

Foreword

In 1949, Secretary of State Dean Acheson transmitted to President Truman the original North Atlantic Treaty. In doing so, Acheson pointed out that in order for the Alliance to be “fully effective” it had to be open to “as many countries as are in a position to further the democratic principles upon which the Treaty was based, to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area, and ... to undertake the necessary responsibilities.”

Within a decade, the Alliance’s twelve founding members began adding to their ranks. They brought Germany and Spain, two formerly fascist countries, into the family of European democracies. They welcomed Greece and Turkey, helping stabilize relations between those two countries. Each of these enlargement decisions helped the Alliance become stronger, overcome old divisions, and anchor more nations in the community of democracies that NATO was designed to unite and protect.

The strength, vitality and resolve of NATO helped tear down the Berlin Wall without firing a shot. But when the Cold War ended, and the Warsaw Pact dissolved, it left a security vacuum. Europe’s new democracies, after being forced by the Soviet Union to live behind an Iron Curtain for forty years, wanted control of their future and wanted to belong to Europe’s economic and security institutions. The Alliance therefore faced a dual challenge: first, how to preserve a favorable strategic environment into the next century; and second, how to seize the opportunity to build a Europe whole and free.

In meeting that challenge, NATO faced a blunt choice. Would it be the last institution in Europe to continue to treat the Iron Curtain as something meaningful, or would it aid in Europe’s reunification and renewal? Would NATO exclude from its ranks a whole group of qualified democracies simply because they had been subjugated in the past, or would it be open to those free nations that were willing and able to meet the responsibilities of membership and contribute to the Alliance’s security?

I believe Allied leaders made the right choice. They saw an opportunity to do for Europe's East what NATO and the Marshall Plan had done for Europe's West. Their goal was to create a sphere of common interest in which every nation could live in security. To this end, they established linkages through the Partnership for Peace between NATO and other European democracies. They transformed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe into an arena for supporting democracy and human rights. And as chronicled in the ensuing pages, they undertook a gradual and deliberate process for enlarging NATO.

Many of the contributors to this edited volume played a critical role in that process. Their accounts greatly enrich the historical record, at a time when the legacy of NATO enlargement deserves to be revisited and better understood.

For my part, I was serving as President Clinton's Ambassador to the United Nations when many of the key decisions about NATO expansion were made. Although I was in favor of bringing new members into the Alliance, I had kept my counsel when the prospect was first raised. I did not want anyone to suspect me, a Czechoslovak by birth, of special pleading on behalf of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, or other potential NATO candidates. I was also focused on my portfolio in New York. But as the debate gathered momentum and I took office as Secretary of State, I became a vigorous advocate for expansion.

One did not have to be a native of the region to see the logic of NATO opening its doors again to new members. After four decades of Communist subjugation, the nations of Central and Eastern Europe were eager to join an enlarged NATO. If they were denied NATO protection, they would be left in political limbo and might well seek security through other means, resulting in unpredictable alliances, efforts at rearmament, and the possible use of force to settle disputes.

All this seemed obvious, but many in the U.S. foreign policy establishment took a different view. One can easily forget how strong the opposition was. George Kennan, the ageless icon of U.S. diplomacy, denounced NATO enlargement as "the greatest mistake in Western policy in the entire post-Cold War era" (few recall that he had opposed NATO's creation in 1949). More than 50 prominent political and academic figures accused the Clinton Administration of "making

an error of historic proportions.” And an informal Council on Foreign Relations poll showed experts opposing NATO expansion two to one.

The Clinton Administration was determined to overcome these critics by making the case that a larger NATO—with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland as the first new members—would serve American interests.

We argued, first and foremost, that enlargement would make America safer by expanding the area of Europe where wars did not happen. By making it clear that America would fight to defend its new Allies, we believed it would be less likely that we would ever be called upon to do so.

We also pointed out that the prospect of a larger NATO had given the nations of Central and Eastern Europe an incentive to strengthen their democratic institutions, improve respect for minority rights, establish civilian control over their militaries, and peacefully resolve border and ethnic disputes. This progress would help ensure that outside powers were never again dragged into a conflict at the heart of Europe.

A final reason why enlargement passed the test of national interest, we argued, was that it would make NATO itself stronger and more cohesive. The prospective allies were passionately committed to NATO, and had risked their lives alongside U.S. troops in the Gulf War and in Bosnia. They saw membership not as a burden, but as an opportunity to show the world that they were able to give something back to the community of freedom that stood by them in their years of darkness.

Still, we also had to address concerns about Russia. President Boris Yeltsin and his countrymen were strongly opposed to enlargement, seeing it as a strategy for exploiting their vulnerability and moving Europe’s dividing line to the east, leaving them isolated.

I spent much time while in office talking through these objections with my Russian counterparts and NATO leaders, eventually reaching an agreement—the NATO-Russia Founding Act. This document provided an institutional means for Russia to participate in transatlantic security deliberations, without giving them a veto over Alliance decisions.

Perhaps no aspect of NATO enlargement has proven as controversial as the impact on Russia. As of this writing, there are still legions of

critics who argue that it poisoned the relationship with Russia, and is therefore to blame for all of the geopolitical problems facing the world in 2019.

This is ludicrous. It is a huge mistake to think that every time Russia does something we do not like, it is to “punish” us for bringing Hungary or Poland or the Baltic states into NATO.

Our disagreements with Russia in the Middle East or in Ukraine have come about because of the manner in which Russia defines its national interests in those parts of the world. These differences existed long before NATO decided to open its doors to new members. If we had kept NATO a closed shop, we still would not have resolved those differences with Russia. We would, however, have turned our backs on nations that stood with us on a range of security issues that mattered to the Alliance.

History will show that the United States and its Allies did seek a true partnership with Russia. But we did not want that partnership to be purchased by denying a dozen European countries the right to seek membership in NATO. A partnership built on an illegitimate moral compromise would not be genuine and it would not last.

For all these reasons and more, the story of NATO opening its doors to new members and new missions—the story told in these pages—involved much, much more than the immediate future of the countries in question. It involved the future security of the United States; the future of an undivided Europe; the future of Russia and the character of NATO’s relationship with it.

While it is impossible to prove a counterfactual, it is clear to me that the world would be far more dangerous, and Europe far less prosperous and stable, had NATO not helped in erasing the continent’s old, artificial divisions.

That makes this a story worth telling. So I am grateful to the editors of this volume for capturing this moment and for teaching a new generation about the importance of the decisions that we made.

Madeleine K. Albright
Washington, DC
April 2019