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Expanding NATO and the Paths to War and Peace

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There are two major paths that the U.S. government always faces: toward war or toward peace. One direction creates confrontations, the other creates cooperation.

U.S. leaders think that peace comes through strength of forces as a deterrent. Strength of forces includes a wide range of techniques nowadays that go well beyond tanks, planes and ships to include methods of asymmetric confrontation like cyber warfare, propaganda, NGOs, subversion, fifth columns, targeted assassinations, false flag attacks, organizing riots, demonstrations and strikes, and more.

There is some truth to the idea of peace through strength, but only if that strength accompanies friendly cooperative moves at the same time and only if that strength is not deployed in threatening ways. In other words, strength has to be viewed by potential enemies as defensive, not as directed offensively against them.

The U.S. government has military strength but it fails to act in cooperative and non-threatening ways. This is why it has ended up confronting Russia. The U.S. has been traveling the path toward war. That path involves escalation at every step, as each side responds to the other side's moves. Suspicions and distrust rise, and each side's more war-loving political segments gain influence.

To get on the path toward peace requires de-escalation. Both sides have to unwind their escalations. Both sides have to find grounds for cooperation. Both sides have to rebuild friendship and trust. Both sides have to stop viewing each other as threats and enemies.

NATO added 7 new members on April 2, 2004: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Smaller countries, newly reasserting themselves after separation from the USSR, thought that they could better survive in the neighborhood of the much larger and stronger Russian Federation (RF) by joining a military alliance, NATO. A political process began in the 1990s in which these countries lobbied for membership and sought to meet membership requirements. They overcame the resistance in certain western circles and joined NATO. For example, the argument was made by some that these countries were indefensible.

This expansion of NATO had been preceded by other additions by 1999: Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. All of these additions radically altered the status quo with regard to the RF. They also went against an informal promise made by Secretary of State James Baker to Gorbachev in 1990. This violation of the spirit of trust and peace had to increase the RF's distrust.

David Stockman has a very interesting piece on how and why Bill Clinton approved of the NATO expansion, in opposition to the wise voices of those who thought it a bad idea. In 1997, George Kennan wrote

“Expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era.

“Such a decision may 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; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”

Clinton was running against Dole. He wanted to erase his wimp image. Expanding NATO was a convenient move to accomplish this. See also here. Domestic politics led to a huge foreign policy blunder. Subsequently, Bush and the neocons compounded the error.

If the European states had formed a defense federation without the participation of the U.S., Canada and Turkey, who are NATO members, it would not appear to be much different in kind than the 13 American colonies uniting in various ways to obtain their independence. However, NATO is very unlike the Continental Congress. The U.S. won World War II. It has a heavy influence on Europe. NATO was formed in opposition to the USSR. The U.S. is a superpower. For these reasons and more, the U.S. presence in this organization gives NATO and its expansion a different character altogether. It pits the U.S. against the RF.

Expansion was bound to look threatening to the RF unless accompanied by cooperation and other actions designed to create trust. And if NATO and/or the U.S. or the EU took additional steps that broke down trust, then NATO would appear even more to be an offensive operation that is a tool of the U.S. to divide and break down Russia, leaving it dominated by the U.S. Such steps include the introduction of anti-ballistic missile batteries in the bordering countries, whose missile capabilities are such as possibly to negate Russia's missile deterrent capability and to leave Russia open to a first-strike nuclear attack.

For Russia to alter its defense posture is altogether rational under these circumstances. This is what George Kennan foresaw.

Professor R.G. Gidadhubli (University of Mumbai) wrote an article on the 2004 expansion that appeared in the May 8, 2004 edition of *Economic and Political Weekly*. He notes that George Bush celebrated the additions and promised more (Albania, Croatia and Macedonia). By contrast, the expansion

“generated strong reactions in Moscow. This was because it was felt that the NATO military facilities and armed forces could be brought right on the Russian border. Hence perceiving such a threat some members of the Duma (Russian parliament) urged the Russian government to revise Russia's defence policies...Russia's Security Council was called upon to consider deploying additional forces to regions bordering NATO members.”

In the years after the USSR's demise, the RF didn't counter the fears of the Baltic countries. From that perspective, the RF's failure diplomatically encouraged them to seek NATO membership. Their fears of Russia became visceral and genetic, inherited from their experiences with the USSR.

According to Gidadhubli, Russia accepted NATO's argument that an expansion of its bases and forces into these countries was to fight terrorism. The RF didn't object to forces in Romania and Bulgaria on these grounds, but it did object to bases in Poland and the Baltic states, where terrorism is not an issue. Russia proposed that it have monitoring facilities “to verify the fact that these facilities pose no threat to Russia.” But the NATO officials denied such a possibility.” Russia had proposed a step to build trust; NATO refused it. Perhaps NATO feared that it meant a way for Russians to spy or for Russia to have a presence on Baltic soil.

Meanwhile, NATO expanded its air surveillance flights and its intelligence operations. Mikhail Margelov, the Chairman of the Russian federation for the Council International Relations Committee

“observed that Russia was being outflanked from south-east in central Asia with NATO Partnership for Peace Programme which was being transformed into a military programme. NATO was also making advances in Georgia and Azerbaijan in the south and setting up ‘special relations’ with Ukraine in the south-west.”

This reference to NATO and Ukraine was made 10 years before the current situation occurred.

There were some joint NATO-Russian military exercises from time to time. Several other trust-building steps were taken to allay Russian concerns. Letters of understanding were exchanged between NATO and Russia. NATO agreed not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members or build infra-structure in preparation for such deployment. NATO pledged that its forces in these countries would be commensurate with their security. And new members will join the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe.

In 2004, Russia joined NATO in 35 peace-keeping anti-terrorist exercises. Even “joint anti-missile exercises were held in Colorado US under the auspices of Russia-NATO Council” on March 8-12. See here.

Cooperative and trust-building steps are feasible. They’ve occurred in the past. New measures can be created. There has been a marked reduction by NATO in its nuclear forces.

On the other hand, “Poland is planning to equip its F-16s with the U.S.-produced Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles (JASSM), a new highly accurate standoff missile that was recently approved for sale to Poland.” These missiles can reach Moscow in less than one hour. Furthermore, “The participation of Polish F-16s from Lask AB in a NATO nuclear exercise is also interesting because the base is the primary base used by NATO aircraft deploying to Poland on temporary rotational deployments under a bilateral U.S. –Polish reinforcement treaty. Some of the U.S. squadrons that have deployed to Lask AB since 2012 are nuclear-capable.”

Too many foreign tails may and already have wagged the tail of the American dog. Israel is a prime example. The eastern European countries are another. Once the U.S. makes a country into an ally, then that country influences the U.S. politically. For example,

“The Obama administration has developed possible alternative plans for a missile defense shield that could drop hotly disputed sites in Poland and the Czech Republic, a move that would please Russia and Germany but sour relations with American allies in Eastern Europe.”

Obama cannot make a move without feeling the pressure from the new members of NATO in Eastern Europe. The same holds with Israel’s influence on the negotiations with Iran. Another example several months before the change in Crimea’s status: “Estonian Defense Minister Urmas Reinsalu told a public audience in Washington that ‘nuclear deterrence is badly needed for NATO. Surely it is a very valuable ‘pro’ which the U.S. provides to the security of the alliance.’”

We have foreign states that are lobbying to be federated with the U.S. empire in various ways, and these ways are not of any obvious value to Americans other than arms and equipment manufacturers. In many cases, they involve America in losing situations and wars. They raise the

risks of major wars and nuclear wars. They raise the risks of terrorism. They impede cooperation with major countries.

The expansion of NATO and the resulting confrontation with Russia over Ukraine is proof positive that American foreign policy is directed in irrational directions by various domestic and foreign pressures and ideas. The 25-year war in Iraq and the coincident Great War II that is involving the U.S. in many more lands is further proof, if we need it.

I have analyzed and bemoaned this problem before, more than once.

How do sensible and peace-loving Americans dismantle U.S. foreign policy and/or redirect it into productive channels and a path to peace, not war? This is a very high priority challenge.

The choice between confrontation (or war) and peace is constantly at hand, in front of each of us. The debates are going on all the time. Voices are speaking up all the time for war and against war. Proposals are being made continually. Editorials appear all the time. Washington and other capitols are reaching decisions continually, and public debates, ideas and pressures influence the decisions.

Recognizing what actions carry us along the road to war and what actions carry us along the road to peace is critical. It is critical to recognize to which side of this great divide various voices and recommendations belong. It is important to support in any way one can those measures that build cooperation and peace. It is important not to be influenced by fear and the psychological construction of enemies. It is important to avoid being exposed to mass media that have a strong tendency to parrot crude slogans and paint crude pictures of supposed enemies and foes. It is very important to learn how to recognize planted stories and propaganda when it is occurring.

An important thing is not to be swayed by emotional appeals that call for unthinking loyalty to the State or to some leader or to patriotism or to some social authority. Another important thing is not to be so intent at accomplishing some supposed end or “good” that one is willing to use or approve the use of means that are evil. The means one uses or approves of in most cases are more critical to moral judgments than the ends. It is altogether too easy and too common to use evil means and rationalize them by appeal to some end that’s thought to be good.