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NATO Headquarters, Brussels, with the flags of all the member nations displayed.

NATO Enlargement, Russia, and Balance of Threat

by Sumantra Maitra

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Introduction

Recent scholarship and declassified documents have thrown open further debates about NATO enlargement at a time when the unity and strength of the alliance is under scrutiny. As the primary offshore balancers in Europe, Britain and the United States show retrenchment tendencies, and the European Union seeks an independent military force projection capability, and arguably, strategic autonomy bordering upon future hegemonic aspirations.

Mary Elise Sarotte, a renowned post-Cold War authority, currently the Distinguished Professor of Historical Studies at the Henry S. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins University, questions conventional wisdom about the benevolent intention of the American and West German strategists in the early

post-cold war days.¹ The West German motivation, especially, was not predicated upon integrating former Warsaw pact countries and spreading “liberal democracy,” or institutions, but to push the frontiers further east, at the cost of Moscow’s sphere of influence. Joshua Shiffrin, an Assistant Professor of International Relations at the Pardee School of Global Studies, Boston University, argues that American policymakers repeatedly assured the desperate Soviet leadership that the alliance would not move east, even though most of the pledges were informal in nature, and arguably, were debatable when one of the original parties, the Soviet Union, collapsed.² It is appropriate to suggest that whatever may be the reason, both Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin were under the impression that there would not be any actual movement of hardware and infrastructure towards the east.³

But what about Moscow’s threat perceptions? That is an immensely policy-relevant question, but one which has been hardly explored. The conventional wisdom suggests that NATO enlargement led to a revanchist Russia. This article summarizes the Western debate and push for enlargement, and then divides and explores three phases of Russian reactions to NATO enlargement, in light of the realist Harvard Professor of International Affairs Stephen Walt’s balance of threat theory.⁴ Ignoring the rhetoric

Tanks on parade in Moscow's Red Square, 7 May 2021, in celebration of the 76th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany in 1945.

emanating from Moscow, as well as Western media, and studying actual observable reactions of Moscow vis-à-vis phases of NATO expansion, this article will suggest that Moscow is purely focused upon material and military aspects. It further suggests that the evidence of Moscow's reflexive revanchism is sparse. Russian foreign policy is tested and correlated with Russian rhetoric, military strategy and Russian balancing actions, in light of each phase of actual and potential NATO expansion. The article will conclude that Russia balances against perceived threats, only in areas where it has entrenched material and military interests. Otherwise, Russia is aware of her relative military inferiority, and is agnostic about NATO and EU enlargement. Reality is, therefore, perhaps more complex. The enlargement itself was not the cause of Russian revanchism, and there was no uniform reaction from Russia about "Western betrayal." Moscow was quite agnostic about NATO enlargement in parts of central Europe and former Warsaw pact countries. Moscow, however, did display aggression when Russia's direct strategic interests were perceived to be threatened, such as Russian military supply chains in Eastern Ukraine, a naval port in Crimea, and defensible terrain and established bases in Georgia.

These findings have enormous policy relevance as both NATO and EU plans further enlargement, American and British isolationism grows, and the European security scenario alters rapidly. The policy relevance of understanding Moscow's strategic

motivations is manifold, and helps guide British and American grand strategy in the changing security dynamics of Europe. The choice of pushing Moscow out of European balance is a political choice for London and Washington. Alternatively, a détente can be reached if London and Washington are willing to accept a small Russian sphere of influence. But there is no evidence that every single instance of NATO enlargement will be met with Russian military aggression or balancing maneuvers.

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This article is, accordingly divided into four sections, followed by a policy-relevant conclusion.

The Western Debate About the Push for Enlargement

Assurances from Western leaders regarding NATO enlargement began on 31 January 1990, with West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher making clear that the changes in Eastern Europe and the German unification process must not lead to an 'impairment of Soviet security interests.'⁵ Ruling out NATO 'expansion of its territory towards the east, i.e. moving it closer to the Soviet borders.' NATO Secretary-General Manfred Wörner stated that the alliance is not looking to any shift of balance, or to extending military borders to the east.⁶ This pledge was repeated subsequently by Helmut Kohl, Margaret Thatcher, James Baker, Douglas Hurd, Francois Mitterrand, and George H.W. Bush. Margaret Thatcher said

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(From left), President George H.W. Bush, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Manfred Wörner, Secretary General of NATO, in the Rose Garden of the White House, October 1990.

all this, as well as being the forum which brought the Soviet Union fully into a discussion about the future of Europe,” a pledge repeated by President Bush, and subsequently my British PM John Major, who personally assured Gorbachev, as late as in March 1991, saying: “We are not talking about the strengthening of NATO.” Subsequently, when asked by Soviet Defence Minister Marshal Dmitri Yazov about East European leaders’ interest in NATO membership, he repeated, “Nothing of the sort will happen.”⁷

From the Western side, the first hint of NATO enlargement came with Secretary-General Manfred Wörner’s declaration in March 1992, that NATO’s doors are open. NATO’s enlargement policy was not a concerted effort initially, but organically developed throughout the early-1990s, and it gained momentum under the

to Gorbachev at NATO’s London summit in 1990: “We must find ways to give the Soviet Union confidence that its security would be assured. ...CSCE could be an umbrella for

Presidency of Bill Clinton, whose administration tied it to the changing grand strategy of the United States. It was also a matter of serious debate within the US administration, the main driver

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Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl sign a treaty in Bonn, Germany, 9 November 1990.

Czech President Vaclav Havel delivers a speech during the NATO summit in Washington, 23 April 1999, as US President Bill Clinton looks on.

of the expansion claim. While the Central and Eastern European states were wary of Russia and wanted to be under the security umbrella of NATO, they were rebuffed initially, for fear of Russian reaction.⁸ In April 1993, Clinton met Lech Walesa of Poland, Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia, and Arpad Goncz of Hungary, who collectively argued that NATO should expand. Clinton's foreign policy was predicated upon the idea that peace is promoted with trade and free market, and democracies rarely go to war with each other, which was otherwise known as the democratic peace theory.⁹ NATO expansion and the spread of liberal institutions was, therefore, a means to this policy.

The idea of expansion was vigorously debated within the alliance.¹⁰ The primary arguments made for expansion were that it would help communist states transition to democracy, and enhance continent-wide security, and prevent a security vacuum in large

Office alongside Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, lobbied for Senate Approval for NATO's geographic expansion, and coined the term "enlargement" as opposed to a more aggressive sounding "expansion".¹⁴ The idea was, however, territorial expansion and forceful spread of institutions and American support for democracy promotion, as opposed to a narrower Cold war era idea of Containment.¹⁵

swathes of territory, as well as preventing the rise of ethno-nationalist harmful elements.¹¹ While superficially sympathetic to Russia, NATO expansion was primarily a security endeavour, and NATO was unwilling to let Russia have any say regarding the process.¹²

Further push for NATO expansion came from Germany, specifically from German Defence Minister Volker Rühe. He said that German stability would be threatened if its new eastern frontiers are not further moved east.¹³ In the United States, National Security Council speechwriter Jeremy Rosner, leading the NATO Enlargement Ratification

US President Bill Clinton visits Russia, 10 May 1995.

The opposition to this Clintonian NATO expansion came from strategic circles. The Pentagon was initially opposed to NATO expansion, and supported the Partnership for Peace (PfP), to allay Russian fears that would arise. Strobe Talbott, then-adviser to the Secretary of State cautioned, saying: “The key principle, as I see it, is this ... An expanded NATO that excludes Russia will not serve to contain Russia’s retrograde, expansionist impulses; quite the contrary, it will further provoke them.”¹⁶ The idea that Russia would inevitably be provoked by territorial expansion was also furthered in academic arguments.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the Clinton administration was ideologically committed to expanding NATO and democratic peace.¹⁸ In January 1994, Clinton stated in a speech in Prague: “The question is no longer whether NATO will take on new members, but when and how.”¹⁹ It was followed by Clinton’s speech in Poland, calling the PfP, ‘...a first step toward expansion of NATO.’ By 1995, the process was inevitable.

Russian Reaction to the First Phase of NATO Enlargement

The North Atlantic Council announced a summit in Madrid in July 1997, which decided to set the course for the Alliance to move towards the 21st Century, consolidating Euro Atlantic security.²⁰ On 10 December 1996, NATO invited Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic to apply for membership at the Madrid summit. The first phase of the enlargement process was expected to take two years to complete, and by 1999, NATO was ready for new members. Because of its size and its geostrategic location, Central Europe was invaluable for NATO.²¹

Russian reaction to NATO expansion is difficult to chart as those reactions are also in phases. Initially, neither Gorbachev nor Yeltsin felt threatened by the NATO alliance, as firstly, both these leaders were under the impression that NATO is not expanding territorially, and both wanted to work with NATO, under the impression that NATO could provide some strategic stability in Europe, and secondly, both were under no illusion that the former Warsaw pact countries were no longer under Moscow’s direct command. The common consensus in foreign policy circles and elites is that NATO enlargement results in the diminishing security buffer between Russia and West, and makes the defence of conclaves and strategic chokepoint like Kaliningrad difficult. Russian Defence Minister Grachev did not see a NATO expansion in the horizon, and the Russian military doctrine in 1993 was designed to foster an era of “partnership and cooperation,” even though it did mention that territorial expansion is a military threat, in future, should it ever happen.²² Since 1994, Atlanticists and liberals in the Western sense, have not acted as a unified political force within Russia.²³ The Russian ruling elite, as well as opposition, whether communist or ultra-nationalist, were consistently skeptical of NATO enlargement, as were the Russian military elite. Russia’s Intelligence Service (SVR) in 1993 also referred to NATO as the “biggest military grouping in the world that possesses enormous offensive potential.”²⁴ As late as 1994, there was no inclination in Russia that NATO was going to expand. At the end of 1993, First Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Kozyrev confirmed to Russian lawmakers that ‘The greatest achievement of Russian foreign policy in 1993 was to prevent NATO’s expansion eastward to our

borders.’²⁵ There was a surprise in Moscow, with the launch of the NATO enlargement study in 1995, prompting Yeltsin to declare that the Cold war had been replaced with Cold Peace. The democrats in Russia felt betrayed and disappointed. Public opinion also started to turn against NATO.²⁶

Even though neither Gorbachev nor Yeltsin felt threatened by NATO, they both made it clear, that NATO expansion would be a constant source of animosity with the West. Ambassador Vitaly Churkin’s comments in Belgium also mentioned the threat to Russian interests would be NATO’s material and infrastructure in the former Soviet sphere. Even before there were any official statements from the United States about NATO expansion to the east, it was officially regarded by Russia as a threat to its national interests, a sentiment that was openly conveyed to the West. Yevgeny Primakov, at that time the director of the Foreign Intelligence, said in November 1993 that material and territorial expansion of NATO is dangerous for Russian interests, as Russia will be compelled to redeploy troops to the West.²⁷

The Russian military and political elite acknowledged Moscow’s material and territorial inferiority compared to the Western alliance. The addition of central European states only increased that gap in aggregate power. However, two conditions from NATO’s side helped in allaying Russian fears. Russia participated in the Partnership for Peace in exchange for special status within North Atlantic Council. The partnership for peace program meant that there was a visible reduction of force posturing from the Western side. NATO’s new security doctrine resulted in a substantial reduction of conventional as well as nuclear forces.²⁸ The forward presence of the United States was reduced from 325,000 to 100,000 troops, and European members cut their troops by more than 500,000. As Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic

were invited into NATO, the land sea and air units were reduced by 30-40 percent, and 35 percent at readiness level compared to 1990 statistics. Theatre level nuclear weapons were reduced by 80 percent. These reductions were clearly visible and denoted the lack of offensive power or offensive intention on NATO’s part.²⁹ Therefore, despite the rhetoric, there were conciliatory efforts from both sides.

The Russian foreign ministry condition was that Moscow would agree to NATO enlargement in Central Europe, as long as there are “no deployments of nuclear weapons or allied combat forces on the territory of the new member states,”

both conditions agreed by NATO.³⁰ Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov also considered PfP to be damage limitation.³¹ NATO’s acceptance of Russian conditions happened around the same time when Russia was also invited to join Implementation Force (IFOR) in Bosnia, and to endorse the Dayton accords.³² The “NATO Russia Founding Act,” which was signed by both parties in May 1997, led to the creation of the Permanent Joint Council (PJC), which allowed Russia to establish a mission at NATO. Yeltsin, in return, officially accepted the first round of NATO enlargement, to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary as inevitable, while making it clear that Russia has strong opposition to NATO expansion to the Baltic countries, or the former borders of the Soviet Union. This new ‘red line’ was repeated throughout the remaining years of Yeltsin’s presidency.³³

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In sum, there were visible Russian posturing and rhetoric that increased with NATO's eastward enlargement. But it could be argued that Russian reaction remained limited, due to a clear reduction of NATO's offensive capabilities, as well as perceived lack of clear offensive intention.

Russian Reaction to the Second Phase of NATO Enlargement

The second phase of NATO enlargement started with the invitation of more central European members, as well as the Baltic states which formed the Soviet Union, to their membership in 2004, one year after the Iraq invasion. The period also saw Russian strategic calculus change after the Kosovo war, as well as a change in Russian leadership. Even though Russian military doctrines started to reflect the changing dynamics, Russian leadership showed flexibility in aligning with NATO after Kosovo and after the 11 September terror attack.

Tensions between Russia and NATO escalated again during the conflict in Yugoslavia, and Russia warned in the first PJC meeting to caution against the unilateral use of force without authorization from the United Nations. NATO ignored the warning, and the centrepiece of NATO's new relationship with Russia, the Permanent Joint Council, broke down during the war in Kosovo.³⁴ The war in Kosovo highlighted that NATO was not

serious about Russian 'consultation,' nor was NATO unaware of Russia's diminished military clout.³⁵ Around the same time, another significant change happened as NATO started to discuss the possibility of moving one of its headquarters in Rendsburg, Germany to northern Poland – a stated redline for Russia and something NATO explicitly promised not to do earlier. The Russian Defense Minister in 1998 warned that such a territorial move would lead to a military confrontation. There was no military confrontation during the move, but Russia suspended ties with NATO and withdrew its representatives from NATO headquarters in March 1999. Russia did return to the NATO table for talks eventually within a few months, but with a clear interest that Russian troops are part of peacekeeping in the Balkans.³⁶ By the end of 1999, Boris Yeltsin resigned and Vladimir Putin was President.

The Kosovo campaign triggered the debate within the Russian military and strategic planning community with respect to NATO's hidden goals, and subsequently triggered Russian military doctrines to be adjusted reflecting its defence policies.³⁷ The first time since the Cold War, Russian strategic planners had to deal with the scenario of NATO forces projecting power within a weakened Russian territory, in the name of human rights.³⁸ Around the same time, right after NATO enlargement in Central Europe, the Russian military updated Russia's military doctrine, which focused upon Russian economic inferiority, the gap in military capabilities, and the need for a multipolar world. The language

Russian servicemen atop an APC, patrol the streets of the Chechen capital, Grozny, 1 August 2001.

REUTERS/Alamy Stock Photo/2D3E2WT

makes it abundantly clear as to which organization the document refers. Russia had abandoned its 'no first use' policy of nuclear weapons against an overwhelming conventional attack from a great power or alliance in 1993. That was continued in this new document.³⁹ NATO, on the other hand, maintained no change in its nuclear posture, reiterating no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons in new member states.⁴⁰

Vladimir Putin was initially less hostile to the idea of NATO itself, even when Russian strategic doctrines continued to consider NATO a threat. He accepted that NATO enlargement agreed under Yeltsin was a *fait accompli*, and at least publicly stated that he wanted to rebuild relations with NATO. In his meeting with NATO Secretary-General George Robertson, Putin stated that there is a need to resume Russia-NATO contacts and compare the military doctrines and strategic concepts of Russia and NATO.⁴¹ Putin continued with the mixed messages, saying he is willing to theoretically consider the possibility of being a member of NATO in future in a BBC interview. Further, while attending a meeting with NATO in February 2001, he mentioned that Russia was willing to coordinate with the US to form a European wide missile defence system instead of a NATO missile defence in Europe, and was willing to send Russian experts to Brussels to discuss the possibility, explain Russian and American cooperation on technology and to test public interest.⁴² For the first time since the Kosovo crisis, Russia announced a full meeting with NATO, even when NATO was reticent about commenting upon Russian membership.

The 11 September attack on the United States changed the strategic dynamics of Europe. Russia was undergoing its own problems with the Chechen insurgency. Immediately after the attack, Putin said, 'If NATO takes on a different shade and is becoming a political organization ... we would reconsider our position with regard to such expansion if we are to feel involved in such processes.'⁴³ Within two weeks of the attacks, Russia declared that it would assist the United States in operating out of central Asian airbases, typically used and operated by the Russian air force and considered under Russian spheres of influence, as well as unilateral closure of an espionage centre in Lourdes, Cuba and a naval base in Vietnam. In December 2001, the United States unilaterally pulled out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which was simply called a mistake from the Russian side, but nothing else was done about it by the Russians.

There were significant changes on the side of NATO as well. The 11 September attacks changed NATO's own reasoning about enlargement from "democracy promotion" of the Clinton era to an alliance determined to pull efforts to tackle international terror. In the 2002 Prague summit, this new line was communicated by President George W. Bush, as he stated, "Expansion of NATO also brings many advantages to the alliance itself. Every new member contributes military capabilities that add to our common security. We see this already in Afghanistan—for forces from Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Slovakia and others have joined with 16 NATO allies to help defeat global terror."⁴⁴

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This reframing of NATO resulted in further cooperation and made NATO enlargement more palatable to Russia for the time being. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov confirmed Russian understanding of NATO's new position, and said, "Russia no longer considers NATO enlargement to be a menace because the alliance has undergone a radical transformation from a Cold War instrument to defence against global terrorism and other 21st Century threats."⁴⁵ When NATO planned to invite seven new countries to join the Alliance at its Prague summit in the fall of 2002, the position was repeated by Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, regarding NATO expansion in the Baltics. Ivanov stated: "Russia is not planning to get overly dramatic about the situation."⁴⁶ During the Rome declaration of May 2002, Russian understanding was that NATO and Russia will act jointly and equally as a side of twenty, instead of the previously agreed 19+1 formula, and would focus upon international terrorism and reaction to crises.⁴⁷

As evident from the sequence of events, Russia was initially skeptical with respect to NATO enlargement in the second phase when for the first time, actual member states in the Baltic region which formed parts of the Soviet Union, were invited to be part of NATO. NATO hardware and outposts also moved east in a breach of a previously declared redline, and the Kosovo war was viewed in Russia as a direct attempt to claw away at the Russian sphere of influence. The Russian military elites also consistently saw NATO enlargement as a serious threat to Russian security and interests.⁴⁸ Previously, in the 1990s, certain sections of the Russian military viewed NATO enlargement as German expansion and continuation of German grand strategy in East Europe.⁴⁹ During the early-2000s, NATO enlargement started to be considered as an American plot to move inexorably eastward, and a continuation of American hegemony. While NATO was not part of the Iraq war, it did not have any discernible difference in Russian military thinking, as evident from the statement in 2003, after the Iraq invasion, by Russian General Yuri Baluyevsky, who stated that the world needs to be multipolar, otherwise it breeds instability.⁵⁰ The Russian political leadership's view of NATO showed greater flexibility. That could be attributed to a change in NATO's reframing of its cause of existence, focused more upon counterinsurgency as well as fighting Islamic terrorism, just as Russia was facing a Chechen insurgency, Russian perception of NATO's offensive intention underwent a change, which led to a temporary alignment of interests. The Rome declaration of 2002 further changed the relation between Russia and NATO as procedurally, Russian administration gained the framework of NATO-Russia Council, and perceived that NATO's primary motivation shifted to counter-terrorism. While Russian military doctrine remains unchanged, the political speeches highlighted that Russia did not consider NATO a threat, but rather a partner against Islamic terrorism in a changing global security scenario. Russia did not perceive any offensive intention, and NATO's declared offensive capability did not increase. Russia's perception of a threat from NATO therefore remained neutral. NATO's declared force posture with no new weaponry in the new member states, added to NATO's focus on counterterrorism, led Russia to perceive a distinct positive change in a NATO – Russia future.

Russian Reaction to NATO Invitation to Ukraine and Georgia

The third and final phase of NATO enlargement is explored in this section, before relations with Russia broke down permanently, and Russia, for the first time since the Second World War, went to war with another sovereign state in Europe. After the second phase of NATO enlargement, in 2004, relations with Russia quickly broke down due to the animosity with the United States over the Iraq invasion at around the same time when the so-called ‘colour revolutions’ rocked Russia’s neighbourhood. This is also the time when the Russian military doctrines changed and Russian redlines on NATO’s further territorial enlargement continued. Russian political statements and military doctrines consequently reflected this change of perception.

When asked about further NATO expansion plans regarding Ukraine and Georgia, Vladimir Putin said that Ukraine should exercise the plan independently but stated categorically that Russian position regarding territorial expansion remained unchanged, a hint at Yeltsin era red line.⁵¹ Russia maintained that the only way Russia would find further NATO expansion acceptable was if NATO transforms itself into a political organization, which, needless to mention, NATO had no intention of doing. NATO meanwhile was transforming and enhancing its military capability as individual NATO members were preparing for a war in Iraq as part of the “coalition of the willing,” something which Russia opposed earnestly and joined forces with France and Germany to curtail. During the Iraq war, NATO supported Poland with communication and logistics, and on the request of Turkey, NATO took precautionary measures to install missile defences in Turkish territory, even when NATO was not taking part in the war as an organization.⁵² Russia continued to maintain that it had concerns regarding further NATO expansion, including territorial and infrastructure, and would change Russian military doctrines accordingly.⁵³ Asked specifically about Ukraine again, Russia repeated that Ukraine is free to choose its future, within the EU, as long as it does not join NATO.⁵⁴

As NATO continued with plans of another round of expansion, a territorial red line for Russia, NATO also began F-16 patrols over the Baltic Sea and Baltic territory, a significant new development in offensive capabilities, infuriating Russia. Putin immediately demanded that any new NATO member state accede and ratify the Conventional Forces Treaty to avoid any sort of a “strategic grey area.”⁵⁵ By that time, there were massive transformations within Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), which added on to Russian understanding that NATO is behind the crisis, and is trying to encircle Russia and encroach even further. By this period, it was also clear that Russian intention (and Putin’s dream) of a “transformation” of NATO into a political institution instead of a primarily military one, with Russia being an equal member, was not going to be fulfilled anytime soon, and that was mainly because of NATO’s new members, who were disinclined to allow Russia

any decision-making powers. NATO’s focus upon democracy promotion and nation-building in Iraq, corresponded with Western support of revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine.

Finally in 2006, at Moscow University, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, “we firmly raise questions about the transformation of NATO, the Alliance’s plans for enlargement, the reconfiguration of the U.S. military presence in Europe, the deployment of elements of the American missile defence system here, and NATO’s refusal to ratify the CFE Treaty. The future of our relations largely depends on what direction the transformation in NATO will proceed in after the Riga Summit, and the extent to which the security interests of Russia are going to be considered.”⁵⁶ The rhetoric from Moscow was not just directed to NATO, but also at Ukraine and Georgia. Lavrov further warned that any move from Ukraine or Georgia towards NATO would mark

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a “colossal geopolitical shift” for Russia. The pitch continued to rise, with President Putin’s Munich speech in 2007, where he said: “I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust.”⁵⁷ That same month, the US planned to talk with Poland and the Czech Republic regarding the placement of missile defences, a significant permanent weapons system, which Russia considered a clear threat. At NATO’s Bucharest summit in 2008, Putin warned: “We view the appearance of a powerful military bloc on our borders ... as a direct threat to the security of our country.”⁵⁸ Russian military generals started threatening war with Ukraine

if NATO expanded eastward. In 2006, the Russian military journal stated that it would be shortsighted for Russia to ignore the fact that the NATO extension might be a central tenet of the United States striving to achieve unipolarity.⁵⁹

In August 2008, after Russia’s war with Georgia, NATO’s foreign ministers declared that Russia’s military action had been disproportionate and that cooperation in the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was suspended until further notice. Around the same time, NATO conducted an exercise in Georgia from 6 May until 1 June 2009, which was perceived in Russia as a clear indication of NATO’s design on Russian borders. A 2009 essay from *Military Thought* stated, “As previously, the Americans will continue actively to foist their values on the rest of the world relying on all the force and assets available to them,” a charge repeated in 2010 after analysis of ongoing wars of choices by the United States.⁶⁰ Another stated: “The armed conflicts of the late 20th and early 21st Centuries have been a graphic demonstration of the United States’ desire for a unipolar world and its determination to solve any problems by force, ignoring the opinion of the world community.”⁶¹ During the Arab Spring, the Russian military was certain that the instability and events in the Middle East were to promote American unipolarity.⁶² In most of these cases, NATO was considered to be an arm of either German or American grand strategy.

Eddie Gerald/Alamy Stock Photo/B3GAKY

Russian armoured personnel carriers on their way to the city of Gori during the Russo-Georgian War, August 2008.

Regardless of which, it was in all the cases, considered a threat to Russian security. At any rate, an enlargement plan with Ukraine and Georgia were the final territorial red lines and completely unacceptable at any rate, and that was made clear from the Russian side repeatedly. NATO continued to be ambivalent about it and offered Georgia and Ukraine Membership Action Plans, suggesting that membership in NATO was not a matter of whether, but when. In August, Russia and Georgia went to war over South Ossetia. Russia later stated that the war stopped NATO expansion.⁶³ Ever since the 2008 war, Russia came out with new military doctrines stating NATO expansion as its biggest threat, and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu identified NATO expansion as one of the top three threats to Russia.⁶⁴ On 5 February 2010, President Dmitry Medvedev approved the Russian Federation's new updated Military Doctrine, which had been being drafted since 2005, right after another phase of NATO expansion in 2004. This text supplemented the Russian National Security Strategy of 2009. The most serious threat was the attempt "...to attribute global functions to NATO in breach of international legal norms" and the NATO infrastructure moving closure to Russian territory. "The deployment (buildup) of troop contingents of foreign states

"The most serious threat was the attempt '...to attribute global functions to NATO in breach of international legal norms,' and the NATO infrastructure moving closer to Russian territory."

(groups of states) on the territories of states contiguous with the Russian Federation and its allies and also in adjacent waters" and maintains that the way to solve the threat is a European security initiative and the changing of NATO into a political union.⁶⁵ A more recent revision of the military doctrine was published on 26 December 2014, which reinforced the threats of NATO expansion as well as military infrastructure and large-scale military exercises and deployment and buildup of military contingents of foreign states or alliances, in the territories of the neighboring states of Russia.⁶⁶ Prompt Global Strike concept is mentioned as a military danger but within a context of interstate rivalries. Concerning NATO, "an abrupt exacerbation of the military-political situation (interstate relations)," "a show of military force" through exercises in Russia's neighborhood or "obstructing" state and military command and control, by means of a "global strike," was considered a threat.⁶⁷ Russian National Security Strategy, dated December 2015, also cites NATO troop deployments, and induction of former Soviet-allied states as the top threat to Russian security, adding that NATO missile defence plans are destabilizing, especially for Russia to protect its natural resources and maritime interests in the Arctic Sea.

Armed men, believed to be Russian servicemen, supply an APC in front of a Ukrainian marine base in the Crimean port city of Feodosia, 23 March 2014.

Morning in Moscow city landscape with Kremlin in the background.

Conclusion

From the evidence observed, the Russian military elite, as well as civilian leadership, were always opposed to NATO territorial enlargement; however, the prospect was not taken seriously in the initial days after the Soviet collapse, and was considered implausible even during the early years of the Yeltsin administration. Each of the subsequent instances of NATO enlargement resulted in a Russian reaction, even when the reaction was varied, but the evidence that *any* and *every* NATO enlargement, *per se*, resulted in Russian revanchism is sparse. In reality, Moscow is quite agnostic, and pragmatic about NATO's relative power superiority. The Kremlin is also aware of Russia's lack of sway in the European balance. The only instances one can expect Moscow to lash out, are when "direct" strategic interests are threatened, as has been observed in Georgia and Ukraine.

The traditional balancers of Europe, the Anglo-Americans, can therefore debate on whether, the European integration would eventually come at a stop, given that there will be logically a limit to enlargement. Second, if Europe will be ever ready to take the security burden, and to balance Moscow as an independent actor. Third, how to eventually find a place of co-existence with Moscow in the European security architecture, or if that is even possible. At the end of the day, whether to compromise with Moscow and let Russia have her own small sphere of influence in parts of Europe where there are already Russian established bases and interests, or to push Moscow out and risk a localized proxy war of attrition, is a policy question beyond the scope of this article.

NOTES

- See, Mary E Sarotte, "Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence: The 1990 Deals to Bribe the Soviets Out" and Move NATO In," in *International Security* 2010 35:1, pp. 110-137; Mary E Sarotte, "How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993-95," in *International Security* 2019 44:1, pp. 7-41.
- J.R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, "The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion," in *International Security*, 2016; 40:4, pp. 7-44.
- Svetlana Savranskaya, Tom Blanton, NSA archives, GWU, Briefing Books, "NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard," at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-03-16/nato-expansion-what-yeltsin-heard> "NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard," at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>
- The greater the aggregate power, that is, the combination of the state or bloc's total resources, which include population, industrial and military capabilities, the greater is the threat perceived by a peer rival. Second variable is geographic proximity, which argues that the states are more threatened, if the threat originates nearby than faraway, especially if not separated by buffer states or high seas. Finally, offensive power, that is military capabilities and technology, and perceived as offensive intention, of a nation or a bloc, can alter the threat perception of the state in question. See, Stephen Walt, "Origin of Alliances", Explaining Alliance Formations, Balancing Behavior. (Cornell University Press, 1987) pp. 28-29.
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