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NATO at the Crossroads

Reexamining America's Role in Europe

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Introduction

Recent proposals to extend NATO eastward into Central and Eastern Europe have been characterized, by the proposals' proponents and detractors alike, as radical and bold suggestions. In fact, however, these proposals are entirely consistent with the (often unstated) aims of American security strategy in Europe for the last 45 years. This paper maintains that if the United States fails to take the lead in extending collective defense and security arrangements to the unstable areas of East Central Europe, then the American-led NATO will indeed "go out of business," and international relations in Eastern *as well as* Western Europe will revert to a more turbulent and competitive condition. In short, if the United States is to define its interests in Europe (as it has since 1948) as forestalling normal patterns of security and economic competition among the states of the region, then America has no choice but to act on these proposals to expand the alliance's responsibilities geographically. The question this begs, however, is whether such a conception of U.S. interests in Europe is sound. Should American security policy continue to be determined by a world view that now demands that the United States assume the preponderant role in maintaining peace within and among the states of East Central Europe—a region riven by ethnic and religious animosities and nationalist passions? To begin to answer this question, it is first necessary to examine that world view by assessing briefly the history and purposes of NATO.

NATO's Continuing Purpose

While containing Soviet power was one reason U.S. policymakers thought it necessary to "secure" Western Europe, it was not the only reason. At the end of World War II, Washington was committed to building and maintaining an international political and economic order based upon what officials at the time termed an American "preponderance of power." That objective was independent of any existing or projected Soviet actions. (In fact, American statesmen knew that their wide-ranging objectives would increase Soviet insecurity and thereby also increase the risk of war.) That America's postwar planning addressed concerns that were distinct from those surrounding the Soviet Union was acknowledged in NSC-68, the National Security Council's 1950 blueprint for America's Cold War strategy, which defined the security policy it advocated "as one designed to foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish." This "policy of attempting to develop a healthy international community," NSC-68's authors went on to assert, was "a

policy which we would probably pursue even if there were no Soviet threat."[1]

By integrating Germany and its West European neighbors into a network of American-led security and economic arrangements after World War II, the United States achieved two important objectives. These states were co-opted into the anti-Soviet coalition, and even more important, Germany—America and Western Europe's erstwhile enemy—was, itself, contained. The United States prevented Germany from embarking upon independent (and, by Washington's thinking, potentially dangerous) policies, stabilizing relations among the states of Western Europe. The dogs of war, which the American foreign policy community believed to be endemic in this region, were thereby restrained by the leash of America's security leadership. By banishing power politics and nationalist rivalries from Western Europe, NATO, in effect, protected the states of Western Europe from *themselves*, enabling West Europeans to cooperate politically and economically. As then Secretary of State Dean Rusk argued in 1967: "The presence of our forces in Europe under NATO has contributed to the development of intra-European cooperation.... But without the visible assurance of a sizable American contingent, old frictions may revive, and Europe could become unstable once more."

This regional pacification, of course, was only achieved at a price: the extension of America's overseas security responsibilities and commitments. The contemplated further expansion of NATO's (and America's) responsibilities eastward would then be an additional payment, made necessary by changing geopolitical circumstances, on that original transaction.

The Alliance and the Specter of "Renationalization"

The argument that NATO's security umbrella should be extended to East Central Europe is an extension of the argument that America must lead in European security affairs. In the view of the proponents of these arguments, if a U.S.-dominated NATO demonstrates that it cannot or will not address the new security problems in post–Cold War Europe (for instance, the "spillover" of ethnic fighting, refugee flows into Western Europe, and the possibility that these could ignite ultranationalist feelings in, for example, Germany), then the alliance will be rendered impotent. If the main instrument of U.S. leadership and "reassurance" in Western Europe is thus crippled, then, it is feared, the post–Cold War continent will lapse into that same old bad habit that the alliance was supposed to suppress—power politics—shattering economic and political cooperation in Western Europe.

The Argument for Extending the Alliance

According to the logic of America's national security strategy, while the end of the superpower rivalry has reduced U.S. security risks and commitments in some respects, it has in other ways expanded the frontiers of U.S. insecurity. During the Cold War, stability in Europe could be assured by the Soviets sitting on and the Americans smothering their respective clients. In fact, this superpower condominium, while crushing to the Europeans, was probably the best means of insuring America's overriding economic and political interest in the stability of the continent, as American statesmen have often privately acknowledged. With the disappearance of the Soviet Union, however, its former charges have become unrestrained. One consequence of this has been internal disorder *within* these countries as long-suppressed ethnic and religious animosities are allowed to surface. Another consequence is renewed nationalist rivalries and geopolitical competition *among* these countries.

Advocates of extending alliance responsibilities into the East fear that if the newly independent states of Eastern and Central Europe are not enmeshed in multilateral security arrangements under U.S. leadership, then the region could once again become a political-military tinderbox as it was in the 1920s and 30s, with the Baltic countries, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, the Czech and Slovak republics, Hungary, and Romania competing with each other, and with all of them fearing Germany. And, as it did in the past, this tense situation, so the argument goes, will threaten the stability of the entire continent, as, for instance, a nuclear-armed Ukraine provokes the nuclearization of Poland, which in turn pressures Germany into acquiring nuclear weapons, which ignites latent suspicions between Germany and its neighbors to the West.

During the Cold War, the key assumption underlying American security strategy in Europe could remain largely unspoken because U.S. policies could always be explained and justified by reference to the Soviet threat. While containing the Soviet Union is obviously no longer relevant, NATO still serves its other, usually unstated, purpose—pacifying relations among the states of Western Europe. Since, however, it is politically difficult to justify publicly the alliance on this ground, those who propose that NATO's responsibilities be extended eastward freely acknowledge that one of their

[1]For the argument that the Soviet Union served as a "convenient adversary"—as an instrument to justify at home and abroad America's world order strategy—see Christopher Layne and Benjamin C. Schwarz, "American Hegemony—Without an Enemy," *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1993.

primary purposes is to find a new, acceptable rationale for preserving the alliance.

Advocates of expanding NATO's geographical scope are probably correct in their assertion that unless the alliance is so altered, NATO will no longer be viable. And if the alliance collapses, instability in the East or a host of other factors could provoke a renationalization of foreign, defense, and economic policies in Western Europe. Therefore, proponents of extending NATO's security arrangements eastward correctly characterize the policy choice the United States faces: NATO either goes "out of area or out of business."

The stark question facing Americans today, then, is quite simple: What would be worse for the United States, a renationalized Europe where states have reverted to their traditional pattern of economic and security relations or an American-led effort to provide for the collective security of the entire continent? This paper holds that the answer to this choice is not, or should not be, a foregone conclusion.

The Cost of Stability

Those advocating that the U.S. choose the latter course argue that since America led an effort to create a "democratic zone of peace" in Western Europe, it can therefore do the same in East Central Europe. Accomplishing America's goal of pacifying the western half of the continent, however, has for nearly 50 years required tremendous defense commitments. To convince Germany and its neighbors that they do not have to build up their defenses and in other ways behave like traditional powers, and to guard against the disaster of political and economic renationalization, U.S. defense commitments have had—and must continue—to be operationally meaningful. America has not only had to convince Western Europeans that it has been committed to the security of their region, but that it has been capable of *acting* on that commitment. This year, reassuring Western Europe, even absent a military threat to the continent, is costing the United States nearly $100 billion.

Moreover, keeping Western Europe pacified is truly a permanent burden. After nearly one-half of a century of projecting democracy and stability into Western Europe, after all, U.S. security experts still believe that it would be hazardous to disengage militarily from that region, lest the states composing it renationalize. Pacifying Western Europe, alone then, amounts to taking the wolf by the ears: When could America ever let go? An American-led effort to stabilize international relations *throughout* Europe must be recognized as an expensive—and eternal—commitment.

Proliferating Threats

The logic that dictates an expansion of NATO's responsibilities eastward has extremely unsettling implications. This line of reasoning—that if America must guarantee the stability of a potentially unstable Western Europe, then it must stabilize those areas that could unsettle Western Europe—illustrates what historian Paul Kennedy calls "imperial overstretch": like the domino theory, it guarantees an exhausting proliferation of "security" commitments in what all agree is an unstable new world order. After all, if the United States, through NATO, must guard against internal instability and interstate security competition not only in Western Europe, but in areas that could infect Western Europe, where would NATO's responsibilities end? It is often argued, for instance, that the alliance must expand eastward because turmoil in East Central Europe could provoke mass immigration flows into Western Europe, threatening political stability there. Of course, turmoil in, for example, Russia or North Africa could have the same effect, as could instability in Central Asia (which could spread to Turkey, spurring a new wave of immigration to the West). Must NATO, then, expand even further eastward and southward than is currently proposed? Senator Richard Lugar, one of the most ardent advocates of taking the U.S.-led NATO "out of area," argues that this step is necessary because "there can be no lasting security at the center without security at the periphery." This is a recipe for overextension; if this formula is accepted, the foreign "threats" to U.S. national security will be nearly endless.

Crusade-Created Dangers

Much of the rhetoric surrounding calls to expand the alliance's geographical responsibilities sounds suspiciously like a summons to a crusade. It is imperative, as some advocates of expanding the alliance have written, that NATO defend the "Western democratic values" that form the "philosophical foundation" of the alliance against the "antidemocratic and anti-Western ideologies" that threaten it. The alliance can accomplish this by adopting "a grand strategy to project democracy and security into the twin arcs of crisis" that lie to the east and south of Western Europe. This requires, in fact, a massive effort to convert other nations. It betrays the dangerous belief that America will be safe only when it has made the world very much like America. Furthermore, to define a state as an enemy *ipso facto* of its internal ideology or form of governance, to declare, for example, that a nondemocratic Russia will perforce threaten American interests, is to create enemies where

none necessarily exist and to adopt a policy that smacks of ideological imperialism. Moreover, the relationship between the ends such a policy seeks (stability within and among the states of East Central Europe, Western Europe, and Russia) and the means such a policy would employ to meet those ends (the triumph of democratic forces within these countries) is far from clear, as America's own history shows. Democratic regimes in Russia or Hungary do not guarantee that they will not seek imperial control over their neighbors any more than a democratic government in the United States guaranteed that America would not make aggressive, expansionist war on Mexico. Nor does democracy immunize a country against destructive internal instability and secession, as the 620,000 dead in the U.S. Civil War attest.

The Risks of Expansion

While extending NATO is perfectly consistent with the assumptions that underlie American security policy, such an initiative would nevertheless entail new risks for the United States, risks that are largely glossed over by those advocating NATO's expansion. The kinds of security commitments now being urged on the United States carry a far higher risk of conflict than did the security commitments entailed in America's commitment to NATO during the Cold War.

Alliance-Created Dangers

Although bipolarity resulted in an intense Soviet-American rivalry, it also, paradoxically, imposed a certain stability on the superpower relationship and led to tacit, and sometimes open, cooperation between Moscow and Washington on a range of issues. In the emerging post–Cold War multipolar world, however, this kind of stability will be lacking. Geopolitical rivalries in East Central Europe and the former Soviet Union are likely to be far more volatile than was the U.S.–Soviet Cold War face-off across the Elbe. There is a substantial risk of conflict in these potential post–Cold War flashpoints, and aspiring aggressors may be more disposed to run the risks of using military force than was the Soviet Union. Since such potential aggressors would threaten U.S. interests less than the Soviets did, they could easily be more inclined to discount the credibility of American, extended-deterrence guarantees and to test U.S. resolve than was Moscow.

Additionally, the United States is likely to exercise far less control over the recipients of its post–Cold War security guarantees than it enjoyed over Western Europe at the height of the Cold War. Consequently, there is a much greater risk that the United States could be dragged into a conflict because of a protected state's irresponsible behavior. Finally, as long as the United States seeks to maintain stability by convincing other states to forgo their own nuclear capabilities in return for accepting American strategic guarantees, Washington will be vulnerable to manipulation by these states. Thus, the United States could be pressured into actions that would, in themselves, be destabilizing. Because the proposed new strategy for NATO could thrust the United States into conflicts in which its direct security is not at stake, there is a strong case to be made against it. From the standpoint of American security, the argument can be made that it is best for other states to be responsible for solving their own security dilemmas even if this means that they acquire great military capabilities.

The Difficulties and Dangers of Peacemaking

In the volatile environment of post–Cold War Central and Eastern Europe, in regions where nearly all borders are in dispute, the territorial status quo will be challenged, if not by "neo-fascist" nationalist forces, then by genuinely aggrieved and suppressed minorities. Often, of course, these groups are one and the same, and just as often one's oppressed minority is another's extreme nationalist. (It should be remembered, after all, that liberal opinion in the West in 1938 sympathized with the Sudeten German minority's desire to break free of Czech rule—although the Sudeten leadership was far from progressive or democratic—and that it welcomed the Munich settlement as the triumph of national self-determination and compromise.) How will a NATO with expanded responsibilities respond to the murky situations with which it would be confronted in East Central Europe?

How, for instance, would an alliance with obligations to Ukraine respond if the discontented Russian minority declared its independence from Ukraine and sought annexation by Russia, which that state then granted, and this was in turn followed by Ukraine's forceful efforts to reassert its control over its Russian minority? Who would be the aggressor? What borders should be defended? Such situations, of course, could occur between many states in the region, and the alliance could not conduct "peace-enforcing operations" without first deciding what borders to enforce and, hence, choosing sides. Moreover, in such situations, alliance members may well have divergent interests and therefore favor different players. In the current Bosnian imbroglio, for example, France is sympathetic to Serbia whereas Germany favors a hardline position against Belgrade. Also, Italy objects to its U.S. partner's style of peacekeeping in Somalia. So too, in future instability

involving, for example, Ukraine and Poland, Germany and France are likely to favor different sides. While the alliance may indeed now face the choice of expanding its geographical responsibilities or dissolving, that very expansion could well lead to situations that would so exacerbate tensions and suspicions within NATO that the alliance would, in fact, crumble.

Conclusion

Advocates of extending the alliance are probably correct in arguing that, if America is to continue its task of stabilizing international relations in Europe, and if NATO is to remain viable, then the states of East Central Europe must be integrated into a U.S.-led security arrangement. There is, however, no escaping the costs and risks of such an initiative. American policy toward the alliance, then, is at a crossroads. Rather than advocate a particular alternative, this paper argues that, confronted with the choice between extending or liquidating NATO, the latter should not be summarily dismissed. Since the assumptions underlying America's security strategy in Europe demand the indefinite continuation of America's expensive role there, and since these assumptions now also demand that the United States lead a problematical effort to expand NATO eastward, Americans must fundamentally rethink those assumptions.

Americans must examine closely whether it is advisable for the United States to allow the states of Eurasia to work out their *own* security system. Such a situation would likely mean a return to normal patterns of international relations there—security and economic competitions, multipolarity, and the formation of regional power balances. Such a situation would be turbulent, competitive, and potentially violent for Eurasian states. Its effects on the United States, however, need to be examined closely before America makes the important choice between a U.S.-led NATO out of area or out of business.

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