



## Lost Opportunity: How the Clinton Administration Started a Cold War With a Democratic Russia

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There is little dispute that relations between the United States and Russia are now so hostile that they amount to a second cold war. The current situation is such a depressing contrast to the high hopes for a cordial bilateral relationship and the emergence of a stable, peaceful, and cooperative Europe that marked the demise of the Soviet Union three decades ago.

Most Americans blame Moscow, but the United States and its NATO allies are largely responsible for the onset of the current, dangerous confrontation. Tensions have intensified gradually over the past three decades, although some episodes stand out as especially important. George W. Bush's successful push to expand NATO to include the Baltic republics, and his even more brazen (albeit unsuccessful) effort to gain membership for Georgia and Ukraine, greatly antagonized Russia. Barack Obama's administration topped that provocation by assisting demonstrators to overthrow Ukraine's elected, pro-Russian president in 2014. Vladimir Putin's government responded to that gross intrusion into Russia's security zone by annexing Crimea, thereby guaranteeing continued access to his country's vital naval base at Sevastopol. Washington's ongoing campaign to make Ukraine a U.S. military pawn and Moscow's efforts to thwart that maneuver have brought the renewed East-West animosity to a climax.

However, one party that has not received sufficient blame for this ugly situation is Bill Clinton's administration. The arrogant, menacing policies that the Clinton foreign policy team pursued started the tragic descent to a new cold war. The 1990s could have become the decade in which an enlightened US policy facilitated Russia's political and economic integration into the democratic West. It also could have been the decade in which NATO was given the retirement party it had earned, Western Europe finally took responsibility for its own defense through a new "Europeans only" security organization, and Central and Eastern Europe became a neutral zone that respected Russia's economic and military interests.

Instead, the Clinton administration insisted on not only perpetuating a U.S.-dominated NATO, but pushing the Alliance to expand toward Russia. The latter action violated verbal promises that George H. W. Bush's administration gave Moscow during the Soviet Union's final months that NATO would not move beyond the eastern border of a united Germany. Clinton administration

officials showed contempt for Russia's interests in a variety of other ways. Washington not only meddled in the Balkans, but did so in a manner that undermined Russia's longstanding political and religious client, Serbia. Indeed, the ostentatious U.S.-NATO military interventions seemed calculated to underscore that Moscow had lost the Cold War and, therefore, had to quietly endure whatever humiliations the Western powers decided to inflict.

Both the Clinton administration and the larger US foreign policy establishment displayed astonishing arrogance in their approach to world affairs generally and relations with Russia in particular. They relished what *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer termed a "unipolar moment" in the international system. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright epitomized the prevailing attitude when she boasted that America was "the indispensable nation," because we "stand tall and see further than other countries into the future." The governing elite of the sole remaining superpower, embracing such narcissism, was not about to respect the interests of a weakened Russia, or even show a modicum of respect in its dealings with Moscow.

Administration officials made perfunctory assurances that NATO expansion was not an anti-Russia initiative, and that Russian leaders would (eventually) reach the same conclusion. However, even a reasonably objective observer likely would have reached a different conclusion. In her memoirs, Albright confirmed that the pro-expansion decision was reached in June 1993—long before Russia made any aggressive moves against its neighbors. "[W]e believed that NATO had to remain at the center of the European security system," she emphasized. Moreover, "it was only fair that NATO should open its doors to the new democracies, provided they met the same political and military standards as other members."

Albright conceded, though, that even the first stage of expansion, which brought three members of Moscow's defunct Warsaw Pact – Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary – into the Alliance, upset Russia. "[Russian President Boris] Yeltsin and his countrymen were strongly opposed to enlargement, seeing it as a strategy for exploiting their vulnerability and moving Europe's dividing line to the east, leaving them isolated." Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott similarly described the Russian attitude. "Many Russians see NATO as a vestige of the cold war, inherently directed against their country. They point out that they have disbanded the Warsaw Pact, *their* military alliance, and ask why the West should not do the same." It was an excellent question, and neither the Clinton administration nor its successors had even a reasonably convincing answer

Albright, Talbott, and other expansion proponents simply insisted that the Russian perception was wrong. The goal of both Washington and the newly free European countries, Albright stated, "was to do for Europe's East what NATO and the Marshall Plan had done for Europe's West." The ultimate goal "was to create a sphere of common interest in which every nation would live in security."

It is unlikely that she was naïve enough to believe that NATO's move eastward was not directed at Russia. Other administration officials were similarly disingenuous in their public statements, but sometimes they let the mask slip a little. Talbott argued that embedding Eastern Europe's newly liberated nations in both the EU and NATO was the key to future stability in the region. Enlargement of NATO, he predicted, would be "a force for the rule of law within Europe's new

democracies and among them." Promoting such stability, according to his thesis, actually would benefit Russia.

However, Talbott (and other Clinton administration officials) also saw Russia as being in a separate, decidedly less trustworthy, category than other nations in Eastern Europe. Moreover, for all the US rhetoric about a new, post-Cold War NATO being focused more on political rather than military objectives, he was candid about the Alliance's continuing primary function. "NATO is and will remain for the foreseeable future, including when it takes in new members, a military alliance and a collective defense pact." Furthermore, "among the contingencies for which NATO must be prepared is that Russia will abandon democracy and return to the threatening patterns of international behavior that have sometimes characterized its history, particularly during the Soviet period. Uncertainty about Russia's future is inescapably among the factors to be taken into account in shaping decisions about European security." However, Russia was not supposed to view such a brazenly hostile perspective as threatening to its interests in any way.

It's hard to imagine why anyone would believe that expanding the most powerful military alliance in world history to the border of a newly democratic nation that emerged from the wreckage of the USSR would not be construed as a hostile act. Even given Washington's continuing superpower status, US leaders and the American people would not react well if another great power, say China, sought to bring Canada or Mexico into a military alliance that Beijing dominated. Yet Clinton administration policymakers insisted that Russia had nothing to fear from NATO's move to the east, and should not act as though it did. Not surprisingly, the Russians felt differently.

Former US Ambassador to the Soviet Union Jack F. Matlock Jr. underscores the destructive impact that NATO expansion and the U.S.-led military interventions in the Balkans had on Russian attitudes toward the United States and the democratic West. "The effect on Russians' trust in the United States was devastating. In 1991, polls indicated that about 80 percent of Russian citizens had a favorable view of the United States; in 1999, nearly the same percentage had an unfavorable view."

The Clinton administration's arrogant, tone-deaf policy torpedoed the prospects for a lasting rapprochement between the West and Russia. When the 1990s drew to a close, the momentum toward a new cold war was becoming irreversible. Washington had wasted the opportunity of a lifetime for a more peaceful Europe and a more peaceful world.

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