, the post-conference declaration stated that 'NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed that these countries will become members of NATO' (NATO 2008).

If Georgia and Ukraine do join, NATO's membership will have doubled from the Cold War peak and the organization will have four member countries (Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, and Ukraine) that share borders with Russia (not including the Kaliningrad enclave) and are small and weak to boot. Even if Ukraine and Georgia fail to gain entry, NATO's Baltic members will be nearly impossible to defend and thus the alliance will have to rely on an extended deterrent with dubious credibility. Coyle (2018) of the Atlantic Council sums up the problem starkly: 'There is no strategic depth, and the [Baltic] states are only connected to Europe by the 65-kilometer-wide Suwalki Gap. The entire area is covered by Russian Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities. It would be suicide to try to fight a war with the Kremlin on this territory.' Moreover, Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine have sizable ethnic Russian minorities; Georgia and Ukraine are embroiled in border disputes with Russia, battle separatist statelets sustained by Russian material support, and have fought the Russian army. Given the extent of NATO's military dependence on the USA, Washington will have committed itself to playing the main military role in protecting a collection of states that have scant military resources and whose locations give the Russian army a clear advantage, whether for launching, reinforcing, and resupplying military operations directed at them or for missions aimed at destabilizing them without resorting to war.

Further, the USA cannot realistically hope that its European partners will substantially boost their defense budgets and the quantity and quality of their armaments, even though some increased defense spending slightly under pressure from President Trump. Excluding the USA, in 2019 only four NATO countries spent more than 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense (the guideline



that members agreed to at the 2014 Wales Summit). Two were barely above the line, while two others were right on the line. Only two of the alliance's European members had exceeded that proportion as well as the guideline that called for states to allocate 20% of their military budgets to weaponry. Ten had met neither benchmark. The median for NATO members' defense spending as a share of GDP—counting the USA, which devoted 3.5 percent—was 1.63 percent (NATO 2019a, graph 2). One might argue that defense spending should not be accorded totemic status and that increased expenditures by small countries count for little. But countries' defense expenditures and the capabilities and readiness of their forces do reflect their priorities and the degree of their commitment to the goal of collective security.

Quite apart from lacking the means to defend weak, vulnerable states adjacent to Russia, NATO also faces the problem of asymmetry when it comes to the stakes. The Baltic states, Georgia, and Ukraine are simply more consequential to Russia's security than they are to the security of the USA. Moscow therefore has significant motivation to take steps against these countries that the USA will be hard pressed to counter without taking imprudent risks. This is the lesson offered by the 2008 Russia–Georgia war, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, and its support for insurgents in parts of Ukraine's Luhansk and Donetsk provinces. Neither Georgia nor Ukraine is part of NATO, so we cannot know whether their inclusion in the alliance would have deterred Russia or whether, given the combination of asymmetric capabilities and asymmetric stakes, NATO would have been unable to deter Russia or defend Georgia and Ukraine.

As regards US grand strategy, the prospective NATO membership in NATO of Georgia and Ukraine and the admission of the Baltic states raises the question of whether the alliance's policy of apparently open-ended post-Cold War expansion has already produced an overextension, the burdens and potential hazards of which will fall principally on the USA.

Russia's reaction

Once the discussions over NATO expansion began in earnest, Russia registered its objections—early, frequently, and emphatically. But considering that the alliance's membership will have increased from 16 in 1991 to 30 once North Macedonia is formally admitted in 2020, Moscow's objections clearly have made little difference to those driving the policy. Richard Holbrooke, writes his biographer George Packer, 'brushed off' arguments that expanding NATO would provoke Russia and dismissed the idea that Russia had reason to feel threatened by the West. But as Packer observed, Holbrooke's inability to imagine how other countries might view US actions given their past experiences—in Russia's case repeated invasions across its western frontier—and current apprehensions meant that 'his doctrine risked becoming a kind of liberal imperialism' (Packer 2019, 399).

Holbrooke's attitude is instructive because it marked the thinking of other advocates of NATO expansion (and still does). They believed that Russians, especially the democrats among them, could not truly believe that an enlarged NATO posed



a threat to their country. Stated differently, US officials committed to expanding the alliance seemed to believe that the only reasonable way Russia could view their policy was the way that they themselves viewed it. In consequence, they regarded Russian objections as, in the main, rhetoric designed for domestic consumption, the result of misunderstanding of US intentions, or simple paranoia. They also believed that Russia's leaders could be won over by a variety of means, whether economic aid and inclusion in the Partnership for Peace or inclusion in security forums such as the Russia–NATO Consultative Council, and that personal chemistry between Russian and US presidents, notably Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton's *bonhomie*, would calm Moscow's anxiety.

This view discounted the possibility that Russian leaders would regard the alliance's movement eastward toward their country's borders as provocative—and disingenuous given US assurances that the Cold War was over and that Russia was a partner. In an October 1993 cable that was subsequently declassified, Yeltsin insisted to Clinton that 'the spirit of the treaty of the final settlement with respect to Germany [i.e., the deal under which a unified Germany became part of NATO], signed in September 1990, especially its provisions that prohibit[ed] the deployment of foreign troops in the eastern lands of the Federal Republic of Germany, preclude[d] the option of expanding the NATO zone into the east' (National Security Archive 1993). The question of whether the USA pledged not to expand NATO remains disputed. Jack Matlock (quoted in Zelikow 1995), the USA's last ambassador to the Soviet Union, insists that 'we gave categorical assurances to Gorbachev back when the Soviet Union existed that if a united German were able to stay in NATO, NATO would not be moved eastward.' Philip Zelikow (1995), who served on the National Security Council from 1989 to 1991, disagrees, contending that the USA provided merely the assurance that the alliance's military forces and equipment would not be moved into the territory of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). Academics remain divided on the matter (McCwire 1998; Shiffrinson 2016; Kramer 2009; Sarotte 2014).

In the end, however, it does not matter whether the George H.W. Bush administration ever gave Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev a binding, let alone written, commitment not to enlarge NATO in exchange for Moscow's cooperation on German unification. The Russians believed that they had been given an assurance and that the United States later reneged—at a time when Russia was beset by weakness, unable to push back, and did not pose any military threat to Europe. Opponents of NATO expansion had warned that Russia's leaders would interpret expansion precisely that way and would be unmoved by the argument that it was needed to provide security to and foster democracy in the lands to NATO's east (Mandelbaum 1996, 1997; GovInfo 1997). After all, Russia was scarcely in a position to attack its western neighbors. During the 1990s, its economy contracted by one-third (Reddaway and Glinski 2001; Rutland 1997) and, in the words of a leading expert on the Russian military, the country 'was left with a shambles of an army and a totally confused military doctrine' (Felgenhauer 1997). As for promoting democracy, it would surely have made sense to apply the underlying logic—namely that military alliances advance democracy and that the latter fosters peace—to Russia, by far the most consequential of the ex-communist countries in Europe. And, as



Clinton and his foreign policy team understood, during the Yeltsin years Russia's democratic experiment was under siege from both the communists (led by Gennady Zyuganov) and the nationalists (such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy), both unrelenting critics of NATO expansion (Berger 2005). There was, to be sure, the prospect of a resurgent Russia, but including it in NATO would have been one way to prevent that outcome from threatening Eastern Europe. That, after all, was the reasoning behind bringing West Germany into NATO following World War Two and a unified Germany into NATO following the Cold War.

Declassified US documents demonstrate that Russian leaders desired a post-Cold War European order that would include them, and not as a mere adornment. This vision underlay Mikhail Gorbachev's 1989 proposal to the Council of Europe for restructuring Europe to create 'a common home.' Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian leaders regarded NATO expansion and Russia's integration into a pan-European security order as incompatible. As Yeltsin explained to Clinton, even reform-minded politicians in Russia would regard NATO expansion.

as a sort of neo-isolation of our country in diametric opposition to its natural admission into the Euro-Atlantic space.... We have a different approach, one that leads to a pan-European security system, an approach predicated in collective (but not on the basis of bloc membership) actions.... Security must be indivisible and based on pan-European security structures (National Security Archive 1993).

Unsurprisingly, Russian leaders regarded NATO enlargement not as a step toward inclusiveness but rather as a repudiation of it. James Collins, *chargé d'affaires* at the US embassy in Moscow and later ambassador to Russia, wrote in a cable to Secretary of State Warren Christopher in 1993—prior to the latter's visit to Moscow—that the Russians had made clear their fear that NATO expansion would exclude them and therefore strategically bifurcate Europe in a new manner. 'No matter how nuanced,' Collins noted, 'if NATO adopts a policy which envisions expansion into Central and Eastern Europe without holding the door open to Russia, it would be universally interpreted in Moscow as directed against Russia and Russia alone—or "Neo-Containment" as Foreign Minister [Andrei] Kozyrev recently suggested' (National Security Archive 2000).

Russia's leaders made their opposition to NATO enlargement unambiguous from 1991 onward. In 3 July of that same year, as the Soviet Union was unraveling, a senior delegation from the Russian Federated Soviet Socialist Republic (RSFSR)—which, once the Soviet state dissolved, became the independent Russian Federation—wrote in a memorandum to Boris Yeltsin, who was then the RSFSR's president, that it had stressed to senior NATO officials that 'expanding NATO would be seen negatively in the USSR and the RSFSR' and that the alliance's secretary general, Manfred Woerner, had assured his Russian interlocutors that he and the NATO Council were opposed to expansion (National Security Archive 1991). But as discussions about expansion nevertheless proceeded within the alliance, Yeltsin made his objections clear during a December 1993 meeting with Woerner (*Chicago Tribune* 1993). In March 1995, Yeltsin's foreign minister, Kozyrev, a liberal reformer whom Europe and the USA considered a staunch advocate of partnership with the



West, remarked that ‘whatever one may think of NATO, it’s still a military alliance that was created when Europe was divided.... It should be replaced by a new model based on comprehensive security.’ Kozyrev, echoing Gorbachev, added archly that ‘the gap between NATO’s very active moves to studying potential enlargement and its passive attitude in developing this new model of comprehensive security is a very wide one, and it could be dangerous’ (quoted in Whitney 1995).

Later that year, Russian president Boris Yeltsin, true to form, used blunter phraseology. In criticizing NATO’s first major out-of-area endeavor, Operation Deliberate Force, which launched airstrikes against Bosnian Serb redoubts as part of the effort to end Bosnia’s civil war, he called for a European (including Russia) solution to the conflict and wondered why Europeans allowed themselves ‘to be dictated to from beyond the ocean,’ an obvious reference to the USA. Turning to the broader NATO enlargement issue, he noted that ‘when NATO approaches the borders of the Russian Federation, you can say there will be two military blocs, and this will be a restoration of what we already had’ (quoted in Erlanger 1995). Yeltsin could be emotional and erratic, among other things, but his assessment proved prescient. By the end of Barack Obama’s presidency, talk of a ‘new Cold War’ between Russia and the West had become commonplace. Hopes for partnership had all but evaporated (Legvold 2014, 2016).

True, when Kozyrev and Yeltsin made their remarks, Russia was part of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, established in 1991. Yet to Russian leaders this forum and others that it later became part of, such as the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the Partnership for Peace, were scant recompense for NATO’s advance toward its borders, which from the outset they deemed a threat to their country’s security. A 1993 report by Evgenii Primakov, the head of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service, who would succeed Kozyrev as Foreign Minister 3 years later, warned that ‘a stereotypical bloc mentality’ persisted in the West, which still regarded Russia as a threat. He noted that though NATO’s leaders might not intend to exclude and isolate Russia, the country should nevertheless anticipate a future in which the alliance’s ‘zone of responsibility...reache[d] the borders of the Russian Federation.’ Primakov opined that although that outcome would not result in creation of ‘a bridgehead to strike Russia or its allies,’ this did not mean that NATO’s eastward expansion would ‘not affect Russia’s military security interests.’ NATO was the world’s ‘biggest military grouping,’ and its movement toward Russia’s borders would, in his assessment, necessitate ‘a fundamental reappraisal’ of Russia’s defense doctrine and posture’ (Izvestiia 1992).

Russia did not beef up the military units deployed on its western flank, but that does not establish that its leaders regarded NATO expansion as unthreatening. For one thing, they made abundantly clear that they did see it as such, and one would have to dismiss all of their protestations as propaganda in order to conclude that they were merely engaged in theatrics. In addition, Russia’s economic free fall in the 1990s, coupled with the continuing necessity to deploy forces along a vast frontier that abutted 16 countries, rendered a countervailing military response infeasible. Russia’s leaders held a weak hand, but that only served to increase their resentment over what they regarded as the West’s disregard for their legitimate security interests. Their bitterness was not contrived. Consider Sandy Berger’s characterization



of President Clinton's response to Yeltsin's objections at the 1996 Helsinki summit: 'Give it up on NATO enlargement.... We're going ahead; stop rocking it. All you're doing Boris is creating a defeat for yourself.' When Yeltsin sought to salvage something by asking that the Baltic states not be inducted into NATO, Clinton's answer, as characterized by Berger was 'No, I will not make that commitment.... All you are doing is moving the line of the divide between East and West...farther to the east' (Berger 2005).

By 2002, it was clear that the Baltic countries would in fact join NATO. Vladimir Putin, Yeltsin's successor, acquiesced in the face of this reality, for two reasons. Russia had still not recovered from the collapse of the 1990s and Putin understood that he was confronting a *fait accompli*. In addition, though Putin's image in the West would change markedly as the new decade advanced (he would come to personify the anti-Western autocrat), in his early years as president he was hopeful about a substantive partnership with NATO, and indeed even membership in the alliance. As the *Daily Telegraph*, a conservative British newspaper, reported in 2002, 'Mr. Putin's acquiescence to NATO expanding its borders to within 100 miles of his home city, St. Petersburg, was the latest sign of his strategic shift toward the West' (Warren 2002). Similarly, the *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer, also a conservative, wrote an op-ed the same year deriding those who warned that NATO expansion would produce Russian backlash, in which he noted: 'In fact the level of US-Russian cooperation is the highest today since 1945. Putin is not just collaborating in the war on terror, not just allowing a US presence in the former Soviet Central Asian states, not just acquiescing to NATO expansion right up to Russia's border and into Soviet space; he is knocking on NATO's door, trying to get in' (Krauthammer 2002).

The strategic benefits gained by the policy of enlarging NATO must be weighed against the negative consequences, one of which is the part it played in Russia's eventual transformation from a putative partner of the West into an adversary. To be sure, that metamorphosis cannot be attributed entirely to NATO enlargement without falling victim to the single factor fallacy—pinning the entire blame for the deterioration of NATO–Russia relations on the West in general and the USA in particular. What became known as the 'new Cold War' stemmed from a concatenation of developments. They include complex political and cultural trends within Russia's polity and society that proved hospitable to the rise of authoritarianism and nationalism; the 2002 US decision to jettison the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; the effect on Moscow's strategic thinking of NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and NATO's 2011 war in Libya; Russia's 2008 military clash with Georgia; and its 2014 annexation of Crimea and arming of separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region.

Still, no serious account of the mutation of what had been a budding cooperative relationship into a near breach can avoid reckoning with NATO enlargement's role in altering Russia perceptions of the West. The effect on Russian strategic calculations was especially evident once the alliance moved from admitting former members of the Warsaw Pact located in Eastern and Central Europe to admitting the Baltic states, which border Russia, to contemplating the admission of Georgia and Ukraine. It seems inconceivable that the US attitude—or that of any historical



power—would have been one of equanimity had an alliance that was once its principal foe started to move toward its borders at a time when it was crippled by weakness. Moreover, a revived USA would surely have pushed back in order to preserve its historic sphere of influence. President Vladimir Putin's strident speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, delivered as senior US officials sat in the front rows, symbolized Russia's resurgence, its determination to resist what it regarded as curtailing of its sphere of influence, and its new strategic outlook. The change cannot be attributed solely to Putin's personality. Russia's 2008 war with Georgia occurred during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. And it was Medvedev who described the former Soviet republic as part of Russia's zone of 'privileged interests,' railed against the US-dominated unipolar world, and asserted that Russia's sphere of influence was not limited to states immediately on its border (New York Times 2008). The Russia–Georgia war—sparked by Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili shelling the capital of the Russian-backed breakaway enclave of North Ossetia—and Russia's annexation of the Crimea and support of separatists in eastern Ukraine in 2014 demonstrated that Russia had acquired the will and wherewithal to push back against the West and that it had carried out a strategic reassessment that bore little, if any, resemblance to the worldviews of Yeltsin and the early Putin.

The argument that the West precipitated the 2014 Ukraine crisis (Mearsheimer 2014; Peng 2017; Sakwa 2016) has been widely rejected as either an exaggeration or as baseless (Michael McFaul and Chrystia Freeland quoted in Chatham House 2014). The gist of that thesis is that the West bears the blame because it serially provoked Russia following the end of the Cold War by expanding NATO without regard to Russian security interests. The USA and its Western allies assured Ukraine that it would join NATO one day. The EU launched its Eastern Partnership, the plan designed to draw post-Soviet states toward it, even though Russia perceived a huge overlap in the membership rosters of the EU and NATO, which was among the reasons for its antipathy to the Eastern Partnership. The USA vocally supported the 2014 Maidan Revolution that ousted the pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, and as it unfolded a senior US foreign policy official visiting Kyiv even discussed with the US ambassador to Ukraine the composition of the future Ukrainian cabinet (BBC News 2014). To the Russian leadership this amounted to interference in Ukraine's domestic politics that was aimed at aligning Ukraine with the West. The West also failed to consider how repeated invasions across Russia's western frontier had made its leaders acutely sensitive to the strategic trajectories of states on its western flank. One can disagree in whole or part with the argument that the West is to blame and still conclude that the shadow of NATO expansion loomed over the 2014 Ukraine crisis and shaped its course and outcome.

There is no doubt that Russian leaders were deeply perturbed about the consequences of Ukraine joining NATO. They see Ukraine as culturally, demographically, economically, and geostrategically the most consequential of the post-Soviet states. Moreover, NATO gave them good reason to believe that the chances of Ukraine being admitted were substantial. By the time Putin arrived at NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit, the alliance had already decided not to provide Ukraine (or Georgia) a MAP. Even so, given NATO's expansion during Yeltsin's presidency as well as his own, Putin clearly did not discount the possibility that Ukraine would be part



of NATO one day, not least because the summit's declaration stated explicitly that it would. According to the insider account of Mikhail Zygar, a respected Russian journalist and former editor of Russia's sole independent television network, 'He [Putin] was furious that NATO was still keeping Ukraine and Georgia hanging on by approving the prospect of future membership.' Zygar writes that Putin 'flew into a rage' and warned that 'if Ukraine joins NATO it will do so without Crimea and the eastern regions. It will simply fall apart' (Zygar 2016, 153–154). As the protests against Yanukovych gained strength in 2014, it was not unreasonable for Russia's leaders to fear that his ouster and the advent of a pro-Western leader would substantially increase the odds of Ukraine eventually entering NATO. In the eyes of Russian leaders the Ukrainian opposition's rejection of the EU-brokered deal, which involved major concessions by Yanukovych, including early elections, was proof that the Maidan movement, with Washington's fulsome support, was determined to topple him so as to align Ukraine with the West (Menon and Rumer 2015). Russia's annexation of Crimea, Ukraine's sole Russian-majority province, was doubtless unlawful, but Russia had never attempted to seize Crimea before, even when a Ukrainian government hostile to it took power following the 2004 Orange Revolution. Its decision to take that provocative step in 2014 cannot be understood apart from the Maidan movement, which, in Russian eyes, had as one of its objectives the integration of Ukraine with the West, not just economically but militarily as well.

The challenge for US grand strategy is that Russia remains fervently opposed to the induction of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO. Addressing a group of Russian ambassadors in July 2018, Vladimir Putin, referring to the West, warned that 'our colleagues, who are...seeking to include, among others, Georgia and Ukraine in the orbit of the alliance, should think about the possible consequences of such an irresponsible policy.... We will respond appropriately to such steps, which pose a direct threat to Russia' (Osborn 2018). Putin may be bluffing in an attempt to block the two countries' entry into the alliance by trying to unnerve the alliance or create dissension in its ranks. He may be playing to the domestic galleries to burnish his nationalist credentials and strongman image. Perhaps Russia would have been deterred from doing what it did in 2008 and 2014 had Georgia and Ukraine been inside NATO and the lesson is that admitting them will not prove dangerous. These are reasonable suppositions. But sound strategy requires thinking hard about what might happen if things unfold in unexpected ways, what responses are feasible if that happens, and what risks are associated with implementing those responses. Now that NATO expansion has become integral to US grand strategy, the task is to figure out what, if any, limits should apply and whether the costs associated with NATO assuming added obligations serve US interests.

An alternative path?

The end of the Cold War presented an opportunity for a fresh start with Russia. One way forward might have been the creation of a new pan-European security architecture that included Russia and perhaps even used NATO as a foundation to start with. But a project of that scope never became a serious proposition in the West, let alone



an element in US grand strategy (Hill 2018). When Gorbachev floated the idea—‘We propose to join NATO’—it went nowhere. President George H.W. Bush’s Secretary of State, James Baker, reportedly dismissed it as ‘a dream.’ Russian membership in NATO was broached again by President Boris Yeltsin in a December 1991 letter to President George H.W. Bush and in 1993. Vladimir Putin also raised the possibility with President Clinton during the latter’s visit to Moscow in 2000 (Gorbachev and Baker quoted in Roache 2019; New York Times 1991; RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty 2017); Monitor 2000). These feelers came to naught. The Eastern and Central European countries that joined NATO regarded it as a means to protect themselves against Russia, not as a forum for partnership with Moscow, and they would almost certainly have blocked Russian membership, and a consensus was required for admitting new members. Perhaps the attempt to create a new European order that included Russia would have failed; perhaps Russia would have subverted it from within. There is no way to know because, in sharp contrast to what happened following World War Two, Western leaders did not try to conceptualize, let alone create, any such security order, nor did the USA provide the leadership that would have been required to make that possible.

Moreover, Russian leaders, regardless of their political orientation and despite NATO’s commitment to an open door, did not see the alliance’s expansion policy as a project that would eventually include Russia. Those who may once have harbored such hopes soon abandoned them given the direction of events. As expansion proceeded apace Russians viewed it as a move that, whatever the underlying intent of the USA and its allies, would exclude Russia, drawing a new East–West strategic demarcation line across Europe.

What might an alternative security order have looked like, and would it have proved feasible? The enlargement of the European Union could have served as the means to foster democracy and economic reform in Eastern and Central Europe and the post-Soviet states, with benchmarks in both categories serving as the criteria for membership. The EU’s indigenous capacity for providing security on the continent could have been strengthened by building on its Common Security and Defense Policy and providing it greater institutional heft through EU states’ commitments to boost their defense spending as well as military capabilities, including by increasing the interoperability of weapons; reducing the duplication in armament production; and regularizing joint training and military exercises. In this scenario, new EU members would have pledged to participate in these measures as the price for benefitting from a collaborative European system. NATO could have been kept in place as a hedge, but not expanded. Talks between the EU and Russia might have been held to promote and deepen security cooperation, including reductions and pullbacks of Russian forces facing Europe and confidence-building measures designed to prevent the outbreak of war and facilitate the management of crises. Sufficient progress on that front could have laid the groundwork for a pan-European security order that included Russia. The creation of a wider European security system would not have prevented the USA from helping to further political, economic, and military reforms in states that lay beyond unified Germany, NATO’s 1991 eastern boundary.

To be sure, a new pan-European security order would have been accompanied by uncertainties and risks. Yet that was also true when NATO, the Marshall Plan, and



the EU were first imagined as means to create a cooperative, secure Western Europe after World War Two. But nothing of comparable boldness was ever attempted by US leaders. Instead, NATO expansion became, for reasons we have explained, their consuming concern in post-Cold War Europe; and as some prominent advocates of that policy noted, it all but precluded Russia's integration into 'a new, all-European security framework' (Asmus et al. 1995, 7).

NATO expansion's advocates and latter-day defenders have hailed it as a resounding success (Brands 2019; cf. Larison 2019). In their minds, it has preserved US engagement in Europe's security, ensured Eastern and Central Europe's security, disproved those who predicted turmoil and even nuclear proliferation in that region, and checked a resurgent, nationalistic Russia. But the relevant question is not whether these outcomes are desirable, but whether NATO expansion was the only way to achieve them. In fact, it was not. Western Europe, which was not prostrate at the end of the Cold War as it was after the ravages of World War Two, had the wherewithal to help achieve alternative solutions. The argument that the USA would have abandoned Europe had NATO not expanded is open to challenge. The USA could have remained involved in Europe in a variety of ways. NATO expansion's proponents posited a false choice between their policy and a wholesale US departure from the continent.

The proponents of expansion aver that it has been vindicated by the rise of authoritarianism in Russia, Russia's war with Georgia, and the 2014 Russia–Ukraine conflict. Under Putin Russia has indeed revived in important respects, but any meaningful index of power—GDP and military spending included—shows that its power is dwarfed by that of Europe. The problem in the 1990s was not that the USA's European allies lacked the economic and technological resources to mount an effective collective defense but that they were politically unwilling to do so, in part because they had all but subcontracted their security to the USA. Yet it is also true that Washington, though it complains about insufficient European military effort, regards a strategically autonomous Europe as incompatible with US global primacy.

As for Russia's political evolution, many complicated factors account for it. But NATO's expansion despite Moscow's fervent objections certainly did not provide an external environment conducive to the success of democracy in Russia. NATO expansion cannot, by any means, explain all that has happened in Russia's politics and foreign policy; but it also cannot be excluded from a comprehensive explanation of that country's political evolution. That, in turn, raises the question of whether and to what extent an alternative approach forging a new European security order that was less threatening or that incorporated Russia would have provided a more propitious setting for Russian democracy.

As for the claim that NATO expansion was essential to ensure that democracy would take root and survive in Eastern and Central Europe and the post-Soviet states, it assumes the truth of a proposition that scholars disagree on, namely that NATO can promote democracy, or save it when it encounters trouble (Reiter 2001; cf. Waterman et al. 2001/02). The history of Greece and Turkey does not support the contention that it can. Both countries joined NATO in 1952 yet succumbed to military rule (Greece in 1967–1974) or military rule plus the military's intervention in politics (Turkey in 1960–1965, 1971, and 1980–1983). Nor has NATO membership



prevented the erosion of democracy in Poland and Hungary, or forestalled the rise of illiberal anti-democratic movements and parties across Europe. Besides, the USA could have pursued democracy promotion in Europe in many ways (using economic and diplomatic means) short of expanding NATO.

Hazards of continued NATO enlargement

NATO enlargement created a new dividing line between Russia and the West in post-Cold War Europe. It helped increase the security dilemma between Russia and the USA while contributing to the emergence of what many commentators refer to as a second Cold War. Both countries have missed the benefits of cooperating to solve global challenges. They could also have worked together to balance a rising China, with which Russia has aligned as its relationship with the USA has deteriorated. Further, as NATO has opened its doors to several states that are hard to defend, the USA has assumed still more obligations even as new challenges arise. That in turn has revealed or exacerbated some of the problems built into its primacist grand strategy. NATO enlargement has, in short, been an unforced error. To mitigate the consequences of this error, the USA and NATO should shut the alliance's open door. Doing so would be safe and beneficial, especially given that Russia's status as a great power competitor has been overblown (Menon 2020).

Yet NATO has repeatedly proclaimed that its door remains open, including to two of the most controversial would-be members, Georgia and Ukraine. In late 2017, Vice President Mike Pence insisted during a visit to Georgia: 'President Trump and the USA stand firmly behind the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement which made it clear that Georgia will, someday, become a member' (White House 2017). As one of us noted at the time, 'Indeed, Pence practically suggested Georgia is already an ally with security guarantees, pointing out that "the joint military operations that are taking place today we hope are a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders"' (Ruger 2017). Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reiterated Pence's promise in June 2019, remarking that 'Georgia's efforts give me great confidence to speak for President Trump, and all of the US Government, when I say that you will continue to have the support of the USA as you seek to become a NATO member' (US Department of State 2019). And despite asking 'Do you think Americans care about Ukraine?' just before a January 2020 trip to that country, once in Kyiv Pompeo stated that the USA had 'maintained support for Ukraine's efforts to join NATO and move closer to the European Union' (US Embassy in Ukraine 2020).

One of the primary reasons the USA should avoid further NATO enlargement is that neither the USA nor its allies need the states that most desire to join the alliance. Consider Georgia.¹ It is a militarily weak country located in a strategic backwater.

¹ This section on Georgia draws on work that first appeared in William Ruger, "Can Georgia Be A Useful American Ally? *War on the Rocks* (August 8, 2017), <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/can-georgia-be-a-useful-american-ally/>.



It also has a small economy and is an insignificant trading partner for the USA. Further, Georgia is a security liability despite its contributions and brave sacrifices in missions like Afghanistan. Georgia has approximately 35,000 active duty soldiers and in 2018 spent a mere \$312 million on defense (SIPRI 2020). The USA in comparison has spent considerably more annually on its military bands and their 6500 musicians (Philipps 2016; Beauchamp 2016). Georgia's military is also significantly smaller than those of its neighbors, including Azerbaijan and Russia's friend Armenia. Nor did Georgian troops acquit themselves well during the five-day war with Russia in 2008 (CNN 2019). As Michael Cecire concluded, 'One item that seems to be almost universally agreed upon by all parties is that the Georgian military performed poorly.' It did so, he argues, because of its relatively small size, its flawed doctrine and training, the fact that its best troops were in Iraq, its lack of force multipliers, and its deficient command and control network (Cecire 2011).

Georgia is a small country—its land area is only a slightly larger than West Virginia's, and its population is less than 4 million (CIA 2020). Its economy ranks 118th in the world in terms of GDP and is half the size of the smallest state economy in the USA, Vermont's (World Bank 2019; Forbes 2019). Georgia's economic situation is mixed. It fares well on the *Economic Freedom of the World* rankings, at 12th—an indicator that correlates with positive economic outcomes. But a recent report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace reveals the other side of the coin, including slow growth, stagnating living standards, a high poverty rate, and lack of diversity in the economy (Gwartney et al. 2019; Stronski and Vreeman 2017). Lack of economic opportunity in Georgia has led to high rates of emigration, and the birth rate is insufficient to maintain the current population size (World Bank 2019). In sum, Georgia has some ability to contribute to NATO but hardly enough to matter for an alliance of wealthy and populous countries that spends a trillion dollars on its military forces—and certainly not enough to justify the resources needed to defend it, let alone the significant risks.

Ukraine is likewise a problematic partner, even though its economic and military resources exceed Georgia's. Nearly the size of Texas, Ukraine contains 44 million people (CIA 2020). Its GDP, \$131 billion, ranks 58th, and its per capita GDP is only just over \$3000. Its economic weight is comparable to Nebraska's (World Bank 2019; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2020). Corruption stunts Ukraine's economic development. World Bank data show that (in constant 2010 dollars) Ukraine's GDP contracted from roughly \$200 billion at the end of the Cold War to \$131 billion in 2018 (World Bank 2019). As the *Washington Post* notes:

The combination of corruption, economic mismanagement, the ongoing civil war against Russian-supported rebels, and did we mention the corruption, have all left Ukraine's economy in worse shape today than it was when the USSR still existed. It seems almost impossible to believe, but Ukraine's GDP is actually 24 percent smaller now than it was in 1993—the first year we have reliable figures for it—and average incomes are 17 percent lower (O'Brien 2019).

Militarily, Ukraine has countered Russian intervention in Donbas resolutely. Still, as Denys Kiryukhin notes, Ukraine's 'military potential remains vastly inferior to that of its primary adversary: Russia' (2018). This is not surprising. Ukraine spent only



\$4.4 billion on defense in 2018 (in constant 2017 dollars) and fielded 204,000 troops (SIPRI 2020; IISS 2018). True, recent reforms have paid some dividends. Valeriy Akimenko observes that ‘the country’s armed forces are larger and better equipped than ever before.... The military budget is set to rise by more than one-quarter in 2018. And, just as importantly, morale has improved.’ Yet he adds:

Major problems remain, all of which stem from Ukraine’s internal political struggles and the continuing weakness of state structures. They include the lack of civilian and parliamentary oversight of the armed forces; incomplete integration of volunteers into the regular army; impunity and abusive behavior in the conflict zone; and systemic corruption and opaque budgets, especially in Ukroboronprom, the state-owned defense-industry monopoly (Akimenko 2018).

The upshot: Ukraine, though more capable than Georgia, will add to NATO’s militarily capabilities only at the margins. But that benefit will be far outweighed by the risks that the alliance will assume to defend it.

Georgia and Ukraine, who remain determined to join NATO, would also be difficult to defend given that they sit on Russia’s doorstep. Georgia is far away from the strongest NATO members.² Tbilisi, its capital, lies 1600 miles from Berlin and 6000 miles from Washington. By contrast, Tbilisi is less than 125 miles from the Russian city of Vladikavkaz. These geographic realities create enormous headaches for NATO when it comes to logistics and power projection. To provide a credible tripwire, NATO—meaning, effectively, the USA—would need to station troops and stockpile materiel in Georgia, and it would need to muster a lot more power to even delay a Russian advance. Giving Georgia NATO membership would also create a moral hazard. NATO’s Article V guarantee could encourage Georgia to engage in what Barry Posen (Posen 2015, 33–35) calls ‘reckless driving.’ Other scholars have argued that the mere possibility of membership and warm relations with the West may have actually emboldened Georgia to drive recklessly in the run-up to the 2008 war (Posen 2015; Savage 2020, 75), though Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State in the George W. Bush administration stated, on the conflict’s tenth anniversary, that “I told Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili—*privately*—that the Russians would try to provoke him and that, given the circumstances on the ground, he could not count on a military response from NATO” (Rice 2018).

Moreover, having Georgia in NATO—or even moving toward admitting it—increases the chance of a NATO–Russia confrontation under circumstances that would favor Russia in almost every respect. This scenario is not far-fetched. In 2008, when Georgian membership in NATO was being discussed in Bucharest, Russia warned: ‘We view the appearance of a powerful military bloc on our borders...as a direct threat to the security of our country’ (Putin 2008). It issued a similar warning in 2017: ‘Moscow has historically treated the process of NATO’s enlargement

² This section on Georgia draws on work that first appeared in William Ruger, “Can Georgia Be A Useful American Ally? *War on the Rocks* (August 8, 2017.). <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/can-georgia-be-a-useful-american-ally/>.



toward our borders with mistrust and concern; we believe this threatens our security and the balance of forces in the Eurasian region. It goes without saying that Russia is taking all necessary measures to rebalance the situation and protect its own interests and its own security' (Kyiv Post 2017). This reaction should not occasion surprise. Surely the USA would not look on with equanimity were an alliance or a major power to deploy its armed forces on its border. Verbal reassurances that no harm was intended and that USA had nothing to fear would be dismissed out of hand.

Ukraine also would be very difficult for NATO to defend. It has long and porous land borders with Russia, and its eastern provinces are quite far from current NATO allies. It is nearly 750 miles from the Polish border to places like Donetsk in Ukraine's east. Russian forces could enter Ukraine from many points with much shorter lines of logistics and communication than NATO would have. Furthermore, Russian-annexed Crimea now forms Ukraine's underbelly, which adds to the advantage that Russian sea power has over NATO navies in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait. Thus, adding Ukraine to NATO, let alone defending it (as opposed to merely creating a tripwire), would require significant investments and troop deployments.

Of course, Ukraine's current war in eastern Ukraine with Russian-backed separatists will keep it out of the alliance for now.³ Rasmussen (2019), a former NATO secretary general, highlighted this fact recently, noting that 'the criteria for eligibility make it virtually impossible for any country with a territorial dispute to become a NATO member.' But the USA should worry that even if Ukraine, the eastern separatists, and Russia reach a peace agreement, Kyiv might try to relitigate its dispute with Russia once it enters NATO.

Shutting NATO's door to new entrants would come at a price, but Ukraine and Georgia would likely bear most of the costs of the decision not to admit them. Although that is unfortunate, US foreign policy should serve US interests rather than those of other countries. One might also argue that denying Georgia and Ukraine membership forecloses the possibility of moving the dividing line in Europe further east and could allow Russia to add these countries to its side in any future clash with NATO. But the prospective gains of admitting them are outweighed by the accompanying risks.

Avoiding threat inflation regarding Russia

Thinking through the enlargement issue requires putting the Russia problem in perspective. Russia—NATO's only real military adversary—is a pale imitation of the former Soviet Union. Thus, the biggest danger to NATO—and the USA in particular—may be threat inflation. Although Russia is geographically large and relatively populous, its economy resembles that of a middling European state. Moreover

³ This paragraph on Ukraine draws on work that was written contemporaneously with this paper but first appeared in William Ruger, "We Should Firmly Shut the Open Door," *Law and Liberty* (April 24, 2019), <https://www.lawliberty.org/libertyforum/we-should-firmly-shut-the-open-door/>; On the last point, see NATO 1995. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24733.htm.



Table 1 Russia's GDP in context

Country	Nominal GDP US\$ (millions) (2017)	GDP PPP UD\$ (millions) (2017)	GDP per capita US\$ (2017)
Russia	1,578,417	3,783,139	10,749
Germany	3,693,204	4,345,631	44,666
UK	2,637,866	2,965,796	39,954
France	2,582,501	2,954,850	38,484
Big 3 Europe	8,913,571	10,266,277	
USA	19,485,394	19,485,394	59,928
Big 3 Europe + USA	28,398,965	29,751,671	

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators database, updated December 23, 2019, <https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>

the Russian economy is highly vulnerable to swings in energy prices (oil and gas account for more than two-thirds of Russia's export earning) and is badly in need of reform, which a host of powerful vested domestic interests resist doggedly. Even über-hawk Senator Lindsey Graham (PolitiFact 2014) acknowledged that Russia's economy was dwarfed by the West's economic power, noting that it only 'has an economy the size of Italy'—a second-tier European country with serious economic problems.

Things have not changed in Russia's favor since 2014. When Graham spoke, Russia's nominal GDP was \$2.06 trillion compared to Italy's \$2.15 trillion. In 2017, Russia's nominal GDP was only \$1.58 trillion compared to Italy's \$1.94 trillion. Based on 2017 purchasing power parity (PPP), Russia fares better than Italy, at \$3.78 trillion compared to \$2.48 trillion. But Russia's GDP per capita was only \$10,749, compared to Italy's \$32,110 (World Bank 2019). Table 1 shows the economic weakness of Russia when compared to the three largest economies of Europe separately and combined, and compared to the USA separately and combined with these three economies. This tally does not even consider the combined economic wealth of all 29 NATO countries.

The combined GDP of European NATO countries, calculated in 2010 prices, was \$18.8 trillion, and if one considers NATO as a whole, the figure jumps to \$38.1 trillion (NATO 2019b). Russia's, by contrast, totals \$1.6 trillion. These figures show that NATO has an enormous advantage over Russia in economic strength.

Nor is Russia a military peer competitor of the USA and its NATO allies. According to the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), Russia's defense spending in 2017 was \$45.6 billion, 3.1% of its GDP. This amounts to less than 10 percent of US defense spending, which IISS estimates totaled over \$600 billion in 2017, 3.1% of GDP (IISS 2018). The Stockholm Institute for Peace Research (SIPRI) calculates that Russia's 2018 military spending amounted to \$64 billion (in 2017 prices and exchange rates), 4.2% of GDP, compared to the US \$634 billion (in 2017 prices and exchange rates), 3.1% of GDP (SIPRI 2020). These numbers are just blunt comparisons based on spending alone. The



differences become starker and favor the USA even more when we consider its technological edge in weaponry and superior force employment (Biddle 2004).

Furthermore, military expenditures for NATO countries as a whole in 2018 (in constant 2017 US\$) were \$933 billion compared to Russia's \$64 billion (SIPRI 2020). Further, many years of similar disparities add to the overall military advantage for the USA and NATO. The gap is substantial even if one allows for the fact that personnel costs—pay and benefits—are far greater in NATO countries than in Russia. The 2018 disparity also holds up even if one excludes US and Canadian spending. NATO's European members spent \$278 billion on defense compared to Russia's \$64 billion. Indeed, France, Germany, and the UK each individually spend close to what Russia does, with France closest at nearly \$60 billion. Moreover, as Michael Kofman (2017) argues, 'The Russian armed forces are actually small relative to the size of the country they have to defend, perhaps exceeding no more than 900,000 in total size with a ground force doubtfully greater than ~300,000. That may not seem small, but Russia comprises one-eighth of the earth's land mass.'

Furthermore, the wealthiest, most populous states of Europe are spending relatively little on defense as a percentage of GDP and could fairly easily (in terms of economic capacity as opposed to political will) increase their expenditures, widening the resource gap that Russia faces. The balance of power—using military expenditures as a not unreasonable proxy for military capabilities—clearly favors the USA, NATO, and Europe.

Russia's difficulties in Georgia in 2008 (which to be sure have been somewhat remedied based on learning from that conflict) and in the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria offer recent examples of the challenges that the Russian military would face against NATO in Europe. In assessing the Russia-Georgia war, Kofman (2018) concludes:

Russia won, but the Russian military simply was not set up to fight a modern war, even against a smaller neighbor, much less a peer competitor.... The war revealed profound deficiencies in the Russian armed forces. Moscow was surprised by the poor performance of its air power, and more importantly the inability of different services to work together. It truly was the last war of a legacy force, inherited from the Soviet Union. The conflict uncovered glaring gaps in capability, problems with command and control, and poor intelligence.

Russia has fought differently in Ukraine and Syria. 'Moscow,' Kofman (2017), argued in an earlier piece, 'has applied force sparingly, leveraging the local population, its own volunteers, and the militias of allies' to meet its goals. But this is a far cry from the type of conflict that it would be forced to fight to existentially challenge NATO in any of its major member states whose defeat would represent a serious threat to the US interests (e.g., France, Germany, or even Poland). Kofman's assessment confirms this. He notes in reference to Ukraine that 'Russia lacked the force, the money, and the military experience to attempt any large-scale operation.'

Russia also faces considerable social problems that contribute to its weakness. A European Parliamentary Research Service study summed it up well:



Economic recovery [in Russia] has been anemic, with growth likely to remain below 2% for the next few years. Forecasts suggest that Russia's share of the global economy will continue to shrink, and that it will lag ever further behind the world's more advanced economies. External factors such as sanctions certainly weigh on Russia's economy, but the main barriers to growth come from inside the country and are the result of long-standing problems, many originating in the Soviet period or even further back. Despite market-economy reforms in the early 1990s, Russia remains dominated by large and inefficient state-controlled enterprises. Reforms have improved the regulatory environment and cut red tape, but these gains have not been matched by progress in tackling corruption, which remains a major scourge for business. In terms of human capital, a catastrophic shrinkage in the size of the workforce caused by low birthrates is expected to hold back economic growth. Inequality remains high, and economic recovery has not yet benefited the nearly 20 million Russians living in poverty. A low level of competitiveness correlates with a general lack of innovation, low levels of investment and reliance on natural-resource exports (Russell 2018).

The USA should nevertheless take Russia seriously. It is a force to be reckoned with, particularly in adjoining regions (like the Baltic states) and in Syria. Russia can still create trouble for its neighbors and further abroad, including via small investments that cause internal challenges in the West (such as election meddling using misinformation). However, none of this warrants the type of threat inflation that presents Russia as a huge problem for the USA or its primary European allies. The USA can safely and confidently deter Russia given the two countries' relative strength. But this does not mean that NATO should overextend itself by assuming responsibility for defending weak states on the Russian border.

Conclusion: looking ahead

As long as NATO continues to exist, greater burden sharing and burden shifting will be necessary to calm rising US concerns about cheap-riding Europeans (Posen 2015). But this problem will be difficult to resolve, and those who would like to see NATO continue as a keystone of the liberal international order should be worried. NATO's European members should be pressured not only to boost their defense spending, but also to devote more of their spending to military procurement changes and to do away with the pervasive duplication in armament production. Only then can they reduce their dependency on US power—so vividly illustrated by the wars in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya—and increase their capacity to take on alliance missions, especially if the USA were to be tied down elsewhere. Temporary combinations of European states should be able to cooperate for missions on the scale of the 2011 intervention in Libya (not that a repeat of this is to be recommended given the disastrous results) and Kosovo in 1999. Given that they have more to fear from the Russian military than the USA does, and that they also have



great economic capacity, European countries should do more on behalf of their own defense.

Some aver that alliance relations will revert to normal should President Trump depart the White House in 2021. But they forget that US concerns about the relative contribution of the Europeans are long-standing, harking back to the 1960s. Moreover, these concerns are likely to intensify as the USA faces economic constraints (the colossal national debt and soaring budget deficits—especially in the post-COVID-19 world) and long-neglected domestic problems increase disaffection among Americans. Since the early decades of NATO, European countries have become economic competitors of the USA and neomercantilists and populists in the USA have become more vocal—in Democratic as well as Republican ranks. US leaders will ratchet up pressure on NATO allies to assume more of the burden of collective defense—and NATO may not survive if Europe does nothing more than tinker in response. Moreover, the rise of China will inevitably divert US military resources from Europe. In short, Trump's departure in 2021 or 2025 won't restore the status quo ante for NATO, at least not for long (Becker 2017; Menon 2007; NATO 1995; Putin 2007; Ruger 2017, 2019; Shlapak and Johnson 2016; US Department of Defense 2011).

Recent friction in the alliance owing to, among other things, different outlooks on the world and the nature of threats as well as disputes over burden sharing raises the question of whether it would be good for the USA (and Europe) for Europe to develop a strong common foreign and defense policy, or even to evolve into a super-state.⁴ Scholars such as Morgan (2005) have for some time made the case that self-sufficiency in defense would benefit Europe. President Emmanuel Macron of France argued at the 2020 Munich Security Conference:

We need some freedom of action in Europe. We need to develop our own strategy. We don't have the same geographic conditions (as the US), not the same ideas about social equilibrium, about social welfare. There are ideals we have to defend. Mediterranean policy: that is a European thing, not a trans-Atlantic thing, and the same goes for Russia—we need a European policy, not just a trans-Atlantic policy (*Deutsche Welle* 2020).

But would such changes be desirable? Some US realists might worry that ending US primacy in Europe and allowing the development of a European superstate could give rise to the type of Eurasian hegemon that Americans have traditionally fought to prevent (Spykman 1942). They would prefer that Europe remain relatively weak, divided, and dependent on the USA, while the latter maintains its hegemonic position on the continent. But other realists would see advantages for the USA if Europe were to forge a common defense policy and increase its defense capabilities. These include a reduced responsibility for ensuring stability and security in Europe and the capacity to better focus on East Asia as China continues its rise. The latter type of realist would rest assured that Eurasia's main centers of power—Europe, Russia,

⁴ This section draws on work that was written contemporaneously with this paper but first appeared in William Ruger, "We Should Firmly Shut the Open Door," *Law and Liberty* (April 24, 2019), <https://www.lawliberty.org/liberty-forum/we-shouldfirmly-shut-the-open-door/>.



and East Asia—will remain divided and preoccupied with one another and therefore unable to challenge the USA. This should certainly be the case between Russia and China, unlikely allies absent a perceived threat from the USA that pushes them closer. As for nonrealists, they would be less concerned about a more vigorous Europe, even a European superstate, given their assumption that shared democratic values and norms and economic interdependence will create a peaceful Western community. In that case, a European superstate would be a partner, not the foe traditional balance of power theorists might worry about.

If a European common security and defense policy—whether created by a superstate or not—would not be palatable to countries in Europe, there are alternatives. NATO could be preserved, given the difficulties and hazards of jettisoning its current commitments. But further enlargement could be taken off the table. This could be paired with something resembling the new security architecture for Eastern Europe proposed by O’Hanlon (2017). Another option would be major powers like Germany and France working together to counter threats from the east or south. This would not necessitate a unified European military force, and security competition and the danger of war would be diminished given that France, the UK, and Russia have nuclear weapons. Their conventional and nuclear forces would also serve as a hedge were Germany to once again pose a threat to Europe’s equilibrium. Some realists might not even be worried about Germany joining the nuclear club to bolster its security.

NATO enlargement has hurt the USA. It foreclosed, without much thought, other options for future European security arrangements that might have prevented a new dividing line on the continent and a hostile relationship between the USA and Russia. And though Russia’s wars in Georgia and Ukraine cannot be chalked up to NATO expansion alone, Russia did fear that these two bordering states might eventually join NATO. In short, post-Cold War US presidents would have been wiser to listen to the pro-NATO, yet anti-enlargement figures who understood at each turn that enlargement could lead to numerous unintended consequences, additional defense obligations, negligible benefits, and an increased risk of crises and even war.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest Neither author has a conflict of interest, though one of us has previously served in a NATO mission.

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