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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Abstract

What have been the consequences of NATO enlargement for European security? To the vindication of its critics, the consequences appear disastrous. Insecurity pervades Europe while NATO is in crisis with a Russia justifiably aggrieved by broken promises and the overreach of liberal hegemony. This insecurity is especially troubling because NATO's newer commitments are indefensible. In this essay, I evaluate these criticisms of NATO enlargement and advance three claims. First, intentionally or not, NATO enlargement has fulfilled a reasonable need to hedge against Russian resurgence. Critics of NATO enlargement themselves conceded that Russia could become revisionist once it reconstitutes itself. Second, NATO enlargement still allows for mutually beneficial cooperation with Russia. It has not been responsible for Russia's internal political development and aggressive foreign policy choices. Finally, NATO enlargement does not necessitate expensive deterrence measures to secure its most vulnerable members. NATO enlargement thus has hugely benefited European security.

Keywords NATO · Alliance politics · European security · Russia · Liberal hegemony · Post-communism

What have been the consequences of NATO enlargement for European security? According to its critics, much to their vindication, the consequences appear downright negative. The alliance has done little to cement liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, with Hungary and—to a lesser extent—Poland leading the way toward authoritarianism. Russia is now a greater menace than at any point since the Soviet Union collapsed. NATO enlargement's critics claim that Russia, rather than being an inveterate troublemaker, acts defensively because NATO has persistently encroached upon its legitimate security interests, whether in Central and Eastern Europe broadly or in Ukraine and Georgia particularly. NATO and Russia are thus

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doomed to experience acrimony in their relations, not least because Moscow feels that Washington and its allies have reneged on pledges made not to expand NATO eastward. Most worryingly, some beneficiaries of NATO enlargement—namely, the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—are so hard to defend against a justifiably aggrieved Russia, given their direct territorial contiguity with it, that they constitute a serious security liability for the alliance. At best, NATO enlargement has not delivered on its promises regarding peace and stability. At worst, it has contributed directly to the deterioration of the European security environment.

I argue that these criticisms are wrong and offer three reasons why European security has benefited significantly from NATO enlargement. First, defensive motives may currently be animating Russian foreign policy, but offensive motives aimed at revising the status quo are just as plausible. Even early critics of NATO enlargement conceded that Russia could turn out to be expansionist. Intentionally or not, an enlarged NATO has provided a useful hedge against this uncertainty. Critics who allege that NATO enlargement has destabilized European security do not offer convincing counterfactual scenarios whereby European countries would be more secure, let alone more democratic, had NATO decided against incorporating former members of the Soviet bloc. Second, NATO enlargement per se did not cause Russia's authoritarianism and aggressive foreign policy choices and so did not make cooperation with Russia impossible. Many predictions about how Russia would behave following NATO enlargement have turned out to be wrong. NATO enlargement did not strangle Russian democracy in the cradle. Other fateful choices—some, admittedly, made by Western decision-makers in the 1990s—were more culpable.[1]

Finally, deterring Russia is not as costly as often alleged, even with respect to NATO's most vulnerable members, the Baltic states. In fact, the view that granting membership to such states creates dangerous security liabilities for NATO is not supported by logic or the empirical evidence. If they are as difficult to defend against Russian aggression as critics argue, then their inclusion in NATO cannot truly be provocative for Russia. Launching an attack against the Baltic states should be much harder than defending them. Nevertheless, critics and supporters of NATO enlargement alike overstate the difficulties of defending NATO allies in the Baltic region. That Russia resorts to lower level tactics like disinformation campaigns and airspace incursions to unsettle countries located on NATO's northeastern flank paradoxically reflects the alliance's overall defensive strength.

This article proceeds by revisiting what proponents and critics of NATO enlargement argued in the 1990s and early 2000s when the alliance incorporated former Warsaw Pact members as well as the former Soviet republics in the Baltic region. This article contextualizes this debate with a reminder of how dangerous post-Cold War Europe appeared to leading contemporary experts. It then assesses NATO enlargement and elaborates on the three arguments made above.

[1] On counterfactual analysis and NATO enlargement, see Marten (2018).

Arguments for and against NATO enlargement

The end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and the collapse of the Soviet Union raised important questions about what sort of security order should prevail in Europe. What would happen now that Germany was reunified, Poland and other Warsaw Pact allies were free to determine their domestic and foreign affairs, and the Baltic states, Belarus, and Ukraine were newly independent?

The stakes were high. Writing in 1990, John Mearsheimer argued that the presence of two military superpowers was responsible for the 'long peace' that prevailed in Europe during the Cold War. Because it was 'certain that…multipolarity w[ould] emerge in the new European order,' greater unpredictability would characterize Europe's future. For Mearsheimer, 'the best new order would incorporate the limited, managed proliferation of nuclear weapons,' whereas 'the worst order would be a non-nuclear Europe in which power inequities emerge between the principal poles of power.' Either order would be worse than that which prevailed in the Cold War. For one, 'a reunified Germany would be surrounded by weaker states that would find it difficult to balance against German aggression.' For another, the Kremlin 'also might eventually threaten the new status quo' given that '[t]he historical record provides abundant instances of Russian or Soviet involvement in Eastern Europe' (quotes from Mearsheimer 1990, 31–33).

Mearsheimer was not alone in expressing fears regarding regional security in Europe. In fact, Mearsheimer (1993) and—to a lesser extent—Barry Posen (1993, 42–43) wrote in favor of a Ukrainian nuclear arsenal that would serve as a local deterrent against potential Russian revanchism. Stephen Van Evera (1994, 8–9) argued: 'Nationalism poses very little danger of war in Western Europe, but poses large dangers in the East, especially in the former Soviet Union…. The risk of large-scale violence stemming from the now-rising tide of Eastern nationalism is substantial.' He did not just mean violence in the former Yugoslavia, which indeed was already occurring when he penned those words. He raised the specter of irredentism all across the region to include Belarus, Poland, Romania, and even the Czech Republic (18). Pro-enlargement practitioners expressed similar fears. State Department official Charles Gati cautioned in a memorandum that new democracies like Poland remained fragile and so would benefit from NATO membership (Goldgeier 1999, 31). Ronald Asmus, Richard Kugler, and Stephen Larrabee (1995, 9) warned of a security vacuum in the region that 'threaten[ed] to undercut the fragile new democracies in East Central Europe by rekindling nationalism and reviving old patterns of geopolitical competition and conflict, thereby endangering the historic gains of the end of the Cold War.' Making the region even more combustible was the concern that many nuclear weapons and other sensitive nuclear technologies were now loose throughout the space previously governed by the Soviet Union (Allison et al. 1996). Former Soviet spies, corrupt officials, and criminal organizations were in a position to exploit the lax legal atmosphere occasioned by the collapse of Soviet Union so as to traffic such nefarious material (Williams and Woessner 1996). In brief, nationalism, nuclear proliferation, and criminality imperiled Europe.

Western decision-makers were unsure how to navigate these challenges. Their initial instinct was not to expand NATO in order to incorporate former Soviet bloc countries. Some historiographical controversy exists over whether NATO leaders made pledges to Soviet leaders that the alliance would not expand (Kramer 2009; Sarotte 2010; Shifrinson 2016). The first instinct of Polish leaders was to retain the presence of the Soviet military on Polish territory as a hedge against potential *German* revanchism (Gorska 2010, 38). In 1993, however, the Bill Clinton administration became receptive to arguments made by Polish and Czech leaders that NATO enlargement would reinforce peace and stability in the region. As Clinton's national security advisor, Anthony Lake, averred, 'The successor to a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement—enlargement of the world's free community of market democracies…. We will seek to update NATO, so that there continues behind the enlargement of market democracies an essential collective security' (quoted in Goldgeier 1998, 87). Within the US government, worries abounded that former communists would take power in the newly free countries of Eastern and Central Europe and reverse ongoing efforts at democratization. NATO membership was an inducement to ensure that those countries would remain steadfast in their political reforms (Goldgeier 1998, 89). To be sure, other motives may have been at play, including concerns about Washington's global standing and perhaps domestic politics (Goldgeier 1999). Whatever the case, the Clinton administration pursued NATO enlargement.

NATO enlargement had its critics. Within the US government, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, John Shalikashvili, and civilian members of the Department of Defense worried about its implications for relations with Russia (Goldgeier 1999, 28–29). Similarly, Senator Sam Nunn opposed enlargement because he did not want NATO to compromise arms control cooperation with Russia, to promote Russian nationalism, or to make security commitments that it could not keep (Stuart 1996, 136). Columnist Thomas Friedman and the *New York Times* editorial board echoed these sentiments (Goldgeier 1999, 141). Abroad, members of the German foreign ministry and the chancellery worried about the effect that enlargement would have on relations with Russia (Wolf 1996, 203). Unsurprisingly, Russian leaders were critical of NATO enlargement. President Boris Yeltsin warned: 'Europe, even before it has managed to shrug off the legacy of the Cold War, is risking encumbering itself with a cold peace' (quoted in Goldgeier 1999, 88). The director of foreign affairs at Russian Public Television wrote in *The National Interest* of a 'a wide consensus within the Russian political establishment that NATO expansion contradict[ed] basic Russian national interest,' so much so that Yeltsin's liberal architect of privatization, Anatoly Chubais, would fundamentally agree with Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov and outspoken nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky that NATO enlargement was unacceptable (Pushkov 1997, 58).

Many critics of NATO enlargement were in the academy. Historian John Lewis Gaddis (1998, 148–149) castigated Clinton's NATO initiative as a fit of 'selective sentimentalism' that broke well-established rules for dealing with a defeated rival after a major contest and would '[let] interests outstrip capabilities.' Dan Reiter (2001, 47–48) similarly argued that 'a NATO commitment to defend new members' would 'have very low credibility' and alluded to the lack of support for seeing

Poland as a vital interest in public opinion polls within the USA. George Kennan (1997) pointed out that the net result of enlargement would be to throw the relationship with Russia into jeopardy. Kenneth Waltz (2000, 30) cautioned that NATO enlargement drew 'new lines of division in Europe, alienate[d] those left out,' and could 'find no logical stopping place west of Russia.' Bruce Russett and Allan Stam (1998, 361) asserted that NATO enlargement would complicate eventual efforts to leverage Russia as a potential counterbalance to a rising China. Michael Brown (1995, 35–36) observed that Russia was too weak to justify expanding NATO. Others rejected the notion that NATO enlargement would enhance democracy. On the basis of case evidence from the Cold War, Reiter forcefully argued that there was 'almost no evidence that NATO membership significantly promoted democracy' and that post-communist 'societies and their elites were committed to democracy anyway' (2001, 60, 63). Others believed that NATO enlargement would undermine democracy within Russia by '[strengthening] the hands of radical nationalists and political opportunists, who will use NATO's action to discredit the current leadership and its pro-Western line' (Brown 1995, 41). Considering 'Russia's long history of authoritarian rule,' claimed Brown (1995, 41), 'it would be foolhardy for NATO to take steps that will hurt democracy's chances in Russia.'

Of course, NATO did expand. In 1991, NATO established the North Atlantic Cooperation Council to cultivate closer relations with former members of the Warsaw Pact. Three years later, it formed the Partnership for Peace. Aside from providing a pathway to possible NATO membership, this program served to deepen military-to-military cooperation between the Western alliance and post-communist countries as well as to entrench democratic control over the latter group's professional militaries. The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland became members of NATO on 12 March 1999. Five years later to the month, NATO added to its ranks the three Baltic countries in addition to Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The Baltic countries are noteworthy because they are the only members of NATO to have been formally part of the Soviet Union. Shortly after acquiring their independence in 1991, they made clear their intention to integrate as much as they could with Western institutions. As Ronald Asmus and Robert C. Nurick (1996, 122) noted, 'Their own history and concerns about real or imagined Russian ambitions have left them with limited faith in the promises of collective or "soft" security.' Thereafter, critics of NATO enlargement largely ceased to litigate NATO enlargement per se, preferring instead to focus more on how and to what extent the United States should retract its military commitments abroad as part of a larger policy of strategic retrenchment (Layne 2005; Preble 2009; Posen 2013).

Assessing NATO enlargement

Fast forward to the 2010s. Critics of NATO enlargement believe themselves to be vindicated. Mearsheimer (2014, 77–78) argues that the specter of further NATO enlargement—to include Ukraine—pushed Russia to use its improved military capabilities to assert its redlines and to annex Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. Barry Posen (2019) declares that 'NATO's well-intended political project is an expensive failure'

for having failed to deliver on democracy and stability in its east. Indeed, 'NATO's expansion now requires the USA to defend all the new member states from both conventional and nuclear threats—a tall order given their proximity to Russia and a strategically unnecessary project since they can contribute nothing to American national security.' According to Sean Kay (2005, 73, 78), NATO became a 'shell of its former self' in the early 2000s because newer members were mostly 'geostrategically marginal' and older European members were spending little on collective defense and not contributing adequately to security initiatives. Joshua Shifrinson (2017, 119) urges US strategists to 'minimize the fallout from three decades of NATO enlargement.' After all, as he argues, owing to an unfavorable balance of power and lack of public support to back them up, US commitments to the beneficiaries of the alliance's enlargement—the Baltic countries chief among them—are fundamentally unbelievable.

Even supporters of NATO enlargement concede that the alliance is uniquely vulnerable in the Baltic littoral region. Some are concerned that the Kremlin could leverage ethnic grievances on the part of local Russophone minority groups in a bid to stoke local discord (Crandall 2014, 50). Others fear that Russia could use its local anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities to close the so-called Suwałki Gap—the land bridge between Poland and Lithuania—so as to prevent NATO reinforcements from entering the theater, while NATO forces already there will experience difficulties operating within it (Elak and Śliwa 2016). One highly cited RAND Corporation study used war games to show that Russian forces could conquer Estonia and Latvia within three days (Shlapak and Johnson 2016).

In the following section, I make three related arguments. First, there are strong reasons to suspect that Russia would have developed hostile intentions against countries located in Central and Eastern Europe regardless of NATO enlargement. Accordingly, NATO enlargement has provided a useful hedge that raises the cost of aggression. Second, NATO enlargement is largely innocent of charges that it pushed Russia into authoritarianism or aggressive international behavior. Third, deterrence and defense measures appropriate to the Baltic region—where NATO's commitments appear to be the most vulnerable—are not as costly as commonly asserted.

A useful hedge

Intentionally or not, NATO enlargement fulfilled the need for a useful hedge against Russian aggression. In fact, the arguments that critics of NATO enlargement make themselves point to counterfactuals suggesting that NATO enlargement helped stabilize Europe rather than undermine its security.

Take Mearsheimer's argument that NATO enlargement provoked Russian aggression. According to him, the irresponsible pursuit of liberal hegemony in Russia's so-called sphere of influence—Eastern Europe and the Caucasus—incited Russia's war against Georgia in 2008 as well as its annexation of Crimea and the subsequent conflict with Ukraine. Setting aside his 1990 warnings about the Kremlin, Mearsheimer is known for offensive realism, which argues that states strive to maximize their power in order to achieve security. For Mearsheimer, great powers 'seek regional

hegemony.' Crucially, he adds that 'a regional hegemon might someday face a local challenge from an upstart state, which would surely have strong incentives to ally with the distant hegemon to protect itself from attack by the neighboring hegemon' (Mearsheimer 2001, 140–141).

Offensive realism suggests that Russia would have sought regional hegemony after the Cold War regardless of NATO enlargement. It is a great power like any other—albeit one in relative decline—and so faces incentives to try to maximize its influence within its own neighborhood. From the perspective of Mearsheimer's theory, regional conflict begins when other countries wish not to align with the regional hegemon and so look to foster closer diplomatic ties elsewhere. Yet this desire for external support is endogenous to the underlying conflict between the aspiring regional hegemon and its potentially wayward neighbors (Lanoszka 2018, 352). Moreover, Mearsheimer's argument suggests that, had NATO refused to expand eastward, Russia would have had an opportunity to pursue regional hegemony more aggressively once it reconstituted its post-Soviet military capabilities. Polish decision-makers were attuned to this risk. Polish minister of foreign affairs Krzysztof Skubiszewski warned that a neutral Central Europe 'would easily become an object of competition among stronger states or superpowers. It would be especially true of Poland, located between Germany and the former Soviet Union' (quoted in Gorska 2010, 69). Because of its direct proximity to Western Europe, instability in Central Europe could not be quarantined as it arguably could be in Central Asia. Even as a unipole, the United States thus had an interest in stabilizing Europe so as to avoid a repeat of the regional wars that befell the continent earlier in the twentieth century—wars to which the United States committed much blood and treasure.

Critics of NATO enlargement anticipated that Russia would pose major security challenges. Mearsheimer himself counseled Ukraine to retain the nuclear weapons that it inherited from the collapsed Soviet Union as insurance against potential Russian aggression. Believing that an 'American-dominated NATO' would not feature much in post-Cold War Europe, Mearsheimer (1993, 54–55) noted that 'the Russians and the Ukrainians neither like nor trust each other' and warned that 'small disputes could trigger an outbreak of hypernationalism on either side.'[2] Although Posen (1993, 43) viewed Russian–Ukrainian relations with greater optimism, he conceded that 'Ukrainian pledges to become a non-nuclear state make it attractive even for nationalist Russians to postpone aggression until later.' Further, the dispersion of ethnic Russians following the collapse of the Soviet Union across its fifteen constituent republics might have provided an impetus for great-power revisionism by the Kremlin (Levin and Miller 2011, 230).

Such concerns were well founded. In 1992, the chair of the Russian Supreme Soviet's Committee for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Economic Relations argued that 'as the internationally recognized legal successor to the USSR, the [Russian

[2] To be fair, Mearsheimer (1993, 57) cautioned that 'extending NATO's security umbrella into the heart [*sic*] of the Old Soviet Union is unwise' given that '[i]t is sure to enrage the Russians and cause them to act belligerently.' But NATO members never offered to do this for Ukraine in 2013 and 2014. They still have not as of early 2020.

Federation] must proceed in its foreign policy from a doctrine declaring all the geopolitical space of the former Union as the sphere of its vital interests…and must seek the world community's understanding and recognition of its [special] interests in this space.' Yeltsin himself averred that Russia should have 'special powers as a guarantor of peace and stability in this region' (quoted in Renz 2019, 823). The possibilities were rife for conflict in the former Soviet space—and possibly beyond—with or without NATO enlargement.

Some critics proposed that NATO enlargement should be contingent on Russia presenting itself as a major geopolitical threat. Brown (1995, 35–36) articulated this position most clearly, arguing that 'if Russia beg[an] to threaten Eastern and Central Europe militarily, then NATO should offer membership and security guarantees to the Visegrad Four and perhaps other states as well.' The logic of this proposal is flawed for two reasons. First, if extending NATO security guarantees is so provocative in peacetime, extending them when the would-be beneficiaries are embroiled in contentious disputes with or receiving military threats from Russia should be just as provocative for the Kremlin, if not more so. If NATO had renounced enlargement unless Russia became a military threat, then it would have been wagering that Russia was ultimately a defensive actor that acted only when provoked. However, this wager could have gone terribly wrong if Russia were instead a revisionist actor that lay in wait while it reconstituted itself. As long as there was any possibility that Russia would threaten Central and Eastern Europe in the future, a possibility that critics of enlargement admitted did exist, it made no sense for NATO to take the risk of delaying enlargement. Why wait to extend security guarantees until Russia is even more powerful?

Second, enlarging the alliance to include states that are under direct military threat from Russia would oblige existing NATO members to wrestle with fears of entrapment. Entrapment occurs when a state becomes involved in unwanted wars for reasons related to alliance commitments (Kim 2011, 355). Entrapment fears might be twofold in this context. First, Russian leaders might believe that they were facing a closing window of opportunity and so feel pressure to realize their foreign policy goals against a prospective NATO ally. Current NATO members could then find themselves defending that potential partner far earlier than they would prefer. Accordingly, their worries about entrapment make admitting states that Russia directly threatens politically infeasible. Second, the prospective NATO ally might pursue a harder line vis-à-vis Russia in anticipation of its future membership and the benefits it would entail. NATO would be in greater of being entrapped in a conflict with Russia, a state with which that some NATO members at least would otherwise prefer to cooperate. In either case, some NATO members might be uneasy about expanding the alliance because they would prefer to avoid being pulled into military conflicts between Russia and potential new members. As NATO is a consensus-based organization, NATO enlargement likely would not happen in a more contentious security environment. Indeed, NATO chose not to give security guarantees to Georgia and Ukraine despite them meeting the one criterion that some critics of NATO enlargement have established for countries to join the alliance—being under military threat from Russia.

Critics of NATO enlargement simultaneously argued that it would hurt democracy in Russia and that it would do nothing for democracy elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. Yet democracy in Eastern and Central Europe might have been worse off if not for the security guarantees that NATO membership provided. Many observers of different theoretical predispositions bemoan the apparent democratic backsliding that has taken place among some of the alliance's newer members, especially Hungary and Poland (Posen 2019; Wallander 2018). Indeed, Celeste Wallander (2002) argued in the early 2000s that NATO provides few incentives for new members to maintain their democratic credentials. Still, the situation is not as bad as commonly suggested. According to the 2019 Freedom House scores, almost all new members remain 'free,' although variation does exist among them (from Bulgaria at 81/100 to Estonia at 94/100). The exception is Hungary (Freedom House 2019, 14). But Hungary has historically been out of step with the regional order, whether within the Dual Monarchy or the Warsaw Pact (Wawro 2014; Benczes 2016). Hungary was already seen as problematic as early as 2002 because of its dubious ethnic policies, territorial disputes with its neighbors, and limited diplomatic engagement in the Balkans (Wallander 2002, 5).

For the Central and Eastern European countries to remain as democratic as they are without security guarantees is theoretically possible. The odds would be against them, though. Tanisha Fazal (2011) shows that buffer states—that is, states located between two great-power rivals—are more likely to experience conquest and occupation than non-buffer states. Vulnerable Central and Eastern European buffer states might embrace strong executive governments to mobilize national resources more effectively and to maximize their chances for survival, repeating interwar European history. If Russia were to reveal itself as a power-maximizing state regardless of NATO enlargement, as per Mearsheimer's offensive realism, then the menacing security environment that would have resulted would likely have depressed the quality of democracy in the regional even more (Boix 2011, 823–826; Pevehouse 2002). Absent security guarantees and integration into Western institutions, fears of Russian irredentism could have inflamed local tensions far beyond the levels that they did reach. These fears could have been more pronounced in light of the dispersal of ethnic Russians in countries previously ruled by the Soviet Union. To be sure, ethnic diversity itself does not diminish democracy's prospects (Fish and Brooks 2004). Yet worries of a revisionist great power could lead strategically isolated states to pursue discriminatory and illiberal policies against perceived fifth columns that are ultimately counterproductive. After all, leaders of 'ethnically dominant and institutionally underdeveloped states' are more likely to launch interventions when the target state is ethnically divided and in a process of political transition (Carment and James 2000, 197).

In sum, a Europe that did not see NATO enlarge would not necessarily have been as peaceful or even as democratic as it was by the late 2010s. In addition, critics of NATO enlargement themselves concede that Russia might not be a status quo actor that would recognize the sovereign rights of other states, especially given the ethnic politics that characterize the region.

NATO enlargement does not prevent mutually beneficial cooperation

To the extent that it served as a hedge against a resurgent Russia, NATO enlargement appears justified in hindsight. Yet, contrary to what many critics of NATO enlargement might assert, this is not the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the alliance justifies itself by provoking the state that it claims to deter. Recall their concerns that NATO enlargement would make Russia an enemy. According to Waltz (2000, 30), for example, NATO enlargement 'weakens those Russians most inclined toward liberal democracy and a market economy. It strengthens Russians of opposite inclination. It reduces hope for further large reductions in nuclear weaponry. It pushes Russia toward China instead of drawing Russia toward Europe and America.' Senator Nunn similarly worried that NATO expansion would raise the appeal of nationalism within Russia.

Predictions that NATO enlargement would undermine Russian democracy and US–Russia security cooperation might initially seem to have been correct. But such conclusions, and thus such explanations of present Russian behavior, do not survive scrutiny. Correlation does not imply causation. Critics would be wrong to ascribe Russia's democratic failings to NATO enlargement. After all, as Russian scholar Andrei Kortunov (1996, 69) wrote when these policy debates unfolded, 'Even for the minority of Russians who do care about foreign policy, NATO remains mostly irrelevant.' The impact of NATO enlargement on daily life was too uncertain and marginal, with wide-ranging interpretations thereof possible among elites who did follow the NATO debate. NATO enlargement may have played some role in the failure of Russian democracy and deterioration of Russian–US relations, insofar as it symbolized Russian weakness during the 1990s. But other, more local factors likely had far greater influence on Russia's domestic political developments.

One need not invoke essentialist arguments about Russia's cultural values or purported lack of fitness for liberal democracy. What probably hurt Russia's chances for democracy the most was the economic experience of the 1990s. Despite good intentions of those who imposed it to empower average citizens, economic shock therapy in Russia caused massive inflation and wiped out personal savings. Significant wealth became concentrated in the hands of a few well-placed individuals who became known as 'oligarchs.' Western insistence on sweeping liberal economic reforms with shock therapy and insensitivity to local conditions were culpable (Orenstein 1998, 35–36; Gould-Davies and Woods 1999). Moreover, political maneuverings in the early 1990s foreshadowed the authoritarianism that was to come. In 1993, President Yeltsin had tanks fire at the Russian White House to help resolve a constitutional crisis. Yeltsin was thus able to force new parliamentary elections, to impose presidential rule by decree, to weaken the legislative branch, and to expand the powers of his office beyond those provided by the Russian constitution. The constitutional referendum that Yeltsin successfully pushed later that year nevertheless provoked enough backlash that the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party and the Communist Party came first and third, respectively, in the subsequent parliamentary elections. The Pro-Yeltsin Russia's Choice came second. Two years later, the Communist Party placed first with over 22% of the vote. The Liberal Democratic Party came a distant second at about 11%. Ironically, during NATO's initial

post-Cold War enlargement, nationalists lost strength in Russia relative to communists. Amid Yeltsin's assertions of executive authority over an adversarial legislature, Russia had trouble using military force to retain control over breakaway provinces like Chechnya and prevent further dissolution (see Pilloni 2000). Gregory Treverton (1991, 111) was prescient when he predicted as early as 1991 that 'with its autonomous regions threatening to become ministates, Russia seems doomed to turn repressive, its citizens associating the democracy they never quite had with longer queues for food.'

Much of this democratic backsliding took place before Waltz predicted that NATO enlargement would damage Russia democracy. Further, subsequent developments have not vindicated his concerns. Consider the rise of Vladimir Putin. Ex-KGB officer Putin fits the profile of someone hostile to liberalism and democracy. Early in his presidency he used executive powers to restrict the press, which he perceived as largely in the pay of an oligarchic class that wished to manipulate Russian politics at the expense of the state (Lipman and McFaul 2001, 121). Putin gradually curbed political and civil rights in Russia, with the most significant concentration of political power taking place when Putin disbanded regional governors following a school hostage crisis involving Islamic militants that ended with many children. This development, along with his prosecution of politically troublesome oligarchs, led to what some observers call a 'power vertical' whereby Putin could command authoritatively a top-down structure in Russian politics. Elections still took place for the presidency and the Duma, but observers questioned how free and fair they were.

Considering the predictions made by Waltz, Reiter, Brown, and other critics of NATO enlargement, one might think that anti-Western or anti-NATO rhetoric would have characterized voters' sympathies for Putin. Surprisingly, Timothy Colton and Henry Hale (2009, 473, 496) find that in presidential elections held from 1996 to 2008, 'Putin and [Dmitri] Medvedev have benefited heavily from association with a core set of principles, including a strong orientation toward markets rather than socialism and…a relatively pro-western foreign policy orientation, even in 2008' when relations with the USA and NATO were poor. Indeed, their survey results reveal that in 2004, the year when the Baltic countries and various former Warsaw Pact countries joined NATO, 'people who believed Russia should treat the west as an enemy were 15% less likely to vote for Putin…than were those who believed Russia should treat the west as a friend' (Colton and Hale 2009, 496). Of course, Putin used nationalism at times to rally support and castigated the West for its perfidy, but he nevertheless cautioned that cooperation rather than conflict was key for Russia. Despite its authoritarian characteristics, the Russian political regime has not necessarily become nationalist, let alone hypernationalist. Its adherence to a nationalist agenda is questionable, and it has sometimes been criticized on nationalist grounds by domestic critics (see Laruelle 2018).[3]

[3] Tellingly, Masha Gessen's (2017, 198–199, 280) recent book about how Putin restored authoritarian rule in Russia mentions NATO only six times and exclusively in the context of the 1999 Kosovo bombing campaign. No mention of NATO appears in more academic texts on Russian authoritarianism (see, e.g., Gel'man 2015).

This last observation points to the inaccuracy of another prediction made about Russian behavior. Notwithstanding NATO enlargement, Russia did not align itself firmly against the USA and its allies. In fact, following the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, Putin pursued closer ties with the United States, partly because he saw an opportunity to find common ground in the fight against terrorism. NATO's 2002 Rome Summit Declaration even saw NATO members and Russia 'reaffirm the goals, principles and commitments set forth [in the NATO–Russia Founding Act], in particular our determination to build together a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and cooperative security and the principle that the security of all states in the Euro-Atlantic community is indivisible.' Despite grave misgivings articulated by much of the foreign policy establishment in Russia, Putin said 2 years later in 2004 that he had 'no concerns about the expansion of NATO' because 'today's threats are such that the expansion of NATO will not remove them' (Kessler 2004). Putin made this statement 16 months after the USA unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, about a year after it invaded Iraq despite Russian protests, and 6 months after the Rose Revolution in Georgia that brought pro-Western Mikhail Saakashvili to power—three key events that observers generally blame for worsening US–Russia relations when George W. Bush was US president (see Breslauer 2009).

Meaningful cooperation remained possible with NATO enlargement. Indeed, NATO and Russia collaborated extensively in Afghanistan, and the United States attempted to cultivate closer ties with Russia after Barack Obama won the presidency in 2008. Contrary to Mearsheimer's fatalistic predictions about nuclear reductions, the 'reset' by the Obama administration even involved both countries signing and ratifying the New START Treaty, an arms control agreement that cut 30% of their strategic nuclear arsenals and capped them at deployed weapons each. Russia did violate the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, which eliminated land-based cruise missiles and launchers of ranges from 500 to 5500 miles, but it has previously complained of the constraints imposed by that treaty for reasons relating to China, not NATO (Gates 2014, 154).

Tensions did erupt between the USA and Russia, but the causal impact of NATO enlargement is probably much less than what the conventional wisdom suggests. Some, like Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, argue that domestic political and economic developments drove Russia to be more confrontational toward the United States. Putin justified political repression at home with reference to the threat allegedly posed by the USA (2015, 169, 178).

The argument that NATO enlargement has provoked Russian aggression against its neighbors is likely wrong. In one study of Russian leaders' foreign policy rhetoric from 2000 to 2016, Maria Snegovaya (2020) finds that Russian leaders articulate anti-Western statements most when oil prices are high, suggesting that—like other petrostates—they are emboldened to press their claims against their neighbors under these circumstances. She uncovers little evidence that NATO enlargement drives anti-Western rhetoric. Another study finds that Russian diplomats consistently adopt a competitive posture vis-à-vis other envoys in various international organizations (Schmitt 2019). NATO enlargement does appear to have played a role in the lead-up

to the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, though the alliance rejected giving a Membership Action Plan to Georgia partly because of worries about being dragged into a conflict with Russia. Territorial disputes and strong personalities made that bilateral relationship ripe for conflict (Lanoszka 2018). NATO also rejected Ukraine's application for a Membership Action Plan in 2008. Similarly, NATO played a much lesser role in stoking tensions with Russia than some accounts suggest because it posed at most a very limited threat to Russia. Operationally, national caveats stymied NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan while a large majority of its members spent far less than 2% of their gross domestic products on defense (Saideman and Auerswald 2012; Stanley-Lockman and Wolf 2016). The US and NATO military presence east of Germany was (and remains) threadbare, consisting mostly of elements making up a missile defense system that even Russian observers like Alexei Arbatov (2016, 168) acknowledge would not undermine strategic stability. During much of the Obama administration, the USA was withdrawing military forces from Europe so as to concentrate more fully on East Asia (Simón 2015). Crucially, NATO enlargement was a non-issue when the Maidan movement began in Kyiv in late 2013. At stake was Ukraine's signature of the Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement, which was similar to what long-time Russian protégé Serbia had negotiated earlier that same year. This agreement did not even guarantee that Ukraine would be a European Union member, but would have spurred closer economic and political ties. NATO membership remainder at best a distant prospect.

Other aspects of Russia's potential balancing behavior against the United States and its allies might be the result of NATO enlargement. Consider its growing ties with China. These countries have increasingly aligned with one another since the 1990s. According to Alexander Korolev (2018, 15), the two countries have had more regular consultations, more military–technological cooperation and personnel exchanges, more intermilitary trust building efforts, and, since 2004, joint military exercises that have become more frequent in recent years. The secular trend toward an alliance partnership suggests causes deeper than a simple reaction to NATO enlargement. One potential deep cause of Russia and China's perceived need to balance against US power is unipolarity itself—a variable that Waltz (2000, 34) invokes obliquely to explain NATO enlargement. In any case, the correlation between rounds of NATO enlargement and the growing Russia–China partnership is not obvious. Similarly, the uptick in Russia's defense spending over the past decade may simply represent a natural great-power desire to repair a military after years of neglect (Renz 2016).

In sum, proponents of NATO enlargement who warned of Russian resurgence appear to have been vindicated, and critics who warned that NATO enlargement would irrevocably undermine cooperation with Russia have not. The line from NATO enlargement to tensions between the USA and Russia in the late 2010s is hardly straightforward. Indeed, Moscow has sought to court Washington multiple times after NATO enlargement began. Many Russian voters have in the past preferred Putin out of the belief that he would be pro-Western. Other decisions made in Washington may have undermined relations with Moscow, but mutually beneficial cooperation remained possible with NATO enlargement.

The defensibility of NATO's northeastern flank

NATO enlargement has provided a key source of insurance by raising the costs of direct Russian aggression against alliance members. This is true even in arguably the weakest part of the alliance, the Baltic littoral region. Conventional wisdom holds that the defense of this region against Russian aggression is especially costly for the USA and NATO to undertake. The countries located there are exceptionally vulnerable. Whereas most beneficiaries of NATO enlargement are at least largely separated from Russia thanks to Belarus and Ukraine, the Baltic countries are directly contiguous and have only a short land connection to continental NATO by way of the Polish–Lithuanian border. According to this perspective, a rebalancing of alliance commitments in Europe is necessary because the local military balance favors Russia too much and the political will to defend the Baltic states is too low. The USA will never 'trade Toledo for Tallinn' (Shifrinson 2017, 111).

Note the contradiction: According to critics, enlarging NATO simultaneously provokes Russia and weakens the alliance. But what rational cause would Russia have to be dismayed when a potentially adversarial military alliance willingly takes on major liabilities? The alliance security dilemma—whereby the strengthening of one coalition may inadvertently create insecurity for another—suggests that Russia would be justifiably concerned if NATO either incorporated states that meaningfully aggregate capabilities or increased military ties with such powerful states (Snyder 1984, 477). By NATO enlargement critics' own admission, the Baltic countries subtract from, rather than add to, what the alliance can do. Russian might have reasons to protest enlargement, but these reasons likely concern the perceived slight to its honor when former Soviet states became formal defense partners of the USA (Götz 2017, 236–239).[4] NATO enlargement has not been responsible for Russian authoritarianism or international revisionism because it never threatened Russia.

Pessimism regarding the defensibility of NATO's so-called northeastern flank is also unwarranted. To begin with, much of the policy literature on this region concentrates on Russia's strengths while ignoring its key weaknesses. The Baltic countries would almost surely lose set piece battles against Russia, but deterrence ultimately hinges less on being victorious in a potential war than on imposing unacceptable costs on the adversary. The Baltic states have already begun embracing unconventional strategies intended to boost national resiliency and make occupation difficult (Collins and Beehner 2019). Guerrilla tactics and territorial defense serve to augment their denial capabilities that in turn would complicate Russian efforts to hold territory and pacify the local population. Moreover, Russia may have local escalation dominance, but it does not have global escalation dominance, given the forces that NATO members possess. A large-scale land grab made at the expense of any of the Baltic countries might precipitate escalatory dynamics that it could not control.

[4] As Götz (2017) demonstrates, every model of Russian behavior—whether it emphasizes individual decision-makers, domestic politics, ideas and identities, or geopolitics—has empirical shortcomings. Indeed, though many opponents of NATO enlargement are self-described realists, constructivists have also offered critiques. See, for example, Tsygankov (2018).

Nuclear war may be a remote possibility, but it cannot be discounted altogether. One reason why Russia has resorted to so-called hybrid tactics against the Baltic countries—such as political subversion and efforts to foment unrest—is that it does not wish to provoke a reaction that it cannot handle (Lanoszka 2016). Put simply, Russia may believe in NATO's Article Five collective defense commitment more than NATO members themselves do.

Russia's ability to mount a major assault on the Baltic littoral region should not be exaggerated either. Strategic assets that Russia supposedly has at its disposal can become liabilities. Its one formal defense partner—Belarus—has proved reluctant to accept additional forward deployed military assets and to provide diplomatic support in Russia's territorial disputes with its neighbors. Because Belarus has potentially much to lose from getting involved in any sort of military confrontation between Russia and NATO, its leaders will be hesitant to offer material support to Russia, especially if they fear becoming the target of NATO countermeasures. Moreover, any massive assault on Poland and the Baltic countries would require extensive stockpiling of military hardware, ammunition, medical equipment, and other supplies, which would provide NATO defense planners with early warning. The Russian exclave of Kaliningrad might also be vulnerable. Swedish researchers have called into question Russian A2/AD capabilities located in Kaliningrad and elsewhere, alleging that its missile systems have much shorter ranges than commonly presumed and may be vulnerable to countermeasures (Dalsjö et al. 2019). NATO militaries like the Polish Armed Forces could hold at risk Kaliningrad. The question should not necessarily be whether the United States would trade 'Toledo for Tallinn' but whether Russia would trade Kaliningrad for Vilnius. And indeed, Russia would need the Suwałki Gap as much as NATO would because the area provides a bridge between Belarus and Kaliningrad. Attempts to close it necessarily involve violating Poland's territorial integrity and would provide justification for NATO to escalate. Partly because of these difficulties associated with a major conventional attack, regional experts and government officials judge the probability of something of this sort happening to be low (Lanoszka and Hunzeker 2019, 29–30, 79). That is not to say Russia is weak; for example, its widening missile advantages still create gaps in NATO's deterrence posture. But Russia is not a military juggernaut either.

Even the use of so-called hybrid tactics may have limited efficacy in the Baltic region. The three Baltic countries have been subject to an intense Russian disinformation campaign since at least 2014. Nevertheless, local public opinion remains largely supportive of NATO and other defense policy measures aimed at boosting deterrence. One reason why these societies may be inoculated against Russian disinformation is that they have grown accustomed to seeing Russia in adversarial terms, thus making average citizens critical of pro-Kremlin narratives (Lanoszka 2019). In addition, the Baltic states have integrated their minority populations far better than is often assumed. Although many Russophones may still lack citizenship rights in Estonia and Latvia and so are more likely to experience political discrimination and economic hardship, they nevertheless retain key benefits associated with living in the European Union (Trimbach and O'Lear 2015). They may have sympathies for aspects of Russian foreign policy, but these sympathies do not translate into a preference to be reunited with Russia (Kallas 2016). Accordingly, Russia faces serious

obstacles replicating what it did in Crimea. Russians living in Crimea were generally sympathetic to being part of *Russkiy Mir* ('Russian World'), making them more willing to be the objects of an annexation effort (O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2016, 761). Further, Russia does not have an existing military presence in the Baltic countries—as it did with the Black Sea Fleet stationed in Sevastopol—that it could leverage to achieve easy *faits accomplis* and dissuade potential challengers from organizing.

In sum, NATO does not need to have a heavy footprint in the Baltic region to deter Russian aggression. Russia would have to overcome major operational challenges if it wished to undertake a successful conquest of the Baltic countries. Of course, none of this is to invite complacency about Baltic security. The Baltic states and Poland should deepen regional cooperation in order to ensure that no key policy differences exist between them (Jermalavicius et al. 2018). They also face potential vulnerabilities at sea and so need to improve the resilience of their undersea and maritime infrastructure (Schaub et al. 2017). Still, the defensibility of the Baltic region helps illuminate why Russia resorts to disinformation campaigns, airspace incursions, vague nuclear threats, and other attempts at subversion. It cannot do much more lest it would provoke an unwanted response.

Conclusion

NATO enlargement has been a net positive for European security. It has provided a useful hedge against Russian revisionism, which even critics of NATO enlargement have acknowledged is possible. Enlargement is not responsible for Russia's current authoritarianism or its foreign relations, and mutually beneficial cooperation between the USA and Russia has still been possible with NATO enlargement. Finally, NATO enlargement has not brought insurmountable deterrence challenges. In fact, it has helped to solidify the security of the alliance's most vulnerable members by creating additional sources of risk of Russia should it be tempted to undertake aggressive activities against them.

Critics of NATO expansion should not feel vindicated in light of the present crisis that characterizes NATO–Russian relations and, more broadly, European security. Enlarging NATO was justified because Russia did, at least potentially, pose a long-term threat to Central and Eastern Europe. Those critics themselves conceded in the 1990s that Russia's historical record and ethnic political incentives were so threatening to Ukraine as to justify the latter having its own nuclear weapons arsenal. Some of these critics themselves foresaw the possibility that Russia would eventually try to expand its power and influence in pursuit of regional hegemony. But waiting for Russian aggression to justify an enlargement of NATO, as some have proposed, would have been a mistake. NATO may not have enhanced democracy for countries in Central and Eastern Europe beyond what other international organizations achieved, but providing these countries with security guarantees against the prospects of Russian aggression did not hurt democracy either. NATO expansion by itself did not make the Russian regime anti-Western in its foreign policy orientation, less democratic in its institutions, or even more nationalist in its domestic

politics. Other factors—mostly indigenous in nature—shaped Russian behavior. Finally, the defense of the Baltic region is not so hopeless as to make countries on NATO's northeastern flank a major liability. Russia would face significant hurdles in achieving any large-scale *faits accomplis* at their expense. The consequences of NATO enlargement are largely positive. The European security environment in the late 2010s was far less grim than the future that many predicted in the early 1990s.

To be sure, the consequences of NATO enlargement may not be entirely or unambiguously positive (see other contributions in this special issue). That NATO in aggregate has vast defensive capabilities does not fully protect the Baltic countries. Partly because those NATO members benefit from extended nuclear deterrence, whatever its credibility, Russia will continue to try to unsettle them using means that fall short of war, thus fostering the impression that they are more vulnerable than they actually are. Finally, that NATO enlargement has so far been largely beneficial for European security does not automatically imply that Georgia and Ukraine can be incorporated without any problems. Although pessimistic predictions regarding NATO enlargement have been wrong in the past and can be wrong again, NATO simply lacks the unity these days to manage any possible costs associated with Georgia's and Ukraine's inclusion, thereby rendering the issue moot. After all, the entrapment concerns shared by France and Germany that prevented those countries from receiving Membership Action Plans in 2008 persist and have arguably intensified since. Regardless of how the future develops, Europe has largely enjoyed peace and security for the past 30 years. Thank goodness indeed for NATO enlargement.

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