

Chapter 12

Enlarging NATO: The Initial Clinton Years

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The end of the Cold War presented the West with obvious opportunities but also with a tangle of challenges and trade-offs that policy makers knew they could only imperfectly understand. Trying to deal sensibly with the dizzying pace of change sometimes seemed like painting a moving train. Top American diplomat Larry Eagleburger captured the times when he answered a question about whether he was guilty of nostalgia for the Cold War: “Hell, I’m nostalgic for last week.”

Western governments wanted to do all they could to help stabilize the independence of Central and East European states—former Soviet satellites and republics alike—and aid their transition to democracy and market economy. At the same time, they wanted to support democratic forces within Russia and build a constructive relationship between it and the West. Most Washington career officials, civilian and military, saw a possible conflict between these goals, but President Clinton never seemed to waver from his belief that he could do both. Western leaders also had to deal with question of NATO’s own role and relevance once the military threat to its members was believed to have disappeared, especially in light of its unwillingness to resist Serbian aggression in Bosnia. These issues, in turn, were related to the political and security role of the European Union, now presumably less in need of American military protection and apparently eager to take more responsibility for its own security—and what its evolution might mean for NATO, for good or ill.

All the former Soviet satellites, and several of its former republics, felt an urgent need to be firmly linked in some Western structure. Most looked first to the European Union, with its tight political links and the economic benefits of membership. As realization grew that EU membership would face tough conditions and take a long time, attention turned to NATO.

Like good bureaucrats almost always almost everywhere when faced with hard issues, the first instinct in the West was delay. There were various reasons, some better than others. Much as we wished the countries of Central and Eastern Europe well, the old system had been comfortable for the West. Decades of planning and training and playing together had formed close bonds among civilian and military security officials across the Atlantic which were unlikely to be replicated, and could well be diluted, by the addition of those whose backgrounds and perspectives inevitably would be different. One senior American diplomat bemoaned, “nothing will ever be the same” if NATO enlarged. As former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger told a Washington conference, “governments tend to go on doing what they know how to do well; that’s how they get into trouble.” But it also was clear that none of the Central or Eastern European states was yet ready for NATO or EU membership and that continuing changes in all of them made it hard to know which would be ready to become members, or when.

In addition to skillfully managing the unification of Germany within NATO (a united Germany, untethered from multilateral structures, would have alarmed its neighbors to the west as well as east), the George H.W. Bush administration focused almost exclusively on supporting the transition to market economies—a key issue given the importance to democracy of economic health and a strong middle class. The Clinton administration continued those efforts and added more direct support to the underpinnings of democracy—non-governmental organizations, journalists, judicial and police reform, local governments.

On NATO membership, senior working level officials in the Clinton administration at first adopted the mantra of the Bush administration: it was “a question for the future, not now.” From the beginning, however, any paper sent to the President with those words would be returned with his left-handed scrawl in the margins: “why not now?” American support for Central and Eastern European integration into NATO and other Western structures, as broadly as possible and as soon as possible, was consistently driven from the top.

The question was what “as possible” reasonably could mean. As Washington saw the NATO issue, it was not only which countries might join and when, but also how to help them prepare for member-

ship and how to strengthen Western ties with those who could only join later, or maybe never.

The Defense Department was most wary, understandably so about taking on new commitments to defend countries in the midst of rapid change and unable at that time to contribute much or anything to their own defense or even to support NATO forces if necessary. However unlikely a military threat then seemed, military planners are paid to prepare for worst cases. Money also mattered. The cost of assimilating new NATO members could be substantial; whatever new funds Congress might provide, some diversion of Defense Department resources was likely. Opinions within both the State Department and the NSC staff varied, and those of individuals changed along the way.

At the June 1993 NATO Foreign Ministers' meeting in Greece, Allies agreed to a Washington proposal for a Summit in December 1993 (later slipped to January 1994). I was then Senior Director for Europe on the U.S. National Security Council (NSC) staff and thus chaired senior Interagency Groups for crises (Bosnia) and issues of equal concern to two or more Departments (NATO). As soon as we returned home from Greece, I convened an Interagency Group to prepare for the Summit. Other key members were the State Department's Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for European Affairs Alexander Vershbow (later U.S. Ambassador at NATO and then to Russia); Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (soon to be Under Secretary) Walter Slocombe; and Chief of Strategic Plans and Policy for the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Barry McCaffrey. Each of these was backed by an impressive group of experts who contributed significantly. All participants also were deeply engaged in Bosnia, which in fact absorbed most of our time and attention. The same was true for the Principals Committee to which we reported: National Security Advisor Tony Lake; his Deputy Sandy Berger; Secretary of State Warren Christopher; Secretary of Defense Les Aspin; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell; Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright; and Director of Central Intelligence James Woolsey.

All members of the Interagency Group agreed from the outset that the Summit Communiqué should take concrete new steps, not just affirm Allies' devotion to NATO—and that Washington should have

proposals to that end when European allies returned in September from summer holiday.

NATO's relations with its neighbors to the east topped the agenda. There already was a North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), established in 1991 during the George H. W. Bush Presidency, to which all European states—including Russia—sent representatives for consultations with NATO's North Atlantic Council on a range of issues. The State Department had a list of ideas for upgrading NACC, ranging from the mildly substantive to assigning its non-NATO members free parking places at Alliance headquarters. The NSC staff felt strongly that something more was needed—a recognizably significant departure rather than a grab-bag of small improvements to existing arrangements.

At the Group's initial meeting I laid out the bones of what became the Partnership for Peace (PfP), an idea that was elaborated by all. Indeed it became apparent that American officials at NATO had been thinking along similar lines and their ideas were fed into the Washington process. NATO would invite all European states, again including Russia, to join the PfP and send permanent staffs not only to NATO headquarters outside Brussels but also to its military command at Mons, Belgium. Non-NATO PfP members would plan and exercise with NATO members for possible operations. There were to be no criteria for joining the PfP, but non-NATO members would share with NATO their plans for military and political reforms. (When I asked Sweden's Deputy Foreign Minister how they would feel about the requirement to share Sweden's plans to become a democracy, he smilingly said they understood its purpose and would be happy to comply.)

Washington knew that NATO had an “out of area” problem: to remain relevant after the Cold War it had to do more than continue preparing to repel a highly unlikely Russian attack on Western Europe. “Out of area or out of business,” the saying went. To address this problem John Shalikashvili, the American General who was then Supreme Commander of NATO's military forces and soon to become Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, proposed creation of Combined Joint Task Forces (CJTF): multinational, multi-service headquarters units which would plan and train to direct military operations beyond NATO's geographic area. Non-NATO members of the PfP could participate.

Shalikashvili also proposed that the European Union—then acting as the Western European Union or however it chose to organize its security and defense cooperation—could use a CJTF or other NATO assets for operations in which NATO chose not to participate. NATO, including the United States, would have to approve the use of NATO assets, but after that the operation would be under EU/WEU control. (NATO of course does not “own” combat forces, which are under national control until and unless assigned to a specific NATO mission. NATO’s own assets at that time included, for example, an Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) and some logistics capabilities such as a pipeline.)

This was an American proposal for the Summit, not a concession to the French or others as some have suggested. It was a dramatic departure for Washington, which for years had seen NATO as the key instrument of its influence in Europe and viewed any other form of security cooperation as potentially a mortal rival. It was understandably controversial. One senior American diplomat then posted in Europe sent a fax to his Washington peers saying all that remained was to “rename the Alliance OTAN” (the French acronym for NATO).

I suspected that some in Washington hoped that making European-only military operations dependent on NATO assets, and thus subject to U.S. veto, would curb European efforts to build truly separate arrangements; capabilities would be “separable but not separate.” But Bosnia had made Clinton Administration leaders, very much including Shalikashvili at NATO and Colin Powell speaking for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, keenly aware that there could be situations calling for Western military engagement in which the United States would not want to participate—and that NATO would not act without significant U.S. involvement. Also, at that time of enthusiasm for European integration among West European governments and people, it was believed that acting to “build Europe” might gain more popular support for defense efforts than contributing to an American-led enterprise, thus strengthening NATO’s own “European pillar.”

All this—creating the PfP and CJTFs, making NATO assets available for European Union missions—was agreed relatively easily at the senior working level. Two things slowed formal approval. One was the name. The working title had been Peacekeeping Partnership, until

the killing of 18 American soldiers in Somalia in October 1993 made “peacekeeping” a dirty word in Washington. There was a longish pause until a Pentagon official came up with “Partnership for Peace.” The other was more substantive. A newly-arrived senior political appointee in the Defense Department wanted to upend things and require each non-NATO country to apply for Partnership membership and its fitness be judged by NATO. His bosses didn’t support him but thought he should be given a hearing by the Principals Committee. Both these issues should have been resolved quickly, but the Principals were meeting almost daily on the Bosnian morass and it took time to get their attention. The delay added to suspicions, in Central Europe and elsewhere, that Washington was stalling.

We saw the PfP and CJTFs as related to the question of NATO enlargement. Participating in them would help Central and Eastern European states learn to operate with NATO and could prepare at least some of them for membership. They could be in at the beginning of the CJTFs, rather than just signing on to longstanding NATO activity.

Decision

With regard to NATO enlargement itself, all understood the strong commitment of the President, his National Security Advisor, and the Secretary of State. Some key political-level officials, notably Secretary of State Christopher and U.N. Ambassador Albright, initially wanted the NATO Summit at least to designate some Central and East European states associate members, or candidate members, or set a timetable for admitting new members—something more than just promising pie in a distant sky. All members of the Interagency Group were more cautious. While few if any voiced outright opposition to NATO enlargement, some clearly wanted to delay it as long as possible. And even those more supportive (or at least resigned) believed that part of their job was ensuring that their political masters understood the possible pitfalls both of enlargement and of its careless handling.

The arguments for enlargement were understood by everyone. Whether or not Central and East European states faced a military threat, the confidence and therefore stability provided by NATO membership could underpin economic and political reforms, much as had

been done for West European countries in the Alliance's early days. Membership could ingrain patterns of cooperation among peoples and governments previously wary of each other. It could promote key elements of democracy like civilian control of the military and transparency of military budgets. Finally, it would have been very hard for Western leaders to say that Luxembourg might need NATO's military protection, but Poland never would.

A less admirable reason for some to push NATO enlargement was to distract attention from Washington's unwillingness to oppose Serbian aggression in Bosnia. Enlargement was to make NATO seem vigorous, on the move, despite its absence from Europe's worst conflict in the Alliance's history. The shadow of that war loomed over everything. One senior political-level official in the State Department even drafted a speech arguing explicitly the need to "enlarge NATO to save it," but was dissuaded from being so blunt in public.

At the same time the Clinton Administration, from the President on down, was doing all it could, in big ways and small, to build a constructive relationship with a Russia which at that time seemed open to one. No one expected Moscow to like the idea that its former enemy would move closer to its borders and absorb some of its former satellites and possibly even, in time, republics. No one could be sure how much NATO enlargement might damage Russia's relations with the West or democratic forces within Russia. But all on the Interagency Group took the problem seriously.

Some East Europeans also urged caution. The Ukrainian Foreign Minister told us that he knew his country would not be among the first new NATO members, but urged that it be given five years or so to entrench its independence before NATO took in other former communist states.

We also had concerns about whether early NATO membership would necessarily be an unmitigated good for potential new members. Would it lead them to divert resources from building strong economies to unnecessary defense spending? While defense contractors did urge aspiring countries to do just that, NATO's military leaders, including top American generals like Shalikashvili, toured the region telling them that big ticket items like supersonic fighter jets were not necessary and that less expensive things like NATO-compatible communications gear

were far more important. As one member of the U.S. delegation to NATO put it: “we care less whether they have their own supersonic jets than whether their airfields can refuel ours.” Another concern was whether, given the importance of democracy in NATO’s criteria for new members (see below), countries doing well, and so less in need of the stabilizing benefits of membership, would be admitted while those still struggling might be seen by their publics as having been rebuffed. (To their credit, countries not in the first batch of new members redoubled their efforts, with public understanding and support.)

If NATO were to designate associate or candidate members, how could it be sure which they should be? At the time of NATO’s January 1994 Summit, Slovakia probably would have been included, but under Prime Minister Mečiar it soon experienced a period of political back-sliding that kept it from being among the first new members.

These and other considerations, such as the cost of assimilating new members, formed the bulk of a Pros/Cons paper the Interagency Group submitted to the Principals. The paper did not turn any of them against NATO enlargement. But it did persuade all that the January 1994 Summit should be only the beginning of a slower process than some, in Washington as well as in the Central and Eastern European countries themselves, had hoped. President Clinton’s Deputy National Security Advisor Berger remarked on the paper, “this shows that it (NATO enlargement) is a lot more complicated than we thought.” Another member of the Principals Committee noted, after reading the paper, that “it looks like this (a general commitment to NATO enlargement, without further details) is all we can do for now” (at the January 1994 Summit).

With one exception, there was no disagreement among members of the Interagency Committee on what the pros and cons were and how to describe them, even though some struck different balances and so reached different conclusions. It was a remarkably congenial and cooperative effort. The exception was a newly appointed political appointee in the Pentagon who pressed me forcibly on the telephone to eliminate key “pros” for NATO enlargement. I refused and he dropped the matter.

On the issue of criteria for membership, there was easy agreement that democracy, market economies, respect for human rights and the sovereignty of others should come first and military factors put farther

down the list. Among the latter, civilian control and defense budget transparency were listed ahead of military capability and interoperability with NATO. The Clinton Administration understood that the chief incentive for political and economic reform in the former communist east would be the lure of European Union membership, but wanted NATO to contribute what it could. Its Summit proposals were designed to that end.

Washington bungled the rollout of its package. Final details of the PfP (its name, whether there would be conditionality) were decided just before a previously scheduled NATO Defense Ministers meeting in December 1993. Secretary of State Christopher first briefed his opposite numbers by telephone, and then Secretary of Defense Aspin elaborated the proposal to his fellow Defense Ministers. Press accounts of the latter meeting gave the impression that PfP was a substitute for NATO membership rather a step toward it at least for some.

That suited most West European Allies just fine. While none objected publicly to NATO enlargement in principle, few wanted to move as rapidly as President Clinton. Many in the public thought Germany was an exception, especially when its Defense Minister Rühe published an op-ed in a major American newspaper supporting rapid enlargement. But at the same time Chancellor Kohl was urging President Clinton to slow down lest he damage relations with Russia.

In the end, the January 1994 NATO Summit communique declared that the Alliance “expects and would welcome” expansion to “democratic states of the east” in an “evolutionary manner.” Allied briefings stressed that this could include Russia. While we were still in Brussels, I shared a television interview with Kenneth Adelman, a prominent Republican security expert. When asked if I really believed Russia might ever join NATO, Adelman, luckily for me, jumped in with the perfect answer: “I don’t ever expect to see Russia in NATO, but I didn’t expect to see the Berlin Wall come down or the Soviet Union to disintegrate.”

The Summit language meant different things to different people. To many it seemed a reiteration of the old “question for the future but not now” attitude. West Europeans allies went home comfortable that the issue had been settled for the foreseeable future. Russian security officials may have had a similar reaction; they voiced no objections to the Summit outcome when I joined Under Secretary of Defense Frank

Wisner in briefing them on the margins of President Clinton's subsequent meetings with President Yeltsin in Moscow. Strobe Talbott's chapter in this book relates the far more important Clinton-Yeltsin discussions then taking place. Central and Eastern European states were understandably disappointed. But Madeleine Albright and General Shalikashvili had previewed our positions in pre-Summit visits, which helped soften the blow. More important was President Clinton's affirmation, when he met Central European leaders in Prague immediately after the Summit, that enlargement was a question of when, not if.

To dispel impressions that the NATO Summit language on enlargement had been just a place-holding temporizer, National Security Advisor Lake directed that a study be launched on the when and how of enlargement. He wanted to keep the issue out of America's 1994 mid-term elections, but in the meantime to use the study to show commitment and momentum. Some West European allies felt they'd been misled.

The View From Prague

I was still on the NSC staff when Lake asked for the study, but I left in the summer of 1994 to prepare for a new post as U.S. Ambassador to the Czech Republic. From that vantage point I saw how one candidate country was preparing for NATO membership, and the role of the U.S. Embassy there.

On the whole the Czech course was quite smooth. NATO and EU membership were each enthusiastically supported by Czech leaders across the political spectrum and by the populace. The beginning of serious NATO air action in Bosnia on August 31, 1995 strengthened this feeling; the Czech Foreign Minister and other key figures told me excitedly "this shows that NATO still is relevant." One exception was Prime Minister Klaus, who told me privately that NATO membership would be a waste of money, but acknowledged that he could not say so publicly or try to make opposition the position of his party or the Czech government.

The U.S. Embassy's Defense Attaché arranged for Czech military and civilian defense officials to participate in a wide array of training programs on how to work with NATO, while both it and the Political Section discussed parliamentary oversight with Czech legislators.

Washington wanted its ambassadors in Central Europe to promote NATO membership, but that was scarcely necessary in Prague. A small minority did see NATO as only a war-fighting body and claimed Washington should focus instead on conflict prevention. I spent quite a lot of time trying to ensure that Czechs understood what NATO was and was not, including the conflict-prevention importance of deterrence, and explaining the Clinton Administration's support for the security roles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe, and especially the European Union. I also tried, with very limited success, to remind Czechs that they needed to pay attention to the West European parliaments that would have to ratify their NATO membership.

There were bumps in the road. A senior American general based in Europe came to town and told the press that the Czechs were failing in membership preparations, specifically because their defense budget was half that of Hungary and growing at half the pace. The opposite was true; he had his countries confused. I worried that his factual mistakes would have enabled Prime Minister Klaus to say we didn't know what we were talking about when we urged the improvements the Czechs did need to make. At the other extreme, the other NATO ambassadors in Prague and I were concerned when General Shalikashvili visited and said publicly that the Czechs were "ready now" to join, or when Madeleine Albright, by now Secretary of State, came to town and told them "welcome home."

None of these incidents, however, seemed to affect Czech preparations. They had decided early to concentrate first on building one Rapid Response Brigade and on English language training. The head of the Czech Army told me proudly that he would be the last in his job who was not fluent in English. In late 1995 they eagerly joined enforcement of the Dayton accords in Bosnia, welcoming the chance to show that their military could operate with NATO.

More troublesome for the Embassy was the competition between two major American defense contractors, each trying to persuade the Czechs that U.S. Senate ratification of their NATO membership depended on their buying its supersonic fighter airplane. Individuals in each company were eager to find evidence that the Embassy was favoring the other. This became so extreme that when former U.S. Senator

Bob Dole came to town, I felt I could not join his meetings because one of his law partners represented one of the companies, and the other likely would have accused me of helping him sell its rival's plane. Dole did not mention airplanes to the Czechs. Already a strong supporter of enlargement, he told me that he was visiting the candidate states so he could tell his former Senate colleagues that he had seen their fitness with his own eyes. Savvy about Washington, he understood and was gracious about my predicament.

The Clinton Administration's efforts to secure Senate ratification of NATO enlargement is covered in Jeremy Rosner's chapter of this book. U.S. Embassy Prague's participation was minimal. We arranged meetings for the steady stream (sometimes flood) of U.S. executive and legislative branch visitors to Prague (then the flavor of the month for Westerners). Czechs were less good at selling themselves (whether their military abilities, export goods, or cultural attractions) than Poles or Hungarians, but had solid progress to show and did so effectively to official American visitors. In February 1998, U.S. Ambassadors in the three candidate countries accompanied "our" Foreign Ministers when they traveled to Washington to make their case on Capitol Hill. In April of that year, the U.S. Senate ratified accession of the three to NATO.

Concluding Reflections

Other chapters in this book and talks with some of the authors show how the NATO enlargement story illustrates two recurring aspects of U.S.—and probably other—foreign policy making.

The first is that even those who participate in the same discussions can come away with different understandings of the decisions, depending at least in part on what outcome they wanted. While those of us working in the White House understood that deciding the "how and when" of enlargement might be tough going, we believed the basic decision to enlarge had been taken with the Summit language expecting and welcoming it. We saw that as the Summit's prime accomplishment. In sharp contrast, senior American diplomats who had been key participants in pre-Summit deliberations thought the Summit decided on PfP as a substitute for enlargement.

The second point is how little presidential decisions sometimes settle. The U.S. Defense Department's continued opposition to enlargement is well known, but it was not alone. It took a long time even to get the Enlargement Study underway. Implementation of other policies also was rocky. The ink was scarcely dry on the Summit decision that the EU could borrow and command a CJTF before NATO's top military commander (a U.S. general) began trying to ensure any operation using one would be under his ultimate command. Later, a new Assistant Secretary of State for Europe began cautioning European diplomats that EU security cooperation risked damaging transatlantic ties, although President Clinton had made no decision to change American support for it.

There is nothing new in this. Except on long-running, major crises requiring continued presidential/prime ministerial involvement in the details, heads of government in most countries, their foreign ministers and national security advisors, do their best thinking on an issue, make a decision, then necessarily move on to the next problem, unable to monitor implementation of what they think they have mandated. Harry Truman was exaggerating but had a point when he said, as Eisenhower was about to assume the presidency: "Poor Ike. He'll sit at this desk and say "do this, do that" and nothing will happen."

