



Why Russia Fears NATO

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Adam Twardowski takes umbrage at arguments that I and other members of the realism and restraint camp have made that NATO's behavior over the past two decades has exacerbated tensions with Russia. He begins his rebuttal with a drive-by smear that is increasingly in vogue among neoconservatives, dismissing such arguments as coming from "Russia's apologists." Elsewhere in the piece, he resorts to the even uglier smear of NATO critics as "Putin's apologists."

Twardowski begins his substantive case with the argument that if Russia truly feared NATO because of the alliance's allegedly belligerent actions "then it makes no sense from a realist perspective that U.S.-Russian relations warmed at all following the Soviet Union's disintegration." That is a puzzling argument. Moscow clearly hoped for a new, united European security architecture in the years following the demise of the Soviet Union. It was only when NATO intervened in Bosnia in 1995 (some four years later) and idle talk about expanding the alliance eastward turned into an actual offer (three years after that) that Russian suspicions about Western, especially U.S., intentions became prominent.

Throughout the piece, Twardowski states or implies that Russian hostility toward NATO is a new phenomenon, basically dating from 2014 and the crisis over Ukraine. Nothing could be further from the truth. I encountered numerous Russian diplomats, journalists, and scholars during the mid-and late 1990s who were mystified and resentful at the U.S. decision to expand NATO eastward—in violation of what they regarded as a solemn promise not to do so. They were even angrier about the U.S.-led military interventions in the Balkans, a traditional Russian sphere of influence, in support of anti-Slavic factions. Although Russian leaders complained about such matters, Russia was simply too weak to do anything about it except issue impotent protests. During the Kosovo intervention, however, the commander of British forces worried that the United States was pushing Russia too far. He directly disobeyed a direct order from NATO Supreme Commander U.S. General Wesley Clark to attack Russian military personnel at Pristina airport, saying that he wasn't about to start World War III. That was a strange fear if the Russians didn't care about NATO's actions.

One sign of Russia's growing disillusionment with the West was seeing a series of generally pro-Western prime ministers under President Boris Yeltsin succeeded by the enigmatic but decidedly more nationalistic Vladimir Putin. And as Yeltsin's successor, Putin would move to rebuild Russia's military strength and adopt a much more assertive foreign policy.

The consequences of NATO's arrogance became evident in 2008—long before the dust-up over Ukraine in 2014. The United States and its allies again double-crossed Russia regarding Kosovo, bypassing the UN Security Council (and a certain Russian veto) and acting as the midwife for the province's unilateral declaration of independence. U.S. leaders then piled on the arrogance, asserting that the Kosovo situation was unique and set no precedent. Russia's answer to that absurdity came a few months later when it exploited a reckless military move by Georgia against a secessionist region, South Ossetia, to counterattack and preside over the detachment of that region and another secessionist enclave, Abkhazia.

Twardowski argues on several occasions that NATO poses no “existential threat” to Russia. But I know of no realist who makes that argument. Indeed, “existential threat” is a concept that is used in a far too promiscuous fashion by Twardowski and his neoconservative colleagues, not by realists and not by the Russians. American hawks even use the term to describe the threat that a few thousand stateless Islamic terrorists pose—as though they truly threaten the very existence of the United States.

But NATO can and does menace important Russian interests without posing an existential threat. As I have described elsewhere, it would be a useful mental exercise to consider what the reaction in this country would be if an alliance dominated by another major power, say China, began to add the Caribbean countries, the Central American countries, and the northern tier powers of South America to a military alliance that it controlled. Consider further the probable reaction if the Chinese equivalents of neoconservatives campaigned to bring Canada and Mexico into such an alliance and deploy Chinese military forces in those countries. Would any U.S. leader—indeed, any prudent American—not consider that a threat to the nation's security?

That is essentially what the United States and NATO have done to Russia. Yet Twardowski believes that the Russians have no legitimate complaints. His response is an operational definition of willful blindness.

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