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Preserving the New Peace: The Case against NATO Expansion

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# Preserving the New Peace

## The Case Against NATO Expansion

*Michael Mandelbaum*

Proponents of extending NATO membership to the Visegrad countries—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia—can be divided into two camps. Those in the first camp assert that the purpose is solely to promote democracy and free markets in central Europe and has nothing to do with the military power and political aspirations of any other country. For the second group, NATO expansion has everything to do with the threat from Russia.

On their point of disagreement, the second group has the stronger argument. NATO expansion *is* about Russia. But on the policy they commonly advocate, both are unpersuasive. NATO expansion, under present circumstances and as currently envisioned, is at best premature, at worst counterproductive, and in any case largely irrelevant to the problems confronting the countries situated between Germany and Russia.

If NATO is to be a vehicle for the promotion of democracy in the post-Cold War world, and, judging from Assistant

Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke's recent article ("America, a European Power," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1995), this is the position of the Clinton administration, there is no reason that all the formerly communist countries of Eurasia should not join. Certainly, if the promotion of democracy is NATO's new mission, then the expansion under consideration does not reach far enough to the east. For the countries under active consideration are precisely those best placed to make a successful transition to democracy and free markets *without* NATO membership. It is in Russia and Ukraine that the development of Western political and economic systems will be most difficult, where failure would be most costly for Europe, and where, therefore, success would have the greatest benefit.

In fact, however, NATO is not an effective instrument for promoting either free markets or democracy. In the second half of the 1940s, when the fate of democracy and free markets in Western Europe was the preeminent international

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issue, the principal response—and an extremely successful one—was the Marshall Plan. The plan provided capital, market access, and incentives for economic cooperation, all of which central Europe currently needs. The logical source for all three is not NATO; it is the European Union, membership in which is a matter of the highest priority for each of the Visegrad countries.

#### ANXIETY ABOUT RUSSIA

NATO is not only not the most effective instrument for promoting democracy, it is not in *essence* an organization for doing so. Rather, it is a military alliance, an association of some sovereign states directed against others. The “other” in this case is Russia.

Anxiety about Russia makes NATO membership attractive to central Europeans. In the words of Bronislaw Geremek, a prominent democratic politician in Poland speaking in the September 6, 1993, *Washington Post*, “At the moment Russia is weak. But we know that this is a transitional period. The Soviet empire could be succeeded by the Russian empire. In some years, Russia will become a superpower again—and the memory of this period of weakness will have an important psychological impact on a new generation of Russian leaders.” Poles have been dominated and oppressed by Russia for most of the last two centuries. It is hardly surprising that they should want some insurance against the revival of Russian imperial behavior, which is what NATO membership offers them.

Americans who favor expanding NATO for reasons having to do with Russia rather than the promotion of democracy

agree. In the post-Cold War era, they say, NATO should be more or less what it was during the Cold War: a mechanism for containing a smaller, no longer communist, but still aggressive Russia. Peter W. Rodman, a senior foreign policy official in the last four Republican administrations, has made the point with admirable clarity in the December 13, 1994, *Washington Post*: “Some will lament that [in expanding NATO to central Europe] we have drawn a new line dividing the European continent. Nonsense. Russia is already getting back on its feet geopolitically, even before it gets back on its feet economically. The only potential great-power security problem in central Europe is the lengthening shadow of Russian strength, and NATO still has the job of counter-balancing it. Russia is a force of nature; all this is inevitable.”

As with the argument that NATO will promote democracy, however, even if the premise of this “neo-containment” rationale for NATO expansion is correct, even if Russian imperialism is bound to revive, the proposed extension of the Atlantic alliance does not go sufficiently far eastward. Poland, after all, is not directly threatened by Russia. The country most important to the West that is immediately vulnerable to a renewal of aggressive Russian behavior is Ukraine. Yet no one is suggesting that Ukraine join NATO. Indeed, discussions of NATO tend to treat Ukraine as marginal.

Ukraine, however, is the opposite of marginal: it is central. So long as it remains independent it is a buffer between Russia and the rest of Europe. More important, an independent Ukraine is the best guarantee that Russia will

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remain a peaceful nation-state. Conflict between the two would have adverse repercussions to the west. And if Moscow absorbed Ukraine or attempted to do so, Russia would again become a multinational empire harboring a large, resentful subject nation, with poor prospects for the construction of a stable democratic system. It is not an exaggeration to say that NATO expansion will be good or bad depending on its effect on the peaceful coexistence of Ukraine and Russia.

Ukrainians, at least, do not seem to believe that expanding the Atlantic alliance will benefit them. On the contrary, they appear to feel that the extension of NATO membership to central Europe would relegate Ukraine to the dangerous side of a new dividing line. The Ukrainian government, unlike its Polish counterpart, has not advocated eastward NATO expansion. Leaving Ukraine feeling isolated would in all likelihood weaken its commitment to relinquishing to Russia all the nuclear weapons it inherited from the Soviet Union, a major goal of the last two American administrations.

Still, the logic of extending the alliance for reasons of neo-containment is far from implausible. If Russia is bound to resume its traditionally imperial foreign policy; if, when it does so, the requirements of American security will demand the eastward expansion of NATO; and if taking this inevitable step is better now when Russia is weak rather than later when it has grown strong,

then it follows that alliance membership should be promptly extended, although to include Ukraine and perhaps the Baltic states rather than simply the Visegrad four. But is all this correct?

It is not *necessarily* correct. Russia may again seek to disturb the peace of Europe but is not destined to do so. There is no Russian national equivalent of a genetic predisposition to aggression. Neither Russia in general nor Russian foreign policy in particular is an impersonal, inevitable force of nature. "Nations are not constants," as the distinguished historian of Russia Martin Malia has written, arguing democracy and free markets can take root in Russia, although not instantly or easily. "It is pseudowisdom to deduce future prospects mechanically from past precedents."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, acting as if the neo-containment premise were correct runs two risks. The first is the risk of weakening the democrats in Russian politics, who are struggling against powerful undemocratic political forces and whom the Russian public identifies with the West. No Russian with any semblance of democratic credentials, starting with President Boris Yeltsin, has endorsed the extension of NATO to central Europe. Many emphatically oppose it. To be sure, the struggle for Russia's political future will not depend principally on what NATO does: it is possible that democracy will triumph even if the Visegrad countries were to join NATO. It is also possible—perhaps, alas, even likely—that the cause

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<sup>1</sup> "Tradition, Ideology and Pragmatism in the Formation of Russian Foreign Policy," in *The Emergence of Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Leon Aron and Kenneth M. Jensen, Washington: The United States Institute of Peace, 1994, p. 47.

of democracy will fail even if NATO expansion does not take place. But expanding the alliance will certainly not assist Russia's democrats.

There is a second risk: that Russia would regard the new configuration of European security that an expanded NATO would produce as illegitimate because it had been imposed over Russian opposition, even as Germany considered the post-World War I settlement an illegitimate "dictated" peace. According to Sergei A. Karaganov, deputy director of the Institute of Europe in Moscow and a Yeltsin adviser, if "NATO expands eastward, Russia under any government will become a revisionist power striving to undermine the already fragile European order."<sup>2</sup> It is significant that *all* the modifications in Europe's security arrangements from 1987 to the present, the net effect of which has been dramatically to reduce Russian power, have occurred with Russian consent. NATO expansion would mark a departure from that pattern.

#### THE POST-COLD WAR SETTLEMENT

The new post-Cold War security arrangements in Europe to which Russia has agreed are, in turn, the most important reason that NATO expansion is not only unwise but unnecessary. Proponents of expansion assert that a security vacuum in Europe must be filled by "new security architecture," of which a NATO encompassing central Europe ought to be an important part.

In fact, there is no such vacuum. The foundation of a new and radically different security order is in place. It consists of the remarkable series of arms control accords, covering nuclear and conventional weapons, negotiated in the five years between the December 1987 treaty eliminating intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe and the January 1993 START II accord covering long-range nuclear weapons.

Together these agreements form an arrangement that Europe has never had, a common security order based not on the age-old balance of power but rather on consensus and cooperation. It has three main features.

First, it is the product of negotiations. For the first time, the distribution of armed forces in Europe has been fixed by treaties into which the countries of Europe and North America have freely entered. In this sense, each country's forces have the approval of all the others.

Second, Europe's military forces have been reshaped so that they are more suitable for defense than attack. This shift is partly by design and partly a matter of numbers: the treaties both reduce and equalize the numbers of weapons in Europe, and equality favors the defense because a successful attack ordinarily requires numerical superiority.

Third, as a result of the verification provisions of the arms treaties and a supplementary series of confidence-building measures, military forces in Europe are transparent: each country

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Charles A. Kupchan, "Expand NATO—and Split Europe," *The New York Times*, November 27, 1994, p. 11.

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can see not only what forces all the others have but also what the others are doing with their forces.

The terms of these treaties make virtually impossible what, during the Cold War, it was NATO's mission to prevent: a successful westward attack by a Russian army.

### **THE PEACE MAY NOT ENDURE**

This does *not* mean that NATO is now superfluous and should be dissolved. The alliance is necessary to ensure the United States remains involved in Europe's political and military affairs. An ongoing American role will reassure Germany that it need not arm itself more heavily to remain secure, something that would make Germany's neighbors feel less secure. Keeping NATO in being will also assure the Europeans that, if Russia does resume an imperial foreign policy, the United States will be committed to taking part in an anti-Russian coalition. Both these tasks, however, can be carried out without the eastward expansion of the alliance. Depending on the course of events in Russia, it may ultimately be possible to carry them out by returning to the alliance's original form, as a guarantee pact rather than an integrated multinational army on the European continent.

On the other hand, Europe's new common security order may not endure. It will survive only so long as all parties voluntarily observe its rules. If one country abandons them, the order will collapse. The European power likeliest to abandon the rules is Russia.

Three developments would signal the end of the effort to transcend balance-of-power politics in Europe. The first is Russian violation of the political or territorial

integrity of its western neighbors, Ukraine and the Baltic states. Such violations are already occurring to Russia's south, in the Caucasus, but they do not threaten Western security as would comparable behavior to the west. A second damaging development would be a serious violation of the major European arms control treaties.

The third deathblow would be the advent of a xenophobic, hypernationalist, or neo-fascist government in Moscow. While in theory even such a regime might conduct a peaceful foreign policy, in practice none of Russia's neighbors will wish to wait to see whether it does. They will want to join NATO, and in these circumstances they should be admitted.

While the new common security order can fail rapidly, it can only succeed slowly. If Russia seeks to overturn the post-Cold War settlement, failure will be obvious in short order; but its neighbors will not be confident of Russia's commitment to the rules of common security unless and until Moscow has followed them for a long time.

Because Russia is so weak, chaotic, and preoccupied with its internal affairs, the West *has* a long time. During the Cold War, the qualities it was important to bring to bear in dealing with the Soviet Union were constant vigilance, firm determination, and the capacity to respond instantaneously. Of comparable importance today is a quality that is in some ways their opposite and is often in short supply: patience. ☺