

Chapter 18

Present at the Transformation: An Insider's Reflection on NATO Enlargement, NATO-Russia Relations, and Where We Go from Here

Alexander Vershbow

It's now twenty years since NATO's first post-Cold War enlargement when Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic became the 17th, 18th and 19th members of the Alliance in March 1999. This began a process that has added a total of 13 new democracies from Central and Eastern Europe to NATO's ranks, with Northern Macedonia set to become the 30th member in 2019.

NATO enlargement was only one dimension of U.S. and NATO policy at the end of the Cold War aimed at consolidating peace and security across Europe, overcoming the division of the continent imposed by Stalin at the end of World War II and ratified at the 1945 Yalta Summit. The enlargement of NATO membership went hand in hand with the forging of a strategic partnership with Russia, formalized in the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. A transformed NATO Alliance and an institutionalized NATO-Russia partnership were envisaged as the main pillars of a U.S.-led pan-European security system that sought to realize the vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace first articulated by President George H.W. Bush and reaffirmed by President Bill Clinton.

The ensuing twenty years have witnessed a lot of second-guessing about the wisdom of the decision to open NATO to the East, with more and more critics arguing that it was the "original sin" that led to the confrontational relationship with Moscow that we are dealing with today. As a participant in developing and implementing NATO's enlargement strategy, I remain convinced that it was the right thing to do in rectifying the injustices of Yalta and setting Europe's East firmly on the path of democracy and reform, rather than consigning these countries to a gray zone of instability and disintegration. At the same time,

the United States and its Allies went the extra mile to demonstrate to Moscow that NATO enlargement posed no military threat to Russia and to establish a framework for NATO-Russia consultations and cooperation that is still functioning today.

In saying this, I don't deny that the West may have missed some opportunities over the years to cement a long-term partnership with Russia. We may have underestimated the psychological impact on the Russian people of the collapse of the Warsaw Pact in 1989 and the break-up of the USSR in 1991, the economic collapse during the 1990s, and the perception that the West no longer saw Russia as an important power.

But we shouldn't buy the false historical narrative the Russians have been peddling in recent years about how we deliberately took advantage of Russia after the end of the Cold War, how we sought to weaken or marginalize Moscow or allegedly encircled the country with NATO military bases poised for surprise attack. Nor should we dignify Putin's claims that we are trying to organize a people's revolution in Russia aimed at toppling his regime (as we supposedly did on Georgia and Ukraine).

The record shows that, in fact, the United States and its Allies made an extraordinary effort to reach out to Russia as a partner—and even as an ally—after the end of the Cold War and achieved a lot in the years until 2014. In the NATO-Russia Founding Act, NATO made unilateral commitments—still in effect today—to limit its deployment of nuclear weapons and combat forces on the territory of new members. These demonstrated that an enlarged NATO would not pose a military threat to Russia. Other factors played a larger role than NATO enlargement in the breakdown of the West's relations with Moscow that culminated in Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine.

The goal of an integrated European security system, with a prominent place for Russia, remains the right one, although it has never seemed as distant as it does today. Applying the lessons learned during the first round of NATO enlargement may help us in halting the further deterioration of the West's ties with Moscow and returning relations to the path of cooperation and partnership that both sides chose in the 1990s.

Hopes and Fears as the Cold War Ended

It is important to remember the historical context in which the NATO enlargement debate emerged. When the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, I was serving as the Director of Soviet Union Affairs at the State Department. U.S.-Soviet relations had begun to change with the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev and his turn to reformist policies epitomized by the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. In those days, we only joked about the Soviet Union reconciling with its arch-enemy, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In December 1989, the invitation to the Soviet Desk's annual Christmas party had on its cover a cartoon depicting me on the phone with Soviet Ambassador Yuri Dubinin asking: "Let me get this straight, Mr. Ambassador. The Soviet Union doesn't want to destroy NATO, it wants to join it?!"

Merely two years later, however, as the new U.S. Deputy Permanent Representative to NATO, I attended the first Foreign Ministers' meeting of the new North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in Brussels in December 1991. The NACC was the first body established by NATO for consultations with its former Cold War adversaries. During the meeting's final moments, Soviet Ambassador Nikolay Afanasievsky announced that he couldn't sign the communique, because his country had ceased to exist. He had just learned that the Presidents of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus had signed the Belovezha Accords dissolving the USSR. Jaws dropped when, a few minutes later, the Chairman, NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner, read out a telegram from President Boris Yeltsin declaring that the newly independent Russian Federation was interested in joining NATO.

This episode only confirmed that the glacial, predictable course of events that characterized the Cold War was a thing of the past. Indeed, history had gone into fast-forward mode—for better and for worse. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the peaceful unification of Germany within NATO, the emergence of democracy and civil society in Central and Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself were mostly good news. But we were also confronted with the tumultuous and violent disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, the Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh, separatist movements in parts of Georgia and Moldova, and upheavals inside Russia itself, including the failed coup against Gorbachev in August 1991. That

and subsequent dramatic events, such as the shelling of the Russian White House in 1993 and the first Chechen War beginning in 1994, showed that the turn toward reform and democracy was far from irreversible.

All these events made clear that we no longer had the luxury of standing on the sidelines and taking a passive, “wait and see” approach, simply reacting to events. Our shared interests with our traditional allies, and our shared values with the forces for change in Europe’s East, demanded that we engage fully and seek to shape events in a pro-active way.

Some suggested that, with the disappearance of the threat of large-scale aggression, NATO had fulfilled its purpose and could go out of business like the Warsaw Pact. But U.S. and Allied leaders recognized that Europe was still a dangerous place. The consolidation of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union was far from assured. Instability in the Balkans and elsewhere along NATO’s periphery suggested that the mission of the Alliance needed to evolve to meet changing circumstances. And the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe themselves were desperately keen to join Western institutions as they sought to consolidate their own transformations, escape the shadow of Soviet domination, and rejoin the European mainstream.

Rather than focusing solely on defense of NATO territory, the United States and its Allies agreed that NATO would need to go “out of area” in two ways: to reach out to its former adversaries to help them consolidate their reforms and avoid regional instability; and to use NATO’s military power when necessary to deal with threats when prevention failed. Rather than just defending its borders, NATO would need to “project stability” beyond its borders—still a key part of NATO’s mission today, even as collective defense has become job #1 once again in the face of Putin’s aggression.

First Steps

The first steps in this direction were taken by the George H.W. Bush Administration, which spearheaded the review of NATO’s Strategic Concept in 1991 and proposed the creation of the North Atlantic

Cooperation Council in 1991. President Bill Clinton, upon taking office in 1993, called for an early NATO Summit to build on these initial steps. It was in that year that the debate within the Administration, and within the Alliance heated up, as has been chronicled by James Goldgeier and the late Ron Asmus.¹

The 1994 Brussels Summit launched the Partnership for Peace (PfP), the highly successful program that gave an operational dimension to NATO's interaction with Soviet bloc states and other interested parties, including neutral Sweden, Finland, Austria and Switzerland. It offered participation in NATO training, assistance with defense reforms and guidance on achieving interoperability and standardization with NATO, creating a set of partners that could operate with NATO in future peacekeeping missions. It was promoted by its authors at the Department of Defense as an alternative to NATO enlargement that would enable us to put off the admission of new members until the end of the decade. It was welcomed by Russia in that light, with President Yeltsin telling Secretary of State Christopher, when he first presented the PfP proposal, that it was a "work of genius."² As former Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev recounts elsewhere in this volume, Yeltsin deliberately ignored the other half of Christopher's message, that NATO was going to admit new members, if not immediately, then in the medium term.

In any event, it became clear immediately after the Brussels Summit that President Clinton had a much more rapid timetable in mind. He declared publicly on several occasions in 1994 that the "time has come" to consider the "when and how" of NATO enlargement. He had been deeply affected by his first encounters with Václav Havel, Lech Wałęsa and other Central and East European leaders at the time of the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993. They convinced him that he had to seize the opportunity to embed the new democracies in Western institutions, rather than risking that they would succumb to internal instability and militant nationalism as had happened in the 1930s. Of necessity, this process would need to start with NATO, since the more extensive requirements for accession to the European Union meant that EU enlargement would proceed at a much slower pace than NATO enlargement.

From Partnership to Membership ... and NATO-Russia Partnership

I joined the NSC Staff in June 1994 as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Europe. I had been hired by National Security advisor Tony Lake, in part, because I was as forward-leaning as he and President Clinton on NATO enlargement. During the year before, when I was serving at the State Department as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Europe, he also discovered I was a kindred spirit when it came to using NATO airpower in the service of diplomacy to end the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

With Lake's encouragement, and working as part of the self-styled NSC Troika with Daniel Fried, Senior Director for Central and Eastern Europe, and Nick Burns, Senior Director for Russia and Eurasia, we set to work on developing a strategy for achieving the President's vision. By the fall of 1994, the Troika had developed a roadmap entitled "Moving Toward NATO Expansion."³ This short paper served as the vehicle for gaining interagency consensus. It became the blueprint for efforts led by the State Department to build a consensus within NATO, described by Daniel Hamilton in Chapter 1 of this volume.

The paper laid out the goals, rationale and timeline for a two-track strategy: on track 1, a process leading to an expanded NATO; and on track 2, a parallel process leading to an institutionalized partnership with Russia. The objectives were defined as follows:

- An integrated and inclusive security system for Europe, including but going beyond NATO expansion, while ensuring a prominent place for a democratic Russia.
- In the medium term, an expanded NATO, including the major Central and East European states who live up to our precepts, with the prospect of further expansion to others down the road.
- In parallel, an institutionalized relationship between NATO and Russia, which could take the form of a charter or treaty (an "alliance with the Alliance"). It should include a mechanism for consulting with Russia on NATO-led military operations and other subjects, but without giving Russians a veto over NATO decisions.

- The possibility of NATO membership for Ukraine and the Baltic States would be maintained; they should not be consigned to a gray zone or a Russian sphere of influence.
- New members would acquire all the rights and responsibilities of current members (full Article 5 guarantee) and would commit to eventual full integration in NATO's military structures. Full integration would not be required at the outset, however, and there would be flexibility on operational issues such as stationing of foreign forces.
- NATO enlargement would take place in coordination with the enlargement of the EU but would not be delayed to match the EU's likely slower timetable.

The rationale was set forth in these terms:

- To extend stability eastward and underpin the democratic reform process in Central and Eastern Europe, we needed to create a perspective that Partnership for Peace will lead to NATO membership for some PFP members.
- To make sure that enlargement was not seen as directed against any country, the process would need to be developed in parallel with a long-term strategy toward Russia that included intensified partnership with NATO and development of other institutions (CSCE/OSCE, G-8).
- The enlargement process would be evolutionary and merit-based. It would be linked to a continued, robust Partnership for Peace as the mechanism both for preparing new members and for deepening relations with countries not yet ready for, or interested in, NATO membership.
- We would downplay the “insurance policy” rationale for enlargement (i.e. as a strategic hedge against the return of a more aggressive Russia).
- Indeed, the possibility of membership in the long term for a democratic Russia should not be ruled out explicitly—although this position, while supported by President Clinton in his talks with President Yeltsin, was not accepted by many Allies or by some parts of the U.S. government.

The criteria for membership would not be overly specific, in contrast with the criteria for EU membership. There would not be an explicit checklist of military requirements; the focus would be on general precepts—democracy, market economy, responsible/good-neighborly security policies. On the military side, the general goal would be interoperability with NATO forces, with the precise standards to be refined as PfP evolved.

In terms of timing, the expectation was that the first explicit NATO decision to invite new members would be taken no sooner than the first half of Clinton's second term (1997 or 1998), which would allow time for building consensus inside NATO, improving the readiness of candidates via Pfp, and, most importantly, working with the Russians on a NATO-Russia institutional relationship. In the meantime, we would avoid speculating on which countries were likely to be included or excluded from the first round.

Implementing the Roadmap

Over the next three years, the United States followed this roadmap almost to the letter, culminating in the signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act in May 1997 and the decision to invite Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic as the first new members at the Madrid Summit in July 1997. While some in Congress, as well as East European émigré groups, pushed for a quicker pace, the Clinton Administration's deliberate approach helped solidify Allied support and made it easier to gain Russia's acquiescence.

The process inside NATO went remarkably smoothly, thanks to the leadership of NATO Secretary General Javier Solana. During 1995, NATO conducted a Study on NATO Enlargement that forged Allied consensus on the precepts and criteria for considering new members.⁴ The Study, completed in September 1995, declared that 1996 would be the year for "intensified dialogues" between aspiring members and NATO's political and military authorities. This was the process for assessing each candidate's progress on political, economic and defense reforms, improving relations with neighbors, and establishing democratic civilian control of its military.

The only drama within NATO came at the very end of the process, at the Madrid Summit itself, when France, supported by Italy, pressed unsuccessfully to add Romania to the first group of new members. They argued that this was necessary to achieve greater geographic balance—despite Romania’s domestic instability. Although uncomfortable playing the “heavy,” the United States rejected the French demand, but agreed to language noting Romania’s progress as a face-saver for President Chirac.

Reaching agreement with Russia was far more difficult. The negotiations were complicated by the turbulence of Russian domestic politics, including Yeltsin’s uphill struggle for reelection in 1996, when he faced a formidable challenge from Communist Party leader Gennadiy Zyuganov. Yeltsin was disappointed that the United States had moved quickly beyond Partnership for Peace, pressing ahead with its enlargement agenda rather than delaying the admission of new members until the end of the century. He appealed to President Clinton to slow the pace and defer any decisions until well after the 1996 Russian presidential elections.

Russian diplomats, while agreeing to the basic paradigm of a NATO-Russia charter and consultative mechanism to parallel enlargement, pressed the United States to renounce any deployment of nuclear weapons or conventional forces on the territory of new members. Yeltsin personally appealed to Clinton to rule out the possibility of membership for former Soviet republics, including the three Baltic states. These former Soviet republics were a special case, since their forcible incorporation into the Soviet Union as part of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 had never been legally recognized by the United States.

In order to get its way on these issues, Russia played hard to get when it came to joining PFP, which the United States and its Allies argued was an essential mechanism for forging NATO-Russia military-to-military cooperation. During President Clinton’s visit to Moscow in May 1995, Yeltsin reluctantly agreed to sign the PFP Framework Document, more than a year after PFP’s establishment. But negotiations proceeded at a glacial pace as Yeltsin fought for his political survival.

The potential for NATO-Russia cooperation got a boost from the conclusion of the Dayton Peace Agreement for Bosnia-Herzegovina in the fall of 1995. Russia, having been a participant at Dayton as a mem-

ber of the Contact Group, agreed in principle at the Clinton-Yeltsin October Summit in Hyde Park, New York, to deploy peacekeepers to the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR). While the Russians insisted that their forces in Northern Bosnia be formally under U.S. rather than NATO tactical control, the operation showed that Russia and NATO could work together on the ground to meet post-Cold War security challenges.

The success in Bosnia gave impetus to the talks on what became the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which began in earnest after Yeltsin's 1996 reelection (a victory secured thanks to extensive U.S. and German support, both political and financial). While the official negotiations were headed by NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, it quickly became apparent that the Russians preferred to address the most sensitive issues bilaterally. With a NATO Summit scheduled for July 1997 to take the first decisions on enlargement, time was of the essence. Success was achieved thanks to the high-level engagement by newly appointed U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and U.S. Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott with Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, as well as direct engagement by President Clinton himself.⁵

Getting to Yes with Russia

Albright and Talbott formed a “flying squad” of senior U.S. officials and experts to tackle the issues one-by-one with Russian leaders, in close coordination with Solana and the NATO Allies. I was proud to be part of the team as NSC Senior Director. My experience as a former Deputy Ambassador to NATO helped me to come up with creative solutions to address Russian concerns without crossing any U.S. or NATO redlines.

We managed to address the first of Russia's concerns in December 1996, with the NATO Allies' decision that they had “no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members”—a unilateral commitment known as the “Three No's.”⁶ The Russians pressed for additional specificity that was ultimately reflected in the NATO-Russia Founding Act: “This subsumes the fact that NATO has decided that it has no intention, no plan, and no reason to establish nuclear weapon storage sites on the territory of those mem-

bers, whether through the construction of new nuclear storage facilities or the adaptation of old nuclear storage facilities.”

There were critics of the Three No’s, both in the United States and in Central and Eastern Europe, who argued that the new Allies should have the same rights and responsibilities as older Allies and not be singularized. But given the dramatically reduced threat since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Allies considered this to be a cost-free gesture.

The United States and the other Allies did, however, reject Russia’s demand for a similar ban on the stationing of conventional forces on the territory of new members. In this case, they agreed that a total ban would render new members “second-class allies” and reduce NATO’s ability to defend them under Article 5. But considering the virtual disappearance of a credible Russian threat of aggression against Allies in Europe, NATO did not see the need for a large U.S. conventional deterrent presence as had been maintained along the inner-German border throughout the Cold War. Defense and deterrence could be carried out via reinforcement rather than permanent stationing. How to reflect this without limiting NATO’s flexibility in the longer term was the challenge.

During one of the flying squad’s consultations with Secretary General Solana in Brussels in early 1997, I scribbled a sentence aimed at articulating NATO policy along these lines. Known as the “sentence from hell,” this proposal, with minor modifications, became the NATO policy on stationed forces that was announced on March 14, 1997: “In the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defense and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.”⁷

Although the security environment has changed dramatically since 1997 and Russia has violated many of its commitments under the Founding Act, the March 1997 statement continues to guide NATO decision-making, including on the scale of its enhanced Forward Presence battalions deployed in Poland and the Baltic states since 2017. If the Russian threat continues to grow, however, NATO may have no choice but to jettison this element of the NATO-Russia Founding Act and deploy much larger forces and strategic enablers along the Eastern flank.

Russia was generally satisfied with the “sentence from hell” when it was presented by the “flying squad.” Although Allies refused to be more specific about the meaning of “substantial combat forces,” they did agree to clarifications requested by Primakov in the Founding Act on the conditions in which reinforcement could take place: “In this context, reinforcement may take place, when necessary, in the event of defense against a threat of aggression and missions in support of peace consistent with the United Nations Charter and the OSCE governing principles, as well as for exercises consistent with the adapted CFE Treaty, the provisions of the Vienna Document 1994 and mutually agreed transparency measures.” For their part, Allies underscored that there was a trade-off: by foregoing large stationed forces, NATO would need infrastructure to support reinforcement.⁸ Russia conveniently forgets this point when complaining nowadays about NATO’s (still modest) infrastructure on the territory of new members.

President Clinton personally rebuffed Yeltsin’s persistent demands that NATO renounce the possibility of membership for former Soviet republics. At their Summit in Helsinki in March 1997, Clinton argued that the West did not recognize the Baltic states as having been legitimately part of the USSR, and that we could not in any case rule out any sovereign country’s right to join an alliance; this was a basic principle of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act that Russia had long accepted, and it had been reaffirmed in the Paris Charter of 1990. Clinton also argued that ruling out the Baltic states or Ukraine would mean foreclosing the possibility of Russian membership in the long term—a point important to Yeltsin who, despite various zig-zags, still believed in Russia’s Western trajectory. That settled it with Yeltsin, at least with respect to keeping NATO’s door open to the Baltic states. But the issue would return with a vengeance eleven years later, when Ukraine’s and Georgia’s pro-Western leaders pushed to join NATO’s Membership Action Plan.

With Russia’s main concerns resolved, the Founding Act was signed on May 27, 1997, and the Madrid Summit convened on July 8 to decide on the first group of nations to be invited to join the Alliance. Both tracks of the 1994 Roadmap were now complete. A few weeks later, as I prepared for my onward assignment as U.S. Ambassador to NATO, National Security Advisor Sandy Berger sent the members of the Troika a copy of the Roadmap with the comment: “One for the

textbooks—a policy well-conceived, well-executed, and well-presented. Congratulations!”

Kosovo: The First Test to the NATO-Russia Partnership

I took up my duties as U.S. Permanent Representative on the North Atlantic Council on January 2, 1998. The Ambassadors of NATO’s three invitees, Karel Kovanda of the Czech Republic, András Simonyi of Hungary, and Andrzej Towpik of Poland, sat to my left in the North Atlantic Council as observers pending ratification by NATO’s 16 parliaments of their accession. It was exciting to work so closely with the beneficiaries of my work in opening NATO to the East. I also welcomed the chance to develop the new NATO-Russia partnership with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak, who had been one of my main interlocutors during the negotiations on the Founding Act. Little did we know that, within a year, NATO would be at war again in the former Yugoslavia—this time, over Kosovo—putting both the Alliance and the NATO-Russia partnership to the test.

As a member of the Contact Group, Russia was part of the diplomacy that sought to press Serbian President Slobodan Milošević to grant autonomy to Kosovo. Moscow refused to push Milošević to compromise Serbia’s sovereignty and agree to an international peacekeeping force, which the Allies judged essential to ending the violence and making an autonomy deal stick. With Milošević hiding behind the Russian position, the Rambouillet negotiations broke down in failure. NATO then delivered on its threat to use force against Serbia to compel it to accept the terms it had rejected at Rambouillet.

NATO—now including Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic—acted without explicit UN Security Council authorization since Russia had made clear it would veto any resolution authorizing force. Russia responded by suspending its participation in the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC).

NATO-Russia cooperation survived the test of Kosovo, although the crisis left permanent scars. Even with the PJC suspended, Russia (in the person of Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin) played a crucial role in the diplomacy that persuaded Milošević to back down, sparing NATO the need for a ground invasion of Serbia. After the air campaign

was over, Russia quickly returned to the PJC. And Yeltsin agreed to deploy Russian troops to the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR), operating again under U.S. tactical control. Russian forces remained part of the mission until 2003.

Russia Reacts Calmly to the Second Round of Enlargement

Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, saw the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington as an opportunity to build closer ties with the West as he consolidated power at home. At a special NATO-Russia Summit in Rome in May 2002, Putin and NATO leaders signed the Declaration on "NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality" and established the NATO-Russia Council to replace the PJC.⁹ Allies and Russia launched a series of joint counter-terrorism projects and continued to develop their dialogue and cooperation on a range of subjects, including the conflict in Afghanistan, arms control, non-proliferation, theater missile defense, and civil emergency planning.

While this upgrade in NATO-Russia relations was not explicitly conceived as a counterpart to further NATO enlargement, it helped Allies manage tensions over the second round. At the Prague Summit in November 2002, Allies invited seven Central and East European states to join the Alliance, including the three Baltic states together with Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. I was Ambassador in Moscow from 2001 to 2005, and I heard few complaints about NATO expansion to the Baltic states as having crossed Russian red lines, either at the time of the Prague Summit or when the seven new members formally joined the Alliance in 2004. Putin described the further enlargement of NATO as "counterproductive" but continued to take a pragmatic approach to relations with the Alliance.

New Challenges to West-Russia Relations under Putin

Relations between the West and Russia did begin to deteriorate after 2002, but the causes were not related to NATO or NATO enlargement. The 2003 Iraq War, while conducted via a U.S.-led coalition of the willing rather than through NATO, rekindled Russian objections to operations launched without a U.N. Security Council mandate.

While Moscow had been assured that Kosovo was a one-time exception to the rules, prompted by an impending humanitarian disaster, the U.S. decision to invade Iraq and topple Saddam Hussein suggested that the United States was making it a standard practice to bypass the U.N. Security Council, nullifying Russia's veto power.

A second factor contributing to Putin's suspicions was the Bush Administration's aggressive pursuit of ballistic missile defense (BMD) of the U.S. homeland, including a "third site" with installations in Poland and the Czech Republic. I recall accompanying Secretary of State Colin Powell to the Kremlin in December 2001 to inform Putin of President George W. Bush's decision to withdraw from the 1972 ABM Treaty. Putin reacted more with sorrow than anger at the time, and Russian experts accepted U.S. assurances that U.S. BMD plans were focused on defending against limited attacks by rogue states like Iran and North Korea and did not threaten Russia's assured retaliatory capability.

As U.S. plans advanced, however, Putin became increasingly convinced that the United States was seeking to negate that retaliatory capacity by deploying interceptors close to Russia's borders, which Moscow feared could embolden the United States to carry out a preemptive first strike. The fact that the third site would not, in reality, put the Soviet strategic deterrent at risk—because of its location and the small number (10) of interceptors—did not alter Putin's perception that the United States was undermining strategic stability.

The third factor that contributed to Russia's estrangement from the West was the Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004). While the West viewed both as spontaneous popular rebellions against corrupt political leaders and, in the Ukrainian case, against Russian-backed efforts to steal the election on behalf of its preferred candidate, Putin saw things in a much darker light. These "color revolutions," in his view, were special operations planned and financed by the United States aimed at undermining Russia's interests in its "near abroad." The reformist leaders' pursuit of NATO and EU membership only confirmed Russian suspicions that the West, led by the United States, was determined to tear these countries from Russia's sphere of privileged interests. (This same perception influenced Putin's harsh reaction to the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine in 2013 and the toppling of President Viktor Yanukovich.)

Another factor affecting Putin's mistrust of the West was the wave of terrorist attacks that spread across Russia in 2002-2004. Putin seemed to see the hand of the United States rather than Chechen separatists and home-grown Islamic extremists as behind the attacks. I remember watching Putin's chilling speech after the 2004 attack on the school in Beslan, North Ossetia. Clearly pointing his finger at the West, Putin said "Some want to tear off a big chunk of our country. Others help them to do it. They help because they think that Russia, as one of the greatest nuclear powers of the world, is still a threat, and this threat has to be eliminated. And terrorism is only an instrument to achieve these goals."¹⁰

U.S. criticism of the arrest of oil tycoon and political opponent Mikhail Khodorkovsky in November 2003 was also seen as confirming Western support for those seeking to weaken Russia and undermine the Putin system.

In sum, by the time of his blistering, anti-Western speech to the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin had concluded that the West had become increasingly dismissive of Russia's interests—circumventing its UN veto, undermining its status as a nuclear superpower with ballistic missile defense, fomenting pro-Western, anti-Russian movements in Ukraine and Georgia, and supporting forces seeking to destroy Russia from within. The fact that much of this perception was based on paranoia and worst-case assessments fed to him by Russian intelligence was beside the point.

Bust-Up At Bucharest

None of these factors were the consequence of NATO enlargement. But when the Bush Administration came to the April 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest actively supporting the inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia in the Membership Action Plan (MAP), Putin's hostile reaction should have come as no surprise. He was not assuaged by explanations that MAP was not a guarantee of membership, since invitations to begin accession talks would require a separate, political decision by the North Atlantic Council. While Allies assured him that MAP was just the start of a more intensive phase of preparation, Putin couldn't abide the symbolism—the M in MAP was the issue.

Moreover, in contrast with the strategy Washington had adopted during the earlier rounds of NATO enlargement, the United States and other supporters of MAP for Ukraine and Georgia had not developed a “Russia track” of measures to mitigate Russian concerns. Lacking a Russia strategy, President Bush and his team were unable to convince key U.S. allies to support MAP in the face of Russian objections.

The resulting deadlock among the Allies at Bucharest led to the ill-conceived and hastily drafted compromise in which NATO leaders refused MAP but declared in the Summit communique that “these countries will become members of NATO.”¹¹ This was a far more categorical commitment than would have been the case had NATO decided only to offer MAP to Ukraine and Georgia. Whatever Allies’ intentions at Bucharest, the Summit outcome contributed to Putin’s decision to launch the war in Georgia four months later. With Russia’s invasion and occupation of Georgian territory, Putin had effectively drawn the red line on NATO enlargement to the former Soviet Union that Yeltsin had been persuaded not to draw in 1997.

One More Try under Medvedev

After the war in Georgia, Allies suspended the work of the NATO-Russia Council for a few months, but business resumed after the “reset” in U.S.- and NATO-Russia relations in 2009. With Dmitriy Medvedev occupying the Russian Presidency, another attempt was made by NATO and Russia to develop a “true strategic partnership” at the 2010 Lisbon Summit, the last Summit attended by a Russian President.

The flagship initiative was an effort to link NATO and Russian missile defense capabilities to create a cooperative system to defense against missile attacks by rogue states. This could have been a game-changer—joining NATO and Russian capabilities to counter a real and growing common threat, and demonstrating that NATO’s missile defense capabilities were not aimed at undermining Russia’s strategic deterrent. As Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, I was part of the U.S. negotiating team that pursued a bilateral missile defense agreement in 2011 and 2012, and I supported the NATO-Russia

side of the negotiations in 2012 and 2013 as Deputy Secretary General of NATO.

Although Allies put a bold proposal on the table,¹² negotiations foundered by the end of 2013. With Putin back as President, it became clear that Russia's real goal was to convince the United States and NATO to cancel their planned missile defense deployments in Romania and Poland and rely instead on a Russian "sectoral" defense of NATO territory—a total non-starter.

The Arab Spring and NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya is where NATO-Russia relations really came a cropper. When Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi threatened to "kill like rats" tens of thousands of pro-democracy protesters in eastern Libya, Allies decided to intervene from the air to establish a no-fly zone and protect the Libyan people. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973 authorizing "all necessary measures"¹³ passed thanks to Russian President Medvedev's decision to abstain—presumably with the concurrence of then-Prime Minister Putin.

As NATO bombing of Libyan forces escalated and Qadhafi was overthrown, Putin and other Russian leaders became convinced that NATO had exceeded that mandate. It looked again that the United States and NATO were circumventing Russia's authority as a Security Council member as they had done in Kosovo and Iraq, with NATO becoming the instrument for regime change.

What Is To Be Done?

The breakdown in the West's relations with Russia was not caused by the NATO decision in 1997 to admit new democracies from Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, the first and second rounds of enlargement went smoothly because the Alliance—guided by creative U.S. leadership—made a concerted effort to develop a real strategic partnership with Russia. This was not meant as compensation or a consolation prize but was an effort to ensure that a democratic Russia's voice was heard in European security.

Success was also achieved because NATO made a determined effort to allay Russian concerns about the military implications of enlargement. Even after the admission of the Baltic states to NATO in 2004,

Russia continued to reduce its forces along its Western flank.¹⁴ This reflected an understanding that NATO enlargement was primarily a political project, and that NATO was living up to its commitments in the Founding Act on non-deployment of nuclear weapons on the territory of new members and on refraining from “additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.”

Relations between Russia and the West faced multiple challenges during President Putin’s first years in office, but these were not directly related to NATO. By 2007, Russia had become increasingly resentful at the West’s alleged disregard for Russia’s interests and increasingly paranoid about “color revolutions” as a catalyst for regime change in the “near abroad” and in Russia itself. Together with the lack of a “Russia track” to balance NATO’s MAP for Ukraine and Georgia at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, this hardened Russia’s animosity toward the Alliance. Today’s Russia is now ready to use force to block any former Soviet republic’s path to NATO, and it has sought (albeit less successfully) to block further NATO enlargement in the Western Balkans, including an attempted coup on the eve of Montenegro’s accession in 2017.

The prospects for overcoming Russian objections to Ukrainian and Georgian membership are dim as long as Vladimir Putin remains in power. For Putin, the future of Ukraine and other former Soviet republics is as much about Russian domestic politics as it is about geopolitics. Putin fears the encroachment of Western ideas far more than the approach of NATO’s borders. He worries that, if Ukraine succeeds as a prosperous, democratic, pro-Western state, it will fall out of Russia’s orbit, foiling Putin’s neo-imperial ambitions and setting a dangerous example for the Russian people, who could be inspired to start a “color revolution” in Russia itself. Thus, to protect the Putin system at home, Putin is determined to destabilize Ukraine, make it an unattractive candidate for NATO and the EU, and discredit Western democracy more generally through interference, influence operations and information warfare.

Given this ideological dimension, the standoff between NATO and Russia cannot be easily resolved. The West and Russia have conflicting visions of European security. The United States and its allies want to restore respect for the principles of the Helsinki Final Act—sovereignty, territorial integrity, no changing of borders by force, and respect for

the freedom of all states to choose their security arrangements. Russia, on the other hand, rejects these principles and wants to pressure the West into accepting some sort of Yalta 2, a Europe divided into spheres of influence with limited sovereignty for everyone but Russia, and hegemony of big powers over small states.

Until Russia itself returns to the westward path its people and leaders chose at the end of the Cold War, our differences are likely to remain profound and the relationship largely competitive. The immediate priority for NATO should be to bolster its deterrence posture and strengthen Allies' resilience against cyber-attacks and information warfare. While Russia is unlikely to engage in direct military aggression against NATO, we cannot allow any possibility that Russia could attempt a limited land grab in the Baltic states using "little green men" as it did in Crimea.

NATO should not renounce its commitment to Ukrainian and Georgian membership as a long-term goal, but we and our Allies must be frank with Kyiv and Tbilisi that membership is effectively on hold for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, acting through NATO and bilaterally, we should use all available means to strengthen Ukraine's and Georgia's security and preserve their independence short of providing security guarantees, even as we hold their feet to the fire on reforms and the fight against corruption. A prosperous, democratic Ukraine and a prosperous, democratic Georgia may be the best counterweight to Russian aggression in the long run, but training and equipping these countries' armed forces with defensive weapons, and boosting their resilience against cyber-attacks and hybrid warfare, are also essential to help them defend themselves and prevent further Russian aggression.

As for the future of NATO-Russia relations, a return to partnership is out of the question as long as Russia is flouting the principles it pledged to uphold in the Helsinki Final Act and the NATO-Russia Founding Act. The litmus test for any return to normal business (and for any lifting of sanctions) must remain an end to Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine and withdrawal of its forces in accordance with the Minsk agreements. Until then, the United States and its Allies should focus their dialogue with Moscow on ways to reduce the risk of incidents between NATO and Russia from escalating to an unintended conflict and to increase transparency and predictability of our military activities.

Conclusion

Our vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace will remain incomplete as long as relations with Russia remain competitive and as long as Moscow seeks to deny its neighbors the right to choose their own future. But that should not diminish our pride in the progress we have made since the 1990s in enlarging the community of democratic nations committed to ensuring one another's security and united by the values of democracy, liberty and the rule of law. NATO's Open Door remains the right policy to encourage all of Europe's democracies to follow the path pioneered by Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic when they joined NATO twenty years ago.

Notes

1. James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999); Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004)

2. Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 101

3. This summary is based on the author's personal notes and recollections.

4. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Study on NATO Enlargement*, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24733.htm.

5. See Talbott, *op. cit.*

6. The full decision, part of the December 10, 1996 NAC Ministerial communique, read as follows: "We reaffirm that the nuclear forces of the Allies continue to play a unique and essential role in the Alliance's strategy of war prevention. New members, who will be full members of the Alliance in all respects, will be expected to support the concept of deterrence and the essential role nuclear weapons play in the Alliance's strategy. Enlarging the Alliance will not require a change in NATO's current nuclear posture and therefore, NATO countries have 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 we do not foresee any future need to do so." <https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1996/p96-165e.htm>.

7. Statement by the North Atlantic Council, March 14, 1997, <https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1997/p97-027e.htm>.

8. "Accordingly, it will have to rely on adequate infrastructure commensurate with the above tasks." https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm.

9. NATO-Russia Council Rome Summit 2002, <https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/2002/0205-rome/rome-eng.pdf>.

10. "Putin Tells the Russians 'We Shall Be Stronger,'" *New York Times*, September 5, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/05/world/europe/putin-tells-the-russians-we-shall-be-stronger.html>.

11. Bucharest Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008, https://www.nato.int/cps/us/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm.

12. NATO proposed bringing NATO and Russian officers together in two centers, one to jointly monitor and provide early warning of ballistic missile attacks, the other to jointly plan and coordinate NATO and Russian missile defense operations to intercept ballistic missiles aimed at NATO or Russian territory. See author's January 2014 speech, "The Future of Missile Defense: A NATO perspective," https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_106142.htm

13. United Nations, "Security Council Approves 'No-Fly Zone' over Libya, Authorizing 'All Necessary Measures' to Protect Civilians, by Vote of 10 in Favour with 5 Abstentions," March 17, 2011, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2011/sc10200.doc.htm>.

14. OSCE Vienna Document data for the Western Military District plus Southern Military District (formerly known as Leningrad, Moscow, and North Caucasus, Districts plus the Black Sea Fleet and Caspian Flotilla) show a steep drop in troops and equipment from 2000 to 2010, a continued but less precipitous drop from 2010 to 2014, and then an uptick 2014-present. If Russia thought NATO enlargement to be a threat, particularly the second round (2004), we would not expect to see numbers keep falling throughout the 2000s. The total reported troop numbers dropped from 236,525 in 2004 to 210,000 in 2008 to 200,000 in 2013 to 190,000 in 2014. Then shot back up to 220,000 in 2015. 216,787 were reported as of 1 January 2017). This is consistent with Battle Tanks (2004: 4000; 2009: 2720; 2013: 1063; 2017: 1264), APCs (2004: 13,000; 2009: 11,000; 2014 8,000; 2017: 8,400) and Artillery (2004: 4,278; 2010: 2,450; 2013: 1,986; 2017: 2,499). Combat aircraft and helicopter numbers were more variable. Source: NATO International Staff.

