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NATO's Wrong Turn

By Scott McConnell

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A rapidly congealing Beltway consensus seems to be forming around the idea of a new Cold War. The anti-Russia sentiment is partially rooted in the particulars of the Ukraine crisis, which flowed from the West-backed insurrection in Maidan that overthrew a democratically elected—if terminally corrupt—Ukrainian leader and replaced him with an unelected nationalist anti-Russian regime. These events sparked a predictable Russian countermove, Russia's taking back of (mostly ethnically Russian) Crimea with troops. In cascading fashion, this has descended upon an American political establishment that has responded as if it had been subconsciously yearning for a “bipartisan” and “unifying” mission of the sort the Cold War once provided. If initial poll numbers showed that few Americans had much of an interest in making a big fuss over Ukraine, or Crimea, the media and the politicians have been rapidly coalescing to change that. For the first time since 2004 or so, neoconservative commentators have the initiative in the opinion columns: they propose tough measures (NATO membership for Ukraine is now being bandied about ^[1], along with various military moves) as liberals emit me-too bleeps, in a political pattern all too evocative of the fateful months preceding the Iraq war. Within several weeks the new elite consensus will undoubtedly be able to point to poll numbers in favor of getting tough with Russia over an issue that few people had opinions about six months ago.

The Ukraine crisis is of course interesting and complicated in its own right (for instance, who commanded the snipers who fired on both police and demonstrators ^[2] at Maidan, escalating the confrontation and upending the diplomatic arrangement reached days earlier?) but it is a subset of the larger question about Russia and NATO expansion at the end of the Cold War. This was

debated in the mid 1990s in forums largely limited to foreign policy specialists. (I worked at the middlebrow *New York Post*'s editorial page during most of those years, and don't recall drafting a single editorial on NATO expansion from 1992 to 1996.) Yet the debate, which once was barely noticed beyond the specialist journals, now looms as critically important. And, if the current confrontation does lead to World War III, as one Ukrainian general ^[3] has predicted, it will be clear that decisions taken quietly in the 1990s lit the fuse.

The collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989 to 1991 came so quickly that no one was prepared for it. The Soviet Union first lost its Eastern European empire, then collapsed into itself. Considering that the Cold War was the central fault line of world politics, and one with stakes such that a civilization destroying nuclear war was at some level contemplated and planned for every day, this was a kind of political miracle. As Owen Harries put it in one of the most important essays ^[4] of the 1990s,

The Soviet regime, steeped in blood and obsessed with total control as it had been throughout most of its history, voluntarily gave up its Warsaw Pact empire, collapsed the Soviet system upon itself, and then acquiesced in its own demise—all with virtually no violence. This extraordinary sequence of events was by no means inevitable. Had it so chosen, the regime could have resisted the forces of change as it had on previous occasions, thus either extending its life, perhaps for decades more, or going down in a welter of blood and destruction. That, indeed, would have been more normal behavior, for as the English scholar Martin Wight once observed, "Great power status is lost, as it is won, by violence. A Great Power does not die in its bed." What occurred in the case of the Soviet Union was very much the exception.

Why did the Soviet Union choose to die peacefully? A large part of the answer was the understanding, explicit according to some but never formally codified, that the West would not take strategic advantage of Moscow's retreat. Had Moscow envisioned that the West would expand NATO to its doorstep, the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union would probably not have expired peacefully. As Harries puts it, the bargain, whether implicit or explicit, made a great deal of sense for the United States:

For, after all, its avowed objective was not the eastward extension of its own power and influence in Europe, but the restoration of the independence of the countries of the region. In effect, the bargain gave the United States everything it wanted (more, in fact, for the breakup of the Soviet Union had never been a Cold War objective), and in return required it only to refrain from doing what it had never expressed any intention of doing.

The critical complicating factor, at the time, was the fate of Germany, Europe's largest power and the source of most of its 20th-century conflict: could Germany be reunited, as part of NATO? Evidently, yes. As Adam Garfinkle noted, in a valuable 1996 analysis ^[5] of the NATO expansion debate:

If it had been proposed to you in 1989 that the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union both would come peaceably to an end, that Germany would be reunited in NATO, and that all Russian military forces would withdraw behind their own frontier—and that all that was asked in return was that NATO not take advantage of this retreat by moving eastward—would you have

accepted? Extraordinary as it would have sounded then, had it been put so succinctly and all in one breath, this is more or less what was in fact proposed in the “two-plus-four” agreement for the reunification of Germany, and later accepted as the Warsaw Pact collapsed.

As the process proceeded, guided by the United States, Russia was told quite explicitly that the Western idea was not to move NATO up to its borders. Why did Russia not insist on a formal treaty to that effect? Obviously it was not in a position to do so—during the dynamics of the time, Russia was imploding and no more able to insist upon terms than the Bolsheviks were at Brest-Litvosk. But importantly, there also seemed to be no need as everyone, Russians and American and key NATO nations alike, were on the same page. As Sergei Karanakov, a leading Russian foreign affairs analyst who subsequently became an advisor to Putin put it: ^[5]

In 1990 we were told quite clearly by the West that dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and German unification would not lead to NATO expansion. We did not demand written guarantees because in the euphoric atmosphere of that time it would have seemed almost indecent, like two girlfriends giving written promises not to seduce each other’s husbands.

Of course the euphoria didn’t last. Rapid liberalization proved deadly to the Russian economy and standard of living in the 1990s, and Putin came to power determined to put a stop to what was widely perceived as an anarchic period of Russian weakness. And the more versatile and powerful girlfriend did indeed seduce, first Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, and has since pushed further into nations and regions that are perceived, by Russians, to be literally part of historic Russia. In his essay of 1997, Owen Harries described the NATO expansion decision as “ominous”—for the United States had decided to project American power into a highly sensitive region.

The expansionist victory came partly through the forces of bureaucratic inertia—NATO has many layers of vested constituencies, which needed new rationales to justify their salaries and continued existence. It was partially due to domestic American politics—Clinton in 1996 made his initial NATO-expansion speeches at campaign events crafted to appeal to Polish and East European voters. And it was partially due to a desire by traditional hawks, neoconservative and others, to continue a version of the Cold War, perhaps by sparking a “democratic crusade” in Eastern Europe. There was also a moral case—we would finally “do right” by those East Europeans twice abandoned—so the conventional narrative ran—first at Munich and then again at Yalta.

Another who perceived this choice to be woefully misguided was the 94-year-old George F. Kennan, the American strategist who had designed the doctrine of “containment” in the early Cold War. In a 1997 *New York Times* op-ed, Kennan suggested that expanding NATO would be “the most fateful error” of American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, which could be expected to “inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy ... and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.” Kennan was perhaps overly prescient, for Russia’s negative reaction did not emerge immediately. Moscow, faced with a more immediate and deadly Chechen insurgency, seemed too distracted to focus on NATO; it would take half a generation before NATO expansion became an obviously sensitive issue. In

1998, the Senate would go on to vote for NATO enlargement by a margin of 80-19. One of the 19, Daniel P. Moynihan, inserted Kennan's op-ed into the Congressional record, along with a laudatory letter Kennan had sent to Owen Harries and Harries' own piece.

Another participant in the 1990s debate was Rodric Braithwaite, Britain's former ambassador to Moscow. His *Prospect* essay^[6] from 1997 asked which path is better for victors after a war: the models of 1815, when a defeated France was brought into the "concert of Europe," and 1945, when Germany, or much of it, was integrated into the Western system; or Versailles, where after World War I a defeated Germany was humiliated and made to pay. It is clear that the first George Bush, in the early 1990s, was thinking along 1815 and 1945 lines. But incrementally his policy was reversed by his successors, first by the Clinton-Albright duo, and then by his son, and now by Obama, the latter prodded by his belligerent assistant secretary of state Victoria Nuland.

Of course it is not really possible that Russia will respond to its Versailles the way Germany did, remilitarizing and for a time dominating its adversaries. It is almost certainly too weak for that. But it can begin to act irresponsibly in global affairs, perhaps most menacingly on nuclear proliferation. It is a state with many weapons and many nuclear scientists. Russia can also reforge its strategic links to China. Of course unlike during the 1950s, an anti-Western Moscow would be the junior partner in a Beijing-Moscow alliance. But it's still a combination the United States should not be working to bring about