



# NATO enlargement: evaluating its consequences in Russia

Kimberly Marten<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

It is often claimed that NATO's post-Cold War geographic enlargement threatened Russian security interests and caused the downturn in Russia's relations with the West. This article unpacks and challenges that causal claim, making three basic arguments. First, NATO enlargement made the alliance weaker. Russia knew this and did not react militarily to any perceived threat from Europe until after it seized Crimea in 2014. Second, the downturn in Russia's relationship with the West was overdetermined and most likely caused by Russia's reaction to its own declining influence in the world. While NATO's geographic enlargement aggravated this situation, it was probably not the most significant causal factor. Third, while Russia certainly reacted negatively to NATO enlargement right from the start, the reaction was manipulated and magnified by both the nationalist opposition, and Vladimir Putin's regime, to serve domestic political interests.

**Keywords** Russia · NATO enlargement · Threat · Status

What impact has NATO's post-Cold War geographic enlargement had on Russia and Russia's policies toward the West? One prominent view among both US analysts and the general public is that NATO expansion threatened Russia and caused it to turn against the West. Cold War diplomat George F. Kennan famously called NATO enlargement 'the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold-War era' (1997), predicting that it would mark 'the beginning of a new Cold War,' where 'the Russians will gradually react quite adversely' (Friedman 1998). His concerns were echoed, with a more subtle and deeper causal argument, in an open letter to US President Bill Clinton by the so-called Eisenhower Group, 40 prominent academics and former diplomats and security officials led by Susan Eisenhower. The letter argued in part that NATO enlargement would 'strengthen the nondemocratic opposition [in Russia], undercut those who favor[ed] reform and cooperation with the West, [and] bring the Russians to question the entire post-Cold War settlement'

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✉ Kimberly Marten  
km2225@columbia.edu

<sup>1</sup> Barnard College, Columbia University, 3009 Broadway, New York, NY 10027-6598, USA



(‘Opposition to NATO Expansion’ 1997). Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft expressed similar sentiments independently at that time (Winter 1997). More recently, prominent analysts including John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, and Stephen F. Cohen have argued that these predictions more or less came true, pinning Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia and occupation of the disputed territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, along with the 2014 seizure of Crimea and military intervention into eastern Ukraine, on fears of further NATO expansion (Mearsheimer 2014a, b; Walt 2014; Cohen 2017).

Yet to disentangle the relationship between NATO’s geographic enlargement and Russia’s relations with the West is not as easy as it first appears. The causal chains that may seem to link the two are complex, subject to interference by many other variables, and mediated by the evolving subjective interpretations of a diverse cast of Russian actors. The purpose of this article is to examine the causal links between NATO enlargement and Russian relations with the West, focusing on three issues: the objective, measurable military postures associated with NATO enlargement, and whether Russia seemed to be threatened by them; whether NATO enlargement is responsible for the downturn in overall relations between Russia and the West from the late 1990s on; and how NATO enlargement became enmeshed with Russian domestic leadership politics, nationalism, and public opinion.

## The difficulty of testing the effects of NATO enlargement

At its base, the causal claim that NATO’s geographic expansion by itself caused anything to happen in Russia is complicated by an important fact: NATO enlargement had no direct impact on the Russian state or Russian territory. No borders were changed, and Russia lost no alliances, trade pacts, or other institutional arrangements. In November 1990, Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev signed the Charter of Paris, affirming the right of all sovereign states to form their own security relationships. Shortly thereafter Moscow lost what it might have considered the buffer states that shielded its territory from Germany when the Warsaw Pact dissolved in March 1991 on the initiative of the Visegrad negotiating group of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. This dissolution of the Soviet Cold War alliance occurred without encouragement by any NATO member, and absent any US or NATO promise of a new security architecture for East-Central Europe (Asmus 2002, 79; Solomon 1998, 14; Binnendijk 1991). The Soviet Union itself dissolved that December because of a purely internally driven set of initiatives (which US president George H.W. Bush strongly opposed), led by Ukraine and welcomed by President Boris Yeltsin of what was then the Russian Soviet Republic (Plokhy 2014).

Analysis of how NATO’s post-Cold War enlargement *per se* affected Russia’s relations with the West is further complicated because enlargement (which publicly began with a NATO study in late 1994, peaked from 1997 through 2004 as states bordering Russia were invited to join, and continues today) occurred alongside numerous other significant and largely negative security interactions between Russia and the West. The effects on Russian perceptions and planning of these various events are impossible to disentangle from those caused by



enlargement. The most significant of these events include NATO airstrikes and NATO-led peace operations in Bosnia and Kosovo, where Russian diplomats and soldiers played complex and sometimes contradictory roles; US and British airstrikes against the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein in 1998 and the eventual US-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003, both of which occurred without United Nations Security Council (UNSC) approval and in the face of what would have been Russian vetoes; US unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty with Russia in 2001–2002, followed by US bilateral agreements with Poland and Romania (with NATO support) to build ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems on their territories against Russian wishes; and the UNSC-approved NATO mission against Muammar Gaddafi's Libya in 2011, which morphed into a regime-change operation that Russia opposed. None of these events depended on NATO enlargement—arguably not even the agreement to build BMD sites in Romania and Poland, given that the USA also has bilateral BMD equipment arrangements with a wide variety of non-NATO members (including Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Japan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United Arab Emirates) (Reif 2019). Russia and the West also found themselves at odds during this fraught time because Russian military forces remained in Georgia and Moldova against the wishes of their UN-recognized sovereign governments, undermining the newly signed Adapted Conventional Forces in Europe (A/CFE) Treaty of 1999. NATO enlargement was not a discrete event in the panoply of Russia's security relationships with the West and cannot be treated as if it were.

There is no question that NATO's geographic enlargement was a major irritant to Russian leaders and contributed to the decline of the overall relationship between Russia and the West—but there is little evidence that enlargement actually threatened Russia. Instead, NATO enlargement was a marker for Russia's declining status and the growing influence of the USA in the world; it reflected, rather than caused, a shift in the relative global power balance. Given the long history of Soviet-NATO confrontation during the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Russia's weakness and instability in the 1990s, *any* action that showcased the growth of relative US influence, especially in Europe, would likely have raised Russian hackles.

As the Eisenhower group correctly foresaw, enlargement challenged the domestic political standing and reform efforts of President Yeltsin in particular and hence played some indirect role in complicating the push for Russia's Westernization. US leaders were well aware of this problem and tried mightily to work around it by delaying the progress of enlargement while attempting broad outreach toward Russia (Talbot 2002). But Russian elites knew that NATO had never attempted to attack the Soviet Union or Russia and remained fundamentally defensive in orientation and mission. Indeed, every indirect effect of NATO enlargement was filtered not merely through the preexisting psychological and sociological perceptions of Russian leaders and citizens, but also through the intentional manipulations of the Kremlin and of Russia's vocal, varied, and sometimes violent nationalist and extremist political groups. Those who predicted that nationalists would run with the enlargement issue were correct—but that is a far cry from the argument that the nationalists would defeat reformers because of it.



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## Organization of the argument

Rather than coming up with a definitive answer to the question of what effect NATO enlargement has had on Russia, this article will concentrate on exploring the difficulties of trying to answer that causal question. First, it will look at the simplest aspect of the question: the objective military postures of the new NATO member states that bordered Russia and how Russia reacted to them. NATO was actually weakened (for both political and geographic reasons) as enlargement continued, and Russia knew it. If that were ever to change, Russia would have significant advance warning—and Russia of course retains a massive nuclear deterrent to protect its territory. Russia indeed did not react militarily to NATO enlargement, doing little to enhance the defense of its NATO-facing regions. The only aspect of geographic change that appeared to cause angst in the Kremlin was a 2006 agreement (the East European Task Force) involving US-supported military facilities upgrades in Romania and Bulgaria. It is possible that the location of these two new NATO states along the Black Sea became justification in Putin's mind for the wars he launched in Georgia and Ukraine, even if actual NATO military activities there posed no threat to Russia.

The next two sections examine the possible indirect and less measurable effects of NATO enlargement on Russia. The second section turns to the question of whether NATO enlargement is responsible for the decline of the relationship between Russia and the West. It argues that in fact the decline was overdetermined and that other factors associated with Russia's declining influence in the world probably had a much greater impact on Russian threat perceptions than did NATO's geographic enlargement. This discussion is divided into two parts: the expansion of NATO and other Western out-of-area military missions (in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya) that negatively affected Russian perceptions of its international influence; and disagreements with the West over major arms-control issues, including the failure of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty process and the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and building of regional BMD sites in Romania and Poland.

The third section briefly describes what other analysts have summarized at length about Russian domestic politics and political perceptions regarding NATO enlargement and the West more generally. It focuses on significant elite statements and public opinion polls, all of which further cast doubt on the idea that NATO enlargement was the primary factor causing Russia to turn away from the West.

In sum, NATO enlargement has had a significant negative impact on Russia's relations with the West—but because of its symbolic and status-related components, not its military implications. Of course status issues are tied to security concerns, given that low-status countries have a harder time getting their international interests taken seriously (Wohlforth and Zubok 2017). But that is a very different argument from what is usually meant by the statement that NATO enlargement threatened Russia. Indeed, the enlargement of NATO was possible only because of a prior diminution of Moscow's status; if that status had not declined, the Visegrad states would still be in the Warsaw Pact, the Baltic states would still be in the USSR, and the West during the 1990s would still have been focused on Soviet military power.



## Objective military and foreign policy effects of NATO enlargement on Russia

On the sidelines of the Paris Charter talks in 1990, Soviet deputy foreign minister Yulii Kvitsinskii attempted to bribe Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia to stay unaligned. Nonetheless, they immediately began agitating for NATO membership, long before NATO was ready to talk about such a thing (Póti 2000, 133; Reisch 1993). That same year, the administration of US President George H.W. Bush began quietly analyzing the possibility of NATO enlargement (Sarotte 2010, 115–119; Shiffrinson 2016, 37–39; Sayle 2019, 233, 238–240). But enlargement did not become NATO's overall policy direction until late 1994, with the advent of the Clinton administration's public Study on NATO Enlargement (Barrett 1996; NATO 1995; Goldgeier 1999; Grayson 1999; Asmus 2002). Poland, Hungary, and what had now become the Czech Republic were invited to join NATO as the first new members in 1997, and officially joined in 1999 at the alliance's Washington Summit.

NATO force deployments, weaponry and equipment, like those of Russia, had meanwhile rapidly declined throughout the 1990s because of both post-Cold War strategic rebalancing and observation of the original limits set by the 1990 CFE Treaty. This should have reassured Russia about the limits and defensive nature of NATO's future capabilities and intentions. As NATO added new member states, of course, the absolute number of its overall active armed forces went up (Cotter et al. 2002). Yet NATO retooled and reconfigured its forces away from large-scale conventional warfighting, to concentrate on stability operations first in the Balkans and then in the Middle East, leading to a decline of relative capability in Europe in comparison with the Cold War era (Boston et al. 2018). Further, the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, signed between the USA and the Soviet Union and enduring until 2019, effectively prevented the deployment of any land-based US nuclear missiles in Europe, although it did not limit either nuclear bomber rotations (which the USA stopped anyway until the 2014 Ukraine war) (NATO 2019) or naval ships or submarines armed with nuclear weapons.

It is impossible to map out exactly how NATO enlargement impacted overall NATO deployments because there are so many confounding factors involved, including the huge uptick in out-of-area operations by NATO and its member states (in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, as well as smaller ones in Africa) that used European air bases and other resources for temporary transport, resupply, and logistics. Although NATO enlargement in theory made more airbases and logistics centers available for these operations, longstanding NATO members with highly developed and alliance-ready infrastructure provided most of these resources, alongside many non-NATO states. Even Russia, in the case of the Afghanistan operation, lent out its rail infrastructure for NATO use (Lobjakas 2008).

In fact, the addition of new members arguably made the NATO alliance weaker. Enlargement posed challenges for force integration, communication, and effectiveness, and as its membership expanded, NATO faced new sources



of internal political disagreement that would likely have negatively impacted its wartime decision-making capabilities. One prominent Western expert argued in 2009 that enlargement had actually ‘put in question the practical military utility of the organization so conceived’ (Michta 2009, 370). Russian specialists knew this. For example, Andrey Zagorsky, a leading Russian security analyst, wrote in 2017, ‘The enlargement of NATO at each step was accompanied not by an increase, but a decrease, of the combined military potential of the alliance’ (Zagorsky 2017, 105).

For the sake of argument, though, if NATO’s geographic enlargement had worried Russian military planners, which states would have mattered most? In 1999, Moscow would likely have viewed Poland as the most militarily sensitive of those first three new members. This is because Poland borders the offset Russian territory of Kaliningrad, and hence its accession to NATO significantly increased the length of the Russia/NATO border. (Norway, one of the original NATO members, has a small border with Russia.) Poland, a relatively large state geographically and in terms of population size, could also easily be resupplied by ground or air from neighboring Germany.

However, the raw number of Polish armed forces gradually declined over the post-Cold War period, eventually reaching about 120,000, or a third of what they had been in the late Soviet era (World Bank n.d.). Poland’s tank force, necessary for large-scale conventional combat, declined from 1700 in 1999 to under 1000 by 2016, and most of the remaining tanks were obsolete Soviet models (Boston et al. 2018, 6). More important, Poland in the 1990s was riven by scandals and domestic political fights over the direction of defense policy and civil-military relations. Military planning and budgeting were also bedeviled by the technical challenges associated with base and force relocation, the discarding of outdated Soviet weapons stocks and adopting of NATO interoperability standards, and questions of what to do about Soviet-era conscription policy (Simon 2004). Until Poland’s accession to the European Union (EU) brought more wealth to the economy in 2004, budgetary restrictions also limited the scope of military reform (Chappell 2009). And though Poland did buy 48 F-16 fighter jets, 5 C-130 military transport planes, and other equipment from the USA in the mid-2000s (perhaps for reasons of political loyalty more than rational cost–benefit defense calculations) (Chappell 2009), it did not even seriously plan for territorial self-defense at that time, hoping to rely instead on vaguely defined international and NATO help in case of a crisis (Paszewski 2016). In May 2008, just before the Russia-Georgia war broke out, Poland officially defined the mission of its armed forces primarily in terms of out-of-area international peace-keeping, peace enforcement, and anti-terrorist operations, such as those in which it participated in Afghanistan and Iraq, and other NATO and European Union missions (Paszewski 2016). In other words, Poland in NATO created no appreciable new military threat for Russian planners.

The 1999 NATO summit in which Poland joined NATO might have seemed militarily threatening to Russia for another reason. It provided Membership Action Plans (MAPs) to the next tranche of potential new members, including the former Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, often collectively referred to as the ‘Baltic states.’ (As of early 2020 these are still the only former Soviet territories to join



NATO.) The Baltic states' accession would leave the heavily militarized region of Kaliningrad divided from the rest of Russia by NATO territory. NATO simultaneously offered MAPs to the former Warsaw Pact Black Sea states of Bulgaria and Romania, which alongside Turkey could now host NATO navy ships and planes directly across the sea from Russia. All five states were among the group invited to join NATO in 2002 (despite strong Western concerns about corruption in Romania in particular), and each officially joined at the Istanbul Summit of 2004.

Armed force deployments in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have never been close to large enough to pose an offensive threat to Russia. They remained small and relatively flat over this time period (World Bank n.d.). As mentioned above, Kaliningrad now found its land borders surrounded by NATO (it faces neutral Sweden by sea), but this threatened the enlarged NATO alliance much more than it threatened Russia. Kaliningrad has long been heavily militarized. Most of its population since Soviet times has worked in military installations (Chillaud and Tetart 2007), even though Russian deployments there were cut somewhat in the 1990s to meet the zonal limits of the original CFE Treaty (Kramer 1997). But in a future war with Russia, NATO would have a challenge resupplying and reinforcing the Baltic states, for two reasons. First, by land NATO could only get to the Baltics via the Suwalki Gap, a 40-mile-long chokepoint on the Poland/Lithuania border faced by heavily militarized Kaliningrad on one side and the nominal Russian ally Belarus on the other (Roblin 2019). Russia often participates in joint military exercises with Belarus, some of which have resembled World War Two scenarios in size, and Moscow could easily move large forces to Belarus quickly. Second, Kaliningrad is the perfect place for Russia to implement an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) missile defense strategy, leaving the Baltic states cut off from the rest of NATO by air and sea unless NATO were willing to bear the likelihood of significant casualties (Williams 2017; Sukhankin 2017, 2018b). An influential 2016 RAND study concluded that NATO forces would be incapable of deploying quickly enough even to defend the Baltic states from a Russian surprise attack (Boston et al. 2018). In short, NATO expansion to include the Baltic states weakened NATO, not Russia.

Indeed, there is good evidence that the change in the Baltics (and neighboring Poland) that most threatened Russia was their accession to the EU, not NATO. Kaliningrad faced economic collapse and rampant criminality in the 1990s, particularly as a result of the Russian financial crisis of 1998, and was at one time referred to as 'the black hole of Europe' (Sukhankin 2018b, 22). Meanwhile the Western states surrounding it were beginning to thrive and to receive a great deal of foreign direct investment (Sukhankin 2018a, 129). In 1998 various regions from within the Western Baltic countries (including non-NATO member Sweden) reached out to include Kaliningrad in a civil society and economic development initiative called 'Euroregion Baltic,' which displeased Moscow enormously (Sukhankin 2018a, 193–194). There were real fears in Moscow that Kaliningrad would seek some kind of autonomous status attached to northern Europe and maybe even adopt the Euro (Chillaud and Tetart 2007, 180–181). These fears may have been intentionally stoked by local Kaliningrad elites to get more development attention from Moscow (Sukhankin 2018a, 175). This situation may very well have triggered Russian security fears, given Kaliningrad's key role in Baltic security. But anxiety about



Kaliningrad's status was only tangentially related, if it all, to concerns about NATO enlargement.

What about NATO's enlargement in the Black Sea region near Russia? Bulgaria's and Romania's force deployment patterns matched those of Poland, falling sharply (World Bank n.d.). Bulgaria in particular should not have worried Russia too much. Its leadership and population have wavered in their opinions about Russia and NATO, and Sofia has rejected two proposals since the start of the Ukrainian conflict in 2014 to form a joint NATO brigade or fleet with Romania. In 2015, only a quarter of Bulgarians said they would fight for their country, and in 2016, only 28% of those who were surveyed thought that NATO helped protect them, whereas 20% said that they instead saw NATO as a threat (Wezeman and Kuimova 2018).

Could these new member states' territories nonetheless have been used by the USA for an invasion of Russia? Not likely (Sestanovich 2015). Around 350,000 US military forces were stationed in European Command during the mid-1980s, but this number declined precipitously after German reunification in 1990, bottoming out at just over 52,000 in 2015 (U.S. European Command Communication and Engagement Directorate 2016). The USA deactivated its heavy combat capabilities in Europe during these years, withdrawing its last tanks from Germany in 2013 (Boston et al. 2018, 6). Its air fleet declined by 75%, and it withdrew its last carrier group from the Mediterranean (Sestanovich 2015). US and NATO force levels have remained so low—even in the more recent times of growing tension between Russia and the West—that Russia would have a great deal of advance warning if NATO territory were ever to be used either to launch a conventional attack or for nuclear deployments.

In fact, although the new NATO members that directly bordered Russia may have valued membership because of the sense of protection against Moscow that it provided, NATO's decision to enlarge during the Clinton administration was largely driven by other concerns. First, Washington feared that US influence in the world would decline if the EU were to create its own independent security arrangements (Sayle 2019). The available evidence indicates that these, too, would have included the Central and East European states but excluded Russia (Solomon 1998, 14; Danilov 2005, 113). Second, the USA was concerned that Europe could become destabilized by the spread of ethnic conflict from the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, including through refugee crises, and hoped that enlarged NATO borders would halt its advance. Third, it wanted to head off the return of pre-World War Two authoritarianism in East-Central Europe, believing that strict NATO membership criteria would help remake these states and keep them on a liberal democratic trajectory (Gati 1996, 2014). Fourth, the new member states sensed that meeting NATO membership criteria was the first step to membership in an enlarged EU, with all of the economic benefits that the latter would bring.

Although new evidence uncovered by Timothy Andrews Sayle (2019) shows that the George H.W. Bush administration was concerned about the future possibility of a resurgent Russia, the Clinton administration, which launched NATO enlargement, was much more concerned about Russian anarchy and internal instability. NATO enlargement was less about containing Russia than about expanding the liberal democratic world order in Europe. Key players like James Baker, secretary of state in





the George H.W. Bush administration, repeatedly opined that Russia would be welcome to join NATO, too, if it made the political and institutional changes required for membership (Baker 1993, 2002).

Russian military planners knew that NATO enlargement did not create a threat to Russian security. Annual military data that Russia provided to members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe through the Vienna Document process show that the numbers of troops and weaponry (including battle tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery) deployed in Russia's Western and Southern Military Districts (those along NATO's new borders) fell steeply from 2000 to 2010—years that Putin was in office, and during which NATO enlargement both began and peaked. These numbers continued to decline until Russia's intervention in Ukraine caused a sharp rise in 2014 (Vershbow 2017).<sup>1</sup> This is exactly the opposite behavior from what would be expected if Russia saw NATO enlargement as militarily threatening. There is simply no evidence that Russian military planners were concerned about NATO's geographic expansion before Putin decided to invade Crimea—20 years *after* the NATO enlargement process began.

What about the claim (Mearsheimer 2014b) that Russia's August 2008 war with Georgia—and later seizure of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine—were caused by NATO's infamous April 2008 Bucharest summit statement that Ukraine and Georgia 'will become members of NATO'? Putin and other leading Russian commentators certainly made it clear that NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia would be considered a direct military threat to Russia—and US ambassador William J. Burns communicated that fact to the George W. Bush administration in a secret March 2008 cable (Burns 2008). But news reports at the time also made it clear that the Bucharest summit initiative lacked French and German support. The USA (especially Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security advisor) had wanted to offer a MAP to the two countries at that time, but the rest of NATO balked (*BBC News* 2008). A Congressional Research Service report published the next month highlighted the divisions within NATO over this issue:

Representatives of several allied governments criticized the Administration's handling of the MAP issue. They noted that several allies had clearly indicated before the summit their opposition to Georgia and Ukraine joining the MAP, and that President Bush's campaign in Georgia and Ukraine, and then at the summit, to persuade them to change their minds ignored their concerns. (Galilis 2008, 5)

The report notes: 'The allies did not provide a time frame for eventual membership' (6). Indeed, there was a snide joke circulating in the European diplomatic community at the time that rephrased the summit declaration as 'Ukraine and Georgia will become members of NATO...when hell freezes over.'

<sup>1</sup> The OSCE data have not been made public, and other reliable sources on weapons deployments (such as the Institute of International Security Studies's annual *The Military Balance* series) do not break down Russian troop and weapon levels by their base location inside Russia.



In any case, Putin's sudden fury against NATO enlargement did not begin after NATO's Bucharest summit. Instead, it was launched to the Western community's great surprise, since it seemed to come out of the blue, at the Munich Security Conference more than a year earlier, in February 2007. After criticizing US unipolarity and world domination, the breakdown of international law, NATO's turning away from UNSC authority, and the deployment of ballistic missile defenses as creating a new arms race, Putin called NATO enlargement 'a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust,' because of 'flexible frontline American bases with up to five thousand men in each,' whereby NATO 'put its frontline forces on our borders' and thereby violated a 1990 pledge not to move NATO forces beyond Germany (Putin 2007).

But there were apparently not even any formal NATO military plans to defend the Baltic states or Poland until 2010, because of internal NATO squabbling (Traynor 2019), and there were certainly no new US military facilities there. Putin's concern at this time was apparently centered not on states directly bordering Russia (despite his claims), but instead on the Eastern European Task Force framework, with agreements signed in 2005–2006 that envisioned up to 1700 US personnel rotating through Romania and 2500 through Bulgaria (together significantly less than the 5000 number Putin mentioned for each), alongside facilities upgrades in both countries (Moldovan, Pantev, and Rhodes 2009, 19–20). Russia made strong public statements against these arrangements, claiming that they violated both NATO promises from the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act and the CFE Treaty (14).<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it is highly unlikely that Russia would have seen these particular East European Task Force agreements as threatening, given the relatively small numbers and limited facilities construction involved, and the prolonged political difficulties in negotiating the agreements (with opposition coming both from socialist and far-right parties in Bulgaria and Romania) (14). Despite Russian claims to the contrary, it is hard to see these cases as violations of the NATO-Russia Founding Act pledge not to establish significant new combat forces in new NATO member states.

But these deployments could have magnified Putin's concerns about events in Georgia and Ukraine, given the location of all of these states on the Black Sea. With Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey all NATO members, Georgia and Ukraine are the only landmasses preventing Russia's historical drive for warm-water ports in the Black Sea (and out to the Mediterranean) from being completely boxed in by NATO. It would take some degree of paranoia to believe that what NATO was doing (indeed, what NATO was *capable* of doing) required invasions of Georgia and Ukraine to protect Russian security interests from NATO expansion. But it is possible that in the mind of Putin, the justification made sense—especially given his concern that the Georgian and Ukrainian color revolutions might infect Russia.

<sup>2</sup> Russia and the West have never agreed on how to interpret CFE Treaty limits. Russia wanted NATO to be permanently limited to only three additional brigades beyond what its 19 members held in 1999—at a time when NATO had negotiated an additional brigade for each of its 3 new Visegrad member states. NATO did not accept that interpretation. Although brigades vary in size, they typically range from 1500 to 5000 troops each.



This leads to a different question about possible Russian threat perceptions. Putin continues to feel terribly threatened by US and Western efforts to foster democratization in Russia, foreseeing the possibility that his own regime might fall victim to the street protests and demands for democratization that swept through Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. Indeed, it may have been events in Georgia and Ukraine at that time, much more than NATO enlargement per se, that turned Putin so strongly against the West. While NATO membership and the threat of color revolution may be conflated in Putin's mind, nonetheless, NATO enlargement has not had any demonstrable effect on democratic revolution. Indeed, though some analysts had hoped that it would encourage liberal democratic consolidation in East-Central Europe, that hope was misplaced. The fact that some of NATO's member states have fallen victim to authoritarian backsliding in recent years and that this might even endanger the cohesion of the alliance (Wallander 2018), is perhaps the best evidence that membership in NATO did not cause democratic institutionalization (Poast and Urpelainen 2018).

### **Confounding external systems effects on Russia's relationship with the West**

Next, did NATO enlargement fatally damage the overall relationship between Russia and the West? Although there is certainly a correlation in time between the enlargement process and the relationship's decline, we have no way of knowing what role the specific factor of NATO's geographic enlargement played in that decline, as opposed to the plethora of other factors affecting the relationship. It is entirely possible that even if NATO had not expanded its geographic scope, the exact same negative trajectory would have ensued. This section will discuss the range of other US and NATO factors that affected Russian perceptions and actions.

It is important to keep in mind that the overall course of Russian–Western relations was not linear after 1994. That in and of itself should cast doubt on the causal role that NATO enlargement by itself played. The up-and-down history of Russia's relationship with the West in the 1990s and 2000s has been well documented and explored (Carter and Perry 1998; Goldgeier and McFaul 2003; Smith 2006; Stent 2014; Hill 2018). US policy makers moved forward with enlargement stealthily, in an effort to minimize its negative effects for Yeltsin's popularity and tenure in office (Talbot 2002), and there was no steady downward spiral in the overall relationship as NATO membership grew. Indeed in 1997, the same year that NATO invited the Visegrad states to join, Russia's hardline realist foreign minister (and lifelong KGB and FSB officer) Yevgenii Primakov (Andrew and Mitrokhin 1999, 13; Kotov 2016) signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act. This nonbinding agreement declared that 'NATO and Russia do not consider each other as adversaries' and promised joint consultation and action going forward, even as it made clear that Russia would have a voice but not a veto in NATO's security arrangements (NATO 1997). In this agreement, NATO reaffirmed that it had 'no intention, no plan, and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO's nuclear posture or nuclear policy' and also pledged 'that in the



current and foreseeable security environment' it would avoid 'additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces,' while Russia pledged to 'exercise similar restraint in its conventional force deployments in Europe.' The entire agreement was predicated on the ongoing CFE Treaty process—and it was signed by Russia in full knowledge that NATO's geographic enlargement was underway.

For many years thereafter, Russian military officers were stationed at NATO headquarters, and various forms of diplomacy and cooperative activities between Russia and NATO continued even when conflict limited the warmth of the relationship (Zisk 1999; Pouliot 2010). This included substantial joint military education, training, and exercise cooperation through NATO's Partnership for Peace initiative, which was open to all former Warsaw Pact members including Russia, at least in part in hopes that it could tame Russia's reaction to NATO enlargement through trust building (Carter and Perry 1998; Perry 2015a, b).

Beyond remembering that the overall course of NATO–Russia relations varied, rather than going straight downhill, it is also worth recalling the wide range of major international security events involving Russia and the West that were unrelated to (and hence causally separate from) NATO's geographic enlargement, but that transpired after the enlargement process began. Many of these created enormous distrust between the actors and likely played an important independent role in the decline of the relationship.

First was NATO's 1992–1995 intervention in Bosnia, approved by the UNSC with a Russian affirmative vote. UNSC sanctions against the activities of Yugoslavian leader Slobodan Milošević and the militias he led in ethnic cleansing campaigns in Bosnia, and the establishment of UNSC safe areas for civilians in that country, each explicitly relied on NATO airstrikes for enforcement, beginning in 1994. Russia officially supported these resolutions, even though its foreign minister at the time, Andrei Kozyrev, initially tried to prevent them from going forward, fearing that they would 'stir up a xenophobic backlash in Russian politics' and put 'a Russian Milosevic in the Kremlin' (Talbot 2002, 73, 74). It is worth remembering that this is exactly what Eisenhower and her colleagues were predicting at the time about the effects of NATO enlargement, but the intervention in Bosnia preceded and was completely causally independent from NATO enlargement.

Even liberals in the Russian legislature (the Duma), not to mention the ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, as well as many of Kozyrev's colleagues in the foreign ministry, opposed the US-led airstrike initiatives in the Bosnian conflict (Adamishin 2013; Talbot 2002, 77; Gorski 2001, 18). While there was no unifying reason for their opposition, one concern was that Russia was being left out of decision making on a crucial European security issue and was no longer being treated as a geopolitical equal. The Russian defense minister at the time, Pavel Grachev, was especially offended that he was only informed of Western airstrikes after they happened, rather than being notified in advance (the USA and its NATO allies were afraid that if Russia knew about the upcoming strikes, it would inform Milošević about upcoming strikes against Serbian militias) (Carter and Perry 1998, 32).

But Bosnian airstrikes and NATO enlargement were not connected to each other logically—the airstrikes occurred before enlargement started, and enlargement did not in any way increase NATO's ability to carry out airstrikes. In fact, Russia



managed the two policy issues independently through separate channels within the Foreign Ministry, indicating that foreign policy leaders in Moscow did not see a relationship between the two things (Kozyrev 2015; Churkin 2015).

The same causal variable—Russian anger over NATO airstrikes—became much more pronounced in 1999 when NATO intervened in Kosovo, again for humanitarian reasons, without UNSC authorization (Antonenko 1999; Lynch 1999; Baranovsky 2000). Many cite this event as a crucial negative turning point in the relationship. It was clear that Russia would have vetoed the airstrikes proposal if it had been brought to a vote in the United Nations, so it was not. Once again Russia was sidelined in a major security issue in Europe. Primakov, who was Russian foreign minister when the bombing began, was so incensed that the UNSC had been ignored that he had the pilot of his airplane turn around mid-air when he was on his way to Washington for aid negotiations. NATO argued (and many others, including UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, accepted) that it was acting to protect ethnic Albanian Kosovars from a renewed Serbian militia ethnic cleansing campaign. Its choice nonetheless demonstrated that NATO would not pay attention to Russia's perceived security interests, and would work around international institutions, in order to use out-of-area violence it deemed necessary. Once again this had nothing to do with NATO's geographic enlargement and was a completely separate variable causing a decline in the relationship with Russia; the only similarity between the two is that both NATO initiatives ignored Russia's wishes.

Even then, both of these Balkan cases had mixed, rather than completely negative, effects on Russia–NATO relations. NATO's geographic enlargement did not derail security cooperation in either case. Former Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin played an important role in 1999 in convincing Milošević to accept a peace settlement as quickly as he did in the Kosovo case, even though the primary cause of Serbian capitulation was the NATO bombing campaign (Hosmer 2001). Russia participated (somewhat uncooperatively, even in Bosnia) (Atkinson 1996), in the NATO-led peace enforcement operations that were established in both Bosnia and Kosovo after the worst hostilities had ended. The Kosovo operation came close to sparking open conflict between Russian and NATO troops when Russia secretly entered the country and seized the airport in Pristina before the joint operation was to start (Daalder and O'Hanlon 2001, 175; Clark 2002), and some analysts believe that Russia's intention at the time was to partition the country to create a Serbian-controlled northern region against NATO's wishes (Brudenell 2008). Yet Russia stayed in both peace operations until 2003 (after the invitation to the Baltic and Black Sea states to join NATO), working side by side with NATO troops on the ground, acting with generally high levels of professionalism, and achieving some real successes in maintaining stability (Cross 2002).

Washington's refusals to seek UNSC legitimation for its actions nonetheless expanded over time. In 1998, the USA and UK conducted several airstrike operations in Iraq without seeking UN approval, both to degrade Iraq's purported weapons of mass destruction capabilities and to provide safe areas for Shia and Kurdish populations that Saddam Hussein had targeted. The Russian General Staff was reportedly furious at this development, especially given that Iraq had once been a Soviet military ally (Brovkin 1999, 546). Then, in 2003, the biggest blow to UNSC



authority occurred, when a US-led coalition invaded and occupied Iraq without UNSC authorization. If any one international event caused Russia to withdraw from the Bosnia and Kosovo peace operations in summer 2003, it was probably the Iraq invasion, not NATO enlargement—although some analysts argue that Russia’s peace operations calculus was based more on domestic cost concerns (Forsberg 2005, 343–344), while others focus on Russia’s belief that it had insufficient say in how the peace operations were being run (Adomeit 2007). Russia never did publicly explain its decision to leave Bosnia and Kosovo. Yet each US intervention hammered home the fact that Russia’s veto in the UNSC—one of its last remaining sources of global power after the collapse of the Soviet Union—meant nothing to the USA, and contributed nothing to Russia’s real influence in the world.

Then came the 2011 UNSC decision to support NATO airstrikes in Libya, with the stated goal of creating safe zones for civilians fleeing Muammar Qaddafi’s violent state suppression of Arab Spring protestors. Russia chose to abstain from, rather than veto, the resolution, allowing the NATO operation to go ahead. Midway through, it became clear that NATO members France and the UK were actually giving significant military advisory help to Qaddafi’s armed opponents and hence enabling civil war, with the active support of the USA and other NATO members (Kuperman 2013). With the death of Qaddafi, from Russia’s perspective, this became one more Western-led effort at regime change, reflecting the same policies Moscow had attributed to the West during the color revolutions in post-Soviet Ukraine and Georgia in prior years. What may have been especially galling to Moscow is that the Barack Obama administration had assured it beforehand that the NATO mission was not about overthrowing Qaddafi’s rule (Burns 2019, 318). By 2014, the Libya example had influenced how Russia’s Defense Ministry presented Moscow’s strategic planning to the outside world: Russia was now said to be focused on creating alliances with authoritarian states globally, both as a means for restoring Russia’s influence and isolating the West and to protect the Kremlin from Western attempts to undermine Putin (Gorenburg 2014). Many analysts believe that the outcome in Libya helps explain at least in part Russia’s military support for Bashar Assad in Syria’s civil war shortly thereafter (Trenin 2012; Menon 2013; Cohen 2019).

There was also an entirely different set of security issues that plagued Russia’s relationship with the West over these years: arms control. While again there was forward progress in some areas, such as the START and New START set of strategic nuclear missile reduction treaties, the CFE Treaty (which, as noted above, was the stated institutional basis for Russia’s cooperation with NATO) faltered, and the ABM Treaty was unilaterally abrogated by the USA.

The 1990 CFE Treaty, which limited the numbers of troops and weapons in various places in the European theater and created a cooperative military exercise notification system, needed to be renegotiated after both the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union collapsed. While many issues bedeviled the negotiations, an ‘adapted’ (A/CFE) Treaty was finally signed in 1999—even as NATO began to enlarge. One unresolved issue in the new version is that the Baltic states and Slovenia, now NATO members, were never signatories, although that could presumably have been resolved if negotiations had gone forward (Chillaud and Tetart 2007). But the USA and its Western allies refused to ratify the 1999 treaty



because Russian troops remained on the ground in breakaway regions of Moldova and Georgia, in defiance of treaty limits. Russia claimed that the forces were engaged in peacekeeping. In order to avoid conflict escalation, the USA and NATO did not forcibly demand their withdrawal, even though it was clear that Russia's interest in these former Soviet states was not impartial, and that in both places Russia was supporting minority ethnic groups who wanted territorial secession (Lynch 2000).

Western nonratification made it easy for Putin to declare in 2007—the year before NATO made its infamous declaration that Ukraine and Georgia would become NATO members—that Russia would no longer observe CFE Treaty requirements or limits. Shortly thereafter Putin began the remilitarization of Kaliningrad (Sukhankin 2017, 2018b). Again, this conflict between Russia and the West, which also paved the way for Putin in later years to resume large-scale military exercises without advance notification, was not clearly tied in any logical way to NATO enlargement. Russian troops in 2020 still remain in the Transdniestrian region of supposedly sovereign Moldova, and even before the 2008 Russia-Georgia war led to the permanent establishment of Russian military bases in the contested Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia was frequently accused of illegally sending troops into Georgian territory to chase down Chechen insurgents in the mountains. In other words, Russia never acted to relieve the Western concerns that held up CFE ratification.

As the A/CFE Treaty stumbled, President George W. Bush meanwhile decided (with policy leadership from John Bolton, then the Undersecretary of State for Arms Control) to quickly and unceremoniously withdraw unilaterally from the 1972 ABM Treaty shortly after assuming office in 2001. That treaty had served as the cornerstone of US–Soviet arms control in the Cold War era. Many experts believe that it served as a key guarantor of nuclear crisis stability by reassuring each side that the other could not launch a disabling first strike against its nuclear arsenal. Bush justified the US withdrawal from the treaty by pointing to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the US intervention in Afghanistan, even though he had already expressed his intentions to withdraw the previous May. Although Putin, Bush, and their advisers did engage in some negotiation about a new security framework to replace the ABM Treaty, the process was cut short by Washington, and Bush made clear that Russian interests were not a high priority in his decision to abandon the treaty (Rusten 2010; Giles and Monaghan 2014).

Russia did not react harshly at the time, perhaps because Putin wished to maintain cooperation with the USA as the war on terror began. He affirmed that the USA was within its rights to withdraw from the treaty and that doing so did not threaten Russia's nuclear security, but called the decision 'an erroneous one' (Neilan 2001). But what the Bush administration did not seem to recognize was that this treaty had crucial symbolic value beyond whatever role it played in nuclear stability. It was the original marker for the Soviet Union that it had attained nuclear parity with the USA and that Washington had to treat Moscow as an equal (Wallander 2002). By abandoning the treaty so precipitously, the USA sent essentially the same message that it had in Kosovo and would in Iraq: Russia was not important, because it had lost parity with the USA as a strategic partner.



US ABM Treaty abrogation was followed shortly thereafter by new BMD deployments in the new NATO member states. In 2006, Bush announced that the USA would deploy a land-based BMD system in Poland, with an associated radar system in the Czech Republic, for the purpose of stopping a future nuclear attack from Iran. That original plan was abandoned under the Obama administration, due to both strong popular protest against the decision in the two European countries and strident Russian arguments that the system was actually targeted against it and could be reconfigured to launch a nuclear attack (Giles and Monaghan 2014). Moscow threatened to respond by leaving the INF Treaty and placing short-range nuclear missiles on NATO's borders.

At that point, in 2009, the Obama administration tried a different tack. This time an existing sea-based BMD system, the Aegis, which could not be easily reconfigured the way the first system could have been, would be modified to become a land-based system in Poland and Romania. Russia nonetheless objected strenuously once more, and efforts were made to find some path forward for joint third-country missile tracking and defense by having Russia work together on BMD with the USA and its NATO partners. Those negotiations proved unfruitful, however, and at its 2010 Lisbon Summit, NATO announced that these new US BMD systems would be integrated into its overall defenses (Giles and Monaghan 2014).

The USA and NATO insist to this day that the new BMD systems are designed to hit limited missile launches originating in the Middle East, and should not be threatening to Russia. Although a future stage of the program, if it is ever implemented, will allow the BMD systems to be used in a limited fashion against strategic (long-range) missiles, modeling demonstrates that even if all the systems were used against Russian attempts to hit the USA at an ideal success rate, they would have no effect on Russian targeting of the US West Coast and could hit US-bound missiles coming from only 5 of Russia's 14 land-based launch sites (Sankaran 2015).

Russia countered that the Polish and Romanian systems could be easily reprogrammed and reconfigured to launch intermediate-range Tomahawk cruise missiles, not just BMD missiles, onto Russian territory, and that the systems thus violated the INF Treaty (Kramer 2016). It must be noted, however, that these Russian accusations were relatively recent. They followed US reports beginning in January 2014 that Russia was testing and later deploying (possibly in Crimea and Kaliningrad) a new intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missile, the 9M729 (known variously as a version of existing Russian Kalibr or Iskander missiles), which the USA claims definitively violated the treaty (Gordon 2014; Woolf 2019). It is therefore unclear whether Russia truly perceived the Obama-era BMD systems as threatening its security—or instead as a useful tool for its negotiating strategy.

In sum, most of the security issues that threatened Russia's relationship with the USA and its NATO partners had nothing at all to do with NATO's geographic enlargement. Distrust between Russia and the West instead grew out of two other fundamental problems that are in fact unresolvable conflicts of interest. First was US and NATO *operational* expansion, including both the use of airstrikes in out-of-area operations without UNSC authorization, and US unconcern for Russia as an arms-control partner. These Western operational shifts could not have threatened Russia directly, given Russia's enormous nuclear arsenal; the USA would never dare launch





air or missile strikes against Russian territory unless open warfare were already underway, and nothing that has happened so far has put Russia's nuclear deterrent at risk. Instead, they demonstrated that Russia had lost its former status and was now unable to influence US and Western security decision making even through its UN veto. Russia stopped being a global power, and the West stopped treating it as one, with no concern for Russian pride.

The second fundamental problem was Russia's unwillingness to play by the rules of the US-dominated European security architecture, which prescribed that all newly independent states had the right to sovereign decision making and that the West had the obligation to help them develop as liberal democracies. Moscow has instead consistently held that it must be given a special role to play in what it once called the 'near abroad,' the states in its immediate neighborhood that had been part of the Soviet Union. Russia insists that it requires a sphere of influence, but the USA and Europe have refused to give it one. NATO enlargement is just one of many signs of this deeper conflict.

## **Russian perceptions about NATO: nationalist manipulation and domestic politics**

In addition to the broad range of international conflicts that bedeviled Russia's relations with the West, the development of Russian domestic politics and nationalism played a huge role in damaging the relationship. While there is no question that NATO enlargement exacerbated these domestic tensions and gave nationalists an excuse for their positions, there is also no evidence that NATO enlargement was a major cause of these developments. Russian nationalism is homegrown and as noted above had plenty of fodder beyond NATO enlargement.

A large number of rich sources detail the complex history of Russian policy statements and debates over time about both NATO in general and NATO enlargement in particular (Gorskii 2001; Smith 2002; Forsberg 2005; Adomeit 2007; Clunan 2009; Pouliot 2010; Frederick et al. 2017; Marten 2018). Although there is no question that much of Russian opposition to NATO was sincere, the Russian state also made a coordinated effort to have a wide variety of Russian elites send an anti-enlargement message to their Western counterparts in the mid-1990s. This was done through an organization called the Working Group on Russia's Policy toward NATO, led by Sergei Karaganov, who was then a member of both the Presidential Council of the Russian Federation and the Advisory Committee of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. This large and diverse group of supposedly independent foreign policy analysts, government officials, and military officers pledged to work 'with main groups of the ruling classes in Western countries that consider the decision to enlarge too risky and/or too costly' to try to prevent NATO expansion (Karaganov et al. 1996). This group explicitly recognized that 'the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as a defensive military and political union of democratic states is not a military threat for a democratic Russia' (94), but feared that Russia's interests would be ignored and marginalized in European security decision making in the future. This concern about



lost influence grew directly out of the Russian Foreign Ministry's 1993 draft 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation' (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1993), which became the basis for a classified document issued by the newly formed Russian Security Council of which Karaganov was a member (Chernov 1993). The fact that this message was so heavily coordinated certainly indicates that it was a high priority for Moscow to get it across to its Western counterparts. But it also indicates that some of the passionate Russian expressions against enlargement that followed may have lacked authenticity and instead reflected coordinated propagandizing.

Despite the generally negative statements that Russian leaders have made about NATO enlargement, it must also be remembered that their remarks have not been completely consistent. Both Yeltsin and Putin at various times said they were not opposed to enlargement. The most striking incidence of this was in fall 1993, when Yeltsin announced at a press conference in Warsaw that he had no objection to Poland joining NATO—obliging Foreign Minister Kozyrev to hastily backtrack on his behalf a few weeks later (Marten 2018, 151–152). Yeltsin did decide to boycott NATO's 50th anniversary summit in April 1999, where Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic were celebrated as new members, but it is hard to know for sure whether enlargement was the primary driver of that decision. That same month also marked a peak of NATO's bombing of Serbian Yugoslavia during the Kosovo crisis, at a point when Russia had proposed that the UN step into resolve the impasse and NATO had refused (Schweid 1999).

In June 2002, Putin said that it was 'no tragedy' that the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were joining NATO (Warren 2002), despite a long record of Russian opposition to their membership and attempts to persuade the Baltics against it (Lane 1997; Chillaud and Tetart 2007). The previous month, at a joint summit with NATO held in Rome, Moscow had agreed to join a new NATO-Russia Council, promising a 'qualitatively new relationship' that would 'pursue opportunities for joint action' working as 'equal partners' (*NATO-Russia Relations* 2002, 6), even though Yeltsin had earlier angrily threatened to cut off relations with NATO if the Baltic countries were to join (Lane 1997, 305). Less than a year later, the US-led coalition invaded Iraq without UNSC approval, putting the lie to the idea that the US relationship with Russia was qualitatively new or based on equal partnership and joint action. But again, it was not NATO enlargement that seemed to be the primary irritant.

It is possible that Yeltsin's and Putin's personal beliefs about how bad NATO enlargement was for Russia varied over time. But it is also possible that their public statements had strategic purposes and were designed either for their domestic audiences or as a gambit in international bargaining. These statements could also have been face-saving measures for the leaders, given that Russia could do nothing to stop enlargement from happening. Yet it is telling that Michael McFaul (2014), who was Obama's chief national security adviser for Russia and then US ambassador to Moscow, states that during all his various private meetings and closed-door negotiations with his Russian counterparts, they never once complained about NATO expansion. All of this may be evidence that the whole NATO enlargement issue has been more a symbolic red herring than a real security problem for Russian leaders,



used strategically abroad to try to manipulate the West into taking Russian security interests seriously, and at home as a way of manipulating nationalist support.

Did NATO enlargement, then, lead to the victory of extreme nationalists in Russia? No. Pitched anti-Western and anti-NATO nationalism began taking its toll against reformers in Russia long before NATO's 1994 enlargement study. Already by 1990, Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze temporarily resigned his post in frustration at anti-NATO criticism leveled against him (Reisch 1993, 37). Kozyrev, Yeltsin's pro-Western foreign minister, gave an infamous speech in Stockholm in 1992 in which he pretended to be an anti-Western nationalist. He did not inform the audience that this was a pretense for half an hour, and many were meanwhile left wondering whether a coup had ousted Yeltsin (Safire 1992). Then, in October 1993, after a lengthy constitutional crisis, a coup almost did happen, as open violence broke out in Moscow between anti-Yeltsin members of parliament and Yeltsin supporters. The Russian military came in on Yeltsin's side, shelling the parliament building. Meanwhile, according to Strobe Talbott, 'the insurgents briefly occupied Smolensk Square in front of the Foreign Ministry, shaking their fists at the windows above and noisily vowing to hang Kozyrev' (Talbott 2002, 88). In other words, it did not take NATO enlargement to empower the extreme nationalists on foreign policy issues, even if enlargement was an issue they could use to their benefit.

Regardless of Putin's aggressive foreign adventurism and his violent authoritarianism at home, he is not an extreme nationalist. Although concern continues to flicker over whether Russia could go down an ethnic nationalist path, so far Putin has done a reasonably good job of keeping those tendencies contained (Hale 2016; Laruelle 2017). Nor is there any evidence that NATO enlargement had anything to do with bringing Putin to power under Yeltsin (the Chechen civil war and terrorist threats inside Russia were instead the key factors), or keeping Putin in power since. The predictions of the mid-1990s naysayers about the dire effects of NATO expansion on Russian domestic politics did not come true.

Finally, what about Russian public opinion and NATO enlargement? Probably, the best place to turn for an answer to this question is Moscow's Levada Center. This is generally believed by Western experts to be the highest quality polling organization in Russia, one that attempts to hew to established international standards of polling accuracy and reliability and has been relatively buffered from political interference, at least until recently (Nechepurenko 2016). It has published the results over time of repeated batteries of questions, making it possible to observe trend lines in Russian popular opinion.

Several polls will be summarized here. In one, after first being asked whether they thought Russia had any enemies, respondents who said 'yes' were asked to name who those enemies were (Levada Center 2018). Each year that the survey was conducted (irregularly from 1999 through 2017), the majority of Russians who believed that Russia had enemies failed to select 'NATO' as being one of them. NATO peaked as a selected enemy in August 2008, at the time of the Russia/Georgia war, at 39%. At two times when NATO enlargement should have been a peak issue (in 1999 with the accession of Poland, and in 2003 with invitations under way to the Baltic states), only a small percentage of respondents (19 and 11 percent, respectively) selected NATO as an enemy. Every year of the survey, it was instead



the USA that received the highest ranking as an enemy by those who thought Russia had enemies—although even the USA did not get a majority vote on that point until the August 2008 Georgia war.

A different survey asked whether respondents believed that Russia had reason to be afraid of NATO countries (Levada Center 2017). Given this prompt, the results were starkly different, for reasons that are unclear. Every year from 1997 onward (with the slight exception, for some reason, of 2007—the same year Putin gave his Munich speech, when the number declined to 49%), more than half (and often more than 60%) of respondents believed the answer was ‘probably’ or ‘definitely’ yes. It is impossible to know from these data whether the numbers would have been lower before NATO first started talking about enlargement in 1994. But there do not seem to be upticks for any particular events—whether Poland joining NATO, the Baltics joining NATO, or even the Kosovo War. Instead, the picture is relatively constant over almost 20 years. An additional, separate poll asked a somewhat different question: ‘Is membership in NATO the reason Russia fears Western countries?’ The results of that one match the previous poll almost exactly, with a majority often exceeding 60% saying yes, again with the slight downturn in 2007 (Smeltz et al. 2016, 5–6).

Yet another poll, conducted annually since 1990, asked Russians how favorably they felt toward the USA. This one shows a striking pattern; there were sharp downturns in US favorability ratings in 1999, 2003, 2008, and 2014 (with the latter enduring through the end of the time period in 2016), precisely pairing with the four years in this era when Russia and the USA found themselves on opposite sides of international conflicts: Kosovo, Iraq, Georgia, and Ukraine (followed by Syria) (Smeltz et al. 2016, 3). Although 1999 was also a key year for NATO enlargement, a variety of other key years (1994, 2002, 2004) did not provoke a sharp downturn. This would appear to support the contention of this article that concerns about Western security issues beyond NATO enlargement probably mattered more to Russia than enlargement per se.

Levada Center pollster Denis Volkov further argues that the downturns in fact matched Russian television propaganda campaigns against the USA (Volkov 2015). He concludes, ‘The Russian government had noticed back in the late 1990s that challenging the USA had a positive effect on approval ratings.... In recent years, the standoff with the U.S. has been one of the main tools in the Russian authorities’ efforts to maintain their own legitimacy in conditions of economic crisis.’ Without access to notes about internal Kremlin deliberations, there is no way to evaluate whether this accusation is correct or not. But it adds further complications to the question of whether perceptions about NATO enlargement were ingrained or instead manipulated by authorities for their own reasons.

## Conclusions

There is no question that Russia—its leaders, expert analysts, and public—reacted negatively to NATO enlargement right from the start. Despite some contrary statements, the opposition was fairly consistent over time. But there is little evidence that



NATO's enlargement per se was the primary cause of Russia's concerns or fears about the West. There is no evidence of a direct Russian military reaction, and Russian experts knew that enlargement actually made NATO harder to defend.

If instead the claim is that NATO enlargement indirectly caused the downturn in Russia's relationship with the West, then there are too many other confounding factors, none directly related to enlargement and most centered on a loss of Russian influence over security decisions, that explain the outcome. NATO enlargement was a blunt instrument used to harangue the West, including in a propaganda campaign that drew in nongovernmental experts. It exacerbated Russian concerns about lost influence—but it was as much a result of that lost influence as a cause of it, and other evidence of lost influence over airstrikes and arms control rankled more.

Russia's unhappiness is overdetermined, and there is no evidence that if NATO enlargement had been avoided, delayed, or altered (while nothing else changed), that Russia could have been reconciled to the idea of US dominance in the world. In the words of prominent Russian defense and foreign policy analyst Dmitry Trenin, 'In terms of power, Russia is not America's equal. Yet, it cannot accept inequality in relations.... It cannot put up with the military dominance of the U.S. And this is the key difference of Russia from other countries' (Trenin 2017).

The one exception to this pattern may be NATO's 2004 enlargement to include Romania and Bulgaria, which may have been perceived by Putin and Russian security elites as threatening Russia's age-old concerns about unrestricted access to the Black Sea. For whatever reason, these are not usually the cases cited by those who blame NATO enlargement for Putin's actions, and they came late enough in the process that they cannot explain Russia's initial mid-1990s blanket drive to stop enlargement from occurring. But the cases as outlined here do suggest that if the USA and NATO wanted to tamp down tensions with Russia, the Black Sea would be the place to start.

Yet much of what Russia has done since the start of the 2014 Ukraine crisis has seemed explicitly designed to provoke Europe and prevent a reduction in tensions with NATO. These provocations include Russia's new missile developments that doomed the INF Treaty; its refusal to use the CFE process to notify European states about its large-scale military exercises with Belarus; its refusal to accept an international investigation of the July 2014 shooting down of the civilian Malaysian Airlines MH-17 flight over eastern Ukraine (with hundreds of European passengers on board); and the chemical weapons poisonings of Sergei Skripal and others inside the UK by Russia's military intelligence service (the GRU) in March 2018. Russia's seizure of Crimea and military actions against eastern Ukraine have also caused NATO to become more unified and to pay more attention to defense against Russia than would have otherwise happened.

Altogether, Russian actions created a self-fulfilling prophecy in making the NATO alliance stronger over the past six years, after enlargement had initially left it weakened. It was Putin's actions—not NATO enlargement—that created the enmity driving this change.

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