

e-International Relations

NATO Expansion: Worth the Cost?

By Andrew M. Beehler on June 28, 2012

“The dirty little secret of U.S. defense politics is that the United States is safe—probably the most secure great power in modern history. Weak neighbors, vast ocean barriers, nuclear weapons, and the wealth to build up forces make almost nonexistent the threats that militaries traditionally existed to thwart”.^[1]
- Friedman & Logan

The expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization after the fall of the Soviet Union was an unnecessary, costly, and flawed policy decision that continues to deteriorate US bilateral relations with Russia. Regardless of how US policymakers describe their motives, the expansion of NATO has and will remain to be seen by Russians as an unjustified threat to their national interests. The actions taken by NATO and its partners since 1991 have inflamed Russian militarism, prevented further market-oriented reforms, and most notably undermined Russian democratization. The benefits the US reaps from NATO expansion are nonexistent—by providing large security subsidies to our allies we are preventing their defense development at US taxpayer expense.^[1] Despite what is commonly believed, the United States is quite safe. Expanding the Atlantic Alliance at very best marginally increases American security at an unacceptable cost.^[1]

NATO is a collective defense organization that was implemented in 1949 to counter the threat and growing influence of the Soviet Union. Initially made up of the United States and Western European powers, the organization was highly successful in its mission to deter any substantial attack, principally Soviet, on a member state. The growth of the USSR and its expanding sphere of influence in the second half of the 20th century necessitated the extension of membership to Greece and Turkey in 1952, West Germany in 1955, and Spain in 1982.^[2] However, after the fall of the organization’s single geopolitical foe in 1991, expansion became unwarranted; there were no current or rising threats that could feasibly undermine European or American security.

Proponents of the expansionist policy have cited the idealistic claim that eastward expansion would project stability and promote democracy in the fragile region.^[3] This assertion failed to realize the sole purpose of NATO as a defense organization: to deter threats and counter attacks against member states.^[3] Additionally, the decision to offer security guarantees (through the extension of membership) to small, geopolitically irrelevant, and possibly reckless states was extremely foolish. The policy decision of growth also failed to recognize or predict the self-fulfilling prophecy that it would incur; there would be significant effects on Russian domestic politics by destabilizing the existing liberal sentiments. The post-Soviet enlargement of NATO has proven to be a detriment to US-Russian relations and has incited unnecessary challenges to US national interests.

The fall of the USSR left NATO in a position of unparalleled military strength without any regional or global threats. Though President Clinton and many western statesmen believed that a Russian danger still existed after 1991, this was a groundless and unprovoked claim.^[3] Putting aside intentions, Russia’s actual military capability was not a threat to the US, Western Europe, Central Europe, or even Eastern Europe.^[3] Conventional force levels in Russia were in compliance with the Treaty of Conventional Forces in Europe, under which they had boundaries on the placement of troops geographically, and limitations on the total number of operational troops.^[3] In 1994 and throughout the rest of the decade, Russian forces were well within their agreed upon restrictions: 70 percent of all divisions were operating at less than 50 percent of approved levels.^[3] Moreover, from 1988 to 1996 Russian military expenditure fell from 15.8% of GDP to 4.1% of GDP.^[5] Taking into account the massive economic problems facing the state, there was clearly a major change in national priorities.^[5] Though he was a proponent of expansion, the former national security advisor to Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, acknowledged that “Neither the alliance nor its prospective new members [are] facing any imminent threat” and went on to say that that justifying expansion by possible future growth in power of Russia is unsubstantiated “either by actual circumstances

or even by worst case scenarios for the near future”.[3] Russian force posture was markedly less hostile than Soviet force posture; why didn’t the West or NATO recognize this change?

The Soviet Union’s sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, though massively reduced in size, was partially transferred to the Russian Federation by default in 1991. This minimal amount of authority in the region, precariously guarded by an unorganized government and an extremely weak economy, would quickly be charged by NATO and the United States as a sign of possible future aggression. As for intentions, rather than displaying aggressive tendencies as is commonly believed, late USSR and early Russian Federation foreign policy of the early 1990s was highly accommodating if not capitulating.[6] The regression from central and Eastern Europe, the signing of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START I & II), and the newfound lack of revolutionary ideology all pointed to a benevolent Russia.[6]

The security situation of Europe and the United States was profoundly different than what it was prior to 1991, but the fact that Moscow was no longer the hub of a radical ideology or hostile political system seems to have gone largely unnoticed. Some Western policymakers acknowledged this change but still feared a possible future threat, one such policymaker was the Deputy Secretary of State under the Clinton Administration, Strobe Talbott. He argued for preemptive expansion, positing that “New threats may arise that would require NATO to protect its members and to deter attack”.[7] If this is the case, and Russia was no longer a threat (as Talbott later conceded), then expansion should have moved to include Russia.

Nearly all advocates of NATO’s expansion see projecting stability and promoting democracy as a crucial function of the alliance. They assert that the incentives to join NATO will encourage democratization in Central and Eastern European states—furthering the goals of the United States and the West. This is an unsound argument that fails to recognize the limited ability of NATO, and the existence of a separate international institution that exclusively serves this purpose—the EU. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a collective defense organization designed to deter threats and respond to attacks on its member states. Though it may be capable, it is not designed to, or efficient at interfering with domestic politics. Though promoting regional stability and the democratization of Central and Eastern Europe should be policy goals of the United States and Western Europe, NATO is not the correct international organization to achieve it with.[3]

The European Union has provided a considerable incentive to prospective member states in Eastern and Central Europe for the growth of democracy by increasing good governance sans corruption, widening human rights laws, and increasing the protection of minorities.[3] NATO on the other hand, is not intended or needed for this purpose; and to be sure, though it may be capable of doing so, it’s not worth the cost of alienating a largely compliant Russia. Instead, the primary incentive for encouraging post-Soviet states to democratize and implement market reforms should be the European Union. Far more appropriate in achieving Western aims, the officially expressed goals of the EU are: to partially integrate states politically, promote a “single market” in which goods, people, and money move freely, and finally, to act together in security and defense matters.[8]

Many proponents of expansion believe that expanding NATO to the East will stabilize the region and prevent conflict. But because NATO is a collective defense organization and not a collective security organization, it is not prepared to mediate inter-alliance disputes.[3] The Turkish invasion of Cyprus in the summer of 1974 is an illuminating and near catastrophic example of NATO’s shortcoming in collective security.[9] The Greek backed coup, which deposed Archbishop Makarios and implanted Nicos Sampson, instilled fear in the Turkish Cypriots who believed their new leader would seek amalgamation with Greece.[9] Tense negotiation talks between the two countries failed, leading to a Turkish invasion of the island and an ensuing military confrontation of the two forces.[9] Both Greek and Turkish Cypriot citizens were victims of ethnic cleansing through forced evacuations from their homes by opposition forces.[9] Though both these states were members, clearly there were major dilemmas to arbitration that NATO failed to solve.

Proponents of this “stabilization theory” also need to understand that extending membership to small, geopolitically irrelevant, and possibly reckless states, such as Georgia, is a recipe for disaster. Despite the fears of outside and often Western observers, Russia did not present a territorial threat or take unprovoked

aggressive action against its neighbors in the 1990's.[3] Still though, American political leaders and NATO policy analysts have continued to promise membership to Georgia and Ukraine.[9] Even if these promises are simply rhetoric, it comes at a high cost. According to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, "NATO's promise to extend membership to Georgia is unjust, humiliating, and intolerable to Moscow".[9] Many Russians described the Georgian offensive in 2008 against the pro-Russian rebel territory of South Ossetia as a "Russian September 11th".[9] With that in mind, Russian policymakers understandably see the positive relations between NATO and Georgia as absolutely ludicrous.[16] Furthermore, extending the security umbrella of NATO to Russian border states like Georgia, especially when under the control of reckless leaders like Mikheil Sakashvili, could end in a WWI style alliance tragedy that pulls the West into confrontation with a nuclear state. Providing a security guarantee through NATO membership to states such as Ukraine or Georgia is a costly decision that is unlikely to increase stability and could easily lead to a calamitous fait accompli.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO's mission began to transition from a distinct adversarial situation poised to deter the USSR, to a self-proclaimed stabilization force aimed at increasing security across Europe. Advocates of expansion claimed that NATO would promote peace and security in both NATO and non-NATO states.[11] With no clear threat to the alliance, this was a primary component of the new mission statement, on which the validity of expansion rested upon.[11] However, as conflict broke out in both Yugoslavia and Kosovo the alliance proved how incompetent it was in regard to peacekeeping and the promotion of stability.[11] Even though the two different situations clearly required intervention, NATO states failed to come to a consensus; leaving Milosevic and the Bosnian Serbs to carry out genocidal actions.

Though proponents of expansion lacked a sound logical argument for expansion, they had a something just as good to achieve their goals of extending NATO membership to Eastern Europe. The Military Industrial Complex is responsible for much of the inflation of the Russian threat. Representatives from these corporations were at the core of NATO's expansion lobby. From the eyes of the IMF and the World Bank, increased defense spending by Central and Eastern European states is not in these states' best interest; there are many other, more pressing social issues that desperately need to be addressed.[14] Despite this, the incentives NATO and the United States have offered in the form of membership action plans and defense spending loans entices these states to make massive American arms purchases.[13] In fact, the prerequisite for consideration in the Atlantic Alliance is westernized weapons systems, "Billions of dollars are at stake in the next global arms bazaar: weapons sales to Central European nations invited to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Admission to the Western Fraternity will bring political prestige, but at a price: playing by NATO rules, which require Western weapons and equipment".[13] The expansion of NATO has taken a significant toll on the budgets of emerging democracies in post-Soviet Europe. Additionally, these defense corporations have lobbied American politicians and swayed representatives by immoral means: expensive dinners, campaign financing, and other incentives are often taken into account more than the geopolitical effect these choices end up having.[14] In the American political system this is not uncommon by any means, but rarely does it have such detrimental effects. As Kenneth Waltz disapprovingly theorized in reference to the Vietnam War, "If the restraints of international politics press less closely, the question of internal restraint looms ever larger. To study the politics of peace, then, requires the examination of domestic politics, especially the politics of the world's most powerful nation".[14]

While there were certainly benefits to the expansion of NATO, they need to be judged in relation to the considerable cost they incur. Primarily, the expansion of NATO to the East has withered away nearly all tolerance Russia has for offensive US strategic policy. Responsive actions taken by Russian strategists need to be viewed with offensive NATO developments, such as the implementation of a comprehensive missile radar system in the Czech Republic, kept in mind.[15] According to Putin, "Our experts consider this system to be a threat to Russian national security, and if it appears, we will be obligated to react to this" by, according to the Kremlin, retargeting Russian missiles towards these new systems.[15]

Another major challenge to US policy objectives is Putin's suspension of the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe in response to a lack of negotiation by the US and NATO.[15] Putin asserted that with NATO's vastly expanded military capability to the East, the treaty signed in 1990 was no longer acceptable.[15]

Perhaps most reckless is the continued expansion of the American and NATO ballistic missile defense shield, now planned to be extended to a plethora of states in Europe. In addition to a set of Aegis ballistic missile defense ships in Spain, both Romania and Turkey have signed onto plans for the development of multiple new Interceptor missile sites.[16][17] Even more unsettling for Russia is the re-emergence of NATO talks on missile defense sites in Poland.[20] Though these sites are officially planned to shield Europe from rogue states such as Iran, new BMD deployments nonetheless continue to neutralize Russia's nuclear deterrent, rendering Mutually Assured Destruction defunct. The weight of this realization on Russia's part could easily push them toward a coalition with China, only furthering the threat to the United States.[18] In fact, many experts agree that the 1996 creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a collective security organization comprised of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, is an answer to the growing menace of an eastward expanding NATO.[18] Russian national interest clearly needs to be taken into account by NATO officials if it doesn't want to reignite Cold War tensions.

The effects of NATO expansion have had anti-liberalization implications for Russian domestic politics. By failing to ease expansion after the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO and the United States forced the Russian Federation into an uncomfortable position where they were required to respond to a growing national security threat.[3] In the 1996 presidential election, Lieutenant-General Aleksander Lebed, a top candidate in the race, declared that "expansion proposals were a product of Cold War thinking" and that NATO would "force Russia to rely on Authoritarian politics", a policy he was a proponent of himself.[19] Lieutenant-General Lebed would go on to win about a sixth of the vote in the 1996 election. As a result, there emerged a swelling and legitimate force of hawkish, nationalist, and militarist politicians in the Russian Duma.[3] Another 1996 presidential candidate, Grigory Yavlinsky, characterized the situation in a colorful way, "A tank cannot be peaceful, even if you paint it pink, even if it is for the sake of peace and stability in Europe".[19] In reference to the extension of a membership action plan to Poland, Russian General Valerri Manilov proclaimed that "NATO's eastward expansion was a fatal mistake" because of "the purely emotional, subconscious reaction inevitably evoked among the Russian officer corps".[19] Democratization has clearly been hampered by the emergence of these not-so-democratically-minded groups in Russian domestic politics.

To a certain extent, the Atlantic Alliance is an artifact of the Cold War; it is devoid of a legitimate, pressing, and concrete purpose. There are a few particular areas of policy that the US and Russia agree on, such as preventive measures to combat transnational terrorism and specifically the "coalition of the willing" in Afghanistan.[21] Still though, there are many more overshadowing points of contention in US-Russian relations with regard to NATO, including: the growth of the US BMD shield, the interventions in Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya, and the overall continued expansion of Atlantic Alliance bases.

Even though there continue to be major ideological and strategic differences between Russia, the United States and NATO, they are not impossible to fix. The United States and NATO should either begin to expand the alliance by offering a membership action plan to Russia, or it should begin the process of a regressive retirement. The expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, on the whole, was and continues to be an unnecessarily offensive policy that has undermined the possibility of a close partnership with an important and powerful nuclear-armed state.

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