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These days, Russian journalists, Duma deputies, and major figures in the government are obsessed with one topic: NATO. Here is a sample of the most frequently repeated claims:

- NATO threatens Russia's national interest (as the president said in his annual address to the parliament);
- NATO seeks to divide Europe in perpetuity;
- NATO refuses to consider Russia's demands;
- NATO enlargement to the east will topple the European security system.

Some say that NATO strategists are being led by the Central and East European countries, where anti-Russian attitudes reign (why the bad blood I wonder?). Others hold the opposite view: NATO is building another cordon sanitaire out of the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, which is contrary to the interests of those states. Europe is returning to the "Cold War," some warn. No, others say, Europe is fast descending into a "Cold Peace."

And so it goes.

Although the number of orators and publicists writing on the topic of NATO enlargement grows beyond all measure, very few of them have even the most rudimentary familiarity with the topic. It would be remarkable if one percent of such people could decipher the acronym accurately. I have yet to encounter a thorough and accurate description of the
charter, doctrine, structure, principles, and functional mechanism of the international
alliance, much less an account that intelligibly explained what political, military and
economic ramifications the inclusion of new members would bring. No one provides
details of *how* the NATO alliance (buttressed with the mighty militaries of Poland,
Hungary and the Czech Republic) threatens Russia or why they believe the alliance
poses a danger to one country, and not to another, such as Sweden. Our public figures
seem more interested in a different issue: Russia was not invited (not that we ever
asked to join), but our former vassals are being considered for inclusion. This offends
our sense of pride and all Russian politicians, from the Liberal Democrat Vladimir
Zhirinovsky to a plain democrat such as Vladimir Lukin, chairman of the Duma's
international affairs committee, unite in a single indignant wail.

Few observers note that the question of NATO enlargement did not arise yesterday. As
far back as 1992, while visiting Warsaw, President Yel'tsin responded to a reporter's
question by saying that if the countries in question wished to join NATO they should be
free to do so. (2) Later, Yel'tsin was forced to disavow this common-sensical approach.
Since then Russian politicians frequently have made negative assessments of NATO
enlargement—but the current level of hysteria constitutes a new phenomenon.

Likewise, there is little newsworthy in the portrayal of NATO as a powerful and devious
enemy. The NATO bogey was not invented by Russia's popular imagination, which
rarely concerns itself with international affairs. Nor was it manufactured by the current
political leadership. For decades, Soviet official propaganda portrayed NATO as the
enemy and the aggressor to justify Soviet military presence in Europe, the maintenance
of the Warsaw Pact, and the over-militarized state of the Soviet economy. This image-
making was not a complete failure. After all, in 1968 it was the Warsaw Pact that
intervened militarily in the very heart of Europe—not against the aggressor from the
West, but against an ally, a member of the Pact itself. Nevertheless, NATO is somehow
perceived as the aggressor.
In the period of perestroika the anti-NATO bent of Soviet foreign policy became considerably less noticeable and, in the immediate aftermath of the events of August 1991, disappeared altogether. From 1991 to 1993 the groups that preserved and developed the anti-NATO concept, though influential in some government and parliamentary circles, had little general appeal. These groups exploited the old German "geopolitical" myth about the confrontation between Russia and the West, the Atlantic and Continental power centers. To this they added even older myths, such as: Russia's special mission in world history; our deeply held collective values (the primary value being the state); the incompatibility of Russian culture and Western liberal values; and Western materialism and individualism.

The current reanimation of the anti-NATO line reflects the general restoration of the ancien régime over the last three years. The party of power has effectively taken over the anti-NATO line of the ultranationalists and geopolitical theorists, and has echoed these sentiments in the corridors of the Duma, the Kremlin, and (in a somewhat more presentable form) in Smolenskaya plozhad. On the question of NATO expansion an unprecedented consensus has developed among our political elite, including even members of the democratic opposition.

How is it possible that the geopolitical nonsense of Zhirinovsky et al. has been accepted by a wide circle of people who in other respects seem entirely rational? If we can understand that, then we will also gain some insight into why the campaign against NATO expansion has become the centerpiece of Russia's foreign policy.

Some observers point to the growing strength of national-patriotic opposition as a possible explanation. In the December 1993 parliamentary elections, Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) performed much better than expected. However, its sizable representation in the Duma did not bring about the catastrophic results that many feared. Two years later, in the next Duma election, the Communists had an even better showing than the LDPR in 1993, winning a larger portion of the seats. Last year, President Yel'tsin was able to stop Communist Gennadi Zyuganov from winning the
presidential race, but only by applying extraordinary efforts and some tactics that bordered on violations of the democratic process. According to those who concentrate on the importance of this national-patriotic opposition, Yel'tsin, as a practical measure, thought it necessary to adopt some of the slogans of the movement and thereby dilute its appeal to the electorate.

Although accurate, this view is somewhat incomplete. Yel'tsin can hardly have failed to notice that the 1993 and 1995 elections registered protest votes. To win over the social strata that support Zyuganov, it is by far more important to pay salaries and pensions, to reverse the decline of the economy, and to curb crime and corruption, than to crusade against NATO. To achieve these ends it would make more sense to pursue vigorously economic and military reform, reorganize the governmental apparatus, build democratic institutions, stimulate foreign and domestic investment and production, and engage more fully in international cooperation.

Yel'tsin must have recognized that those few true believers who share the ideological bent of the national-patriotic parties can be convinced of his conversion to their way of thinking only if he sounds more radical spouting nationalist slogans than the leaders of the national-patriotic parties. This is impossible in today's Russia. If Adolf Hitler rose from the grave to speak at one of Russia's nationalist rallies today, he would be shouted down and removed from the podium for his liberalism and moderation. For this crowd Yel'tsin's flourishes are hardly convincing.

If the newfound anti-NATO pathos of the Russian president results primarily from the growing popularity of the national-patriotic forces, then why didn't it take on urgency in 1993 and 1995, when these forces achieved their most impressive victories? Why did the president wait until after the 1996 elections to unleash the tirade of anti-NATO rhetoric?

In the fall of 1996, the whole country united in regard to one political issue—the recognition that Russia lost the war in Chechnya—and all shared in the sense of
national humiliation. Of course, for some the war itself, and the way in which it was conducted, constituted the humiliation, while others were humbled by the military and political losses. It is difficult to say what the numerical proportion is between the former and the latter, especially since many belong to both categories. In any case, for the majority the war with Chechnya left them feeling degraded and helpless. It is natural to vent frustration against the government that started such a pointless war, executed it in the most criminal way, and eventually lost it.

Three times in Russian history, defeat at the front heralded liberal reform of the political system. The Crimean War was followed by the abolition of serfdom, reform of the army, a measure of local self-government, and a weaker form of censorship restraints. The Russo-Japanese War brought with it substantial limitations of absolutism, improvements in the sphere of civil liberties, and the seeds of democratic rule. After the Afghan war came Gorbachev’s perestroika. Each of these periods of reform brought the country closer to following the general path of western civilization, as the political consequences of wartime defeat served to weaken Russia's government. In those instances and today, Russia's virtually unlimited government has leaned on a vast and powerful bureaucracy. In each instance, these entrenched bureaucratic interests, with varying degrees of effort, have undertaken to hinder or reverse the course of political modernization.

In the fall of 1996, few persons could predict how Russian society, no longer the mute herd of Soviet times, would take defeat. The political elite—previously monolithic, highly hierarchical, and highly insulated from popular sentiment—had to formulate a defense against popular dissatisfaction with the defeat in Chechnya.

The Byzantine-Tatar relations between government and society that originally inspired the concept of Russia’s special place in world civilization relied on the condition of autarky, a state of self-imposed isolation and self-sufficiency. In isolation Russia took on a confrontational posture against other states. This siege and great power mentality (derzhavnost) vis-à-vis other social forces, which the national-patriots (and Prof. Zbigniew Brzezinsky) like to portray as defining features of the Russian character, are
indeed crucial, not to Russian character, but to the survival of the old Soviet bureaucracy \((\text{chinovnichestvo})\). Though the Russian bureaucracy is still quite large and influential and, perhaps, growing more influential as it merges with the new financial oligarchy and criminal interests, it is hardly synonymous with Russian national consciousness as a whole.

National-patriotism, the cult of the great power, as well as anti-Western and anti-NATO rhetoric all have deep roots. Leaving aside pre-Revolutionary history, the Bolshevik regime evolved precisely in the direction of national-patriotism from the very moment its leaders captured power. During the second half of Stalin's reign, he made an effort to transform this doctrine into the official ideology of the state. After his death it remained the latent ideology of members of the Soviet government at all levels, from a raykom member to the General Secretary. Gorbachev's \textit{perestroika} and the revolutionary events of August 1991 put an end to the government's Marxist phraseology and ritual. But these changes failed to alter the isolation of the government from the society or to rein in the unlimited power of the government. In this way, the latent became evident; the statist approach, dressed up in democratic rhetoric, quickly sought the status of the official ideology.

Each of the trials the Russian leadership has faced over the last few years, but especially the Chechen crisis, have starkly exposed the government's ineptitude. In an open society, with political freedom, a free market, and a nascent partnership with the West, statism could not be effective. Therefore, two options would be available: 1.) the government can change, with genuine and thorough reform at all levels of government to eradicate the condition of unlimited government power; or 2.) the government can try to alter the conditions, by restoring the iron curtain where possible, turning the country to face inward, and ultimately returning to autarky.

In the fall of 1996 it was announced that NATO enlargement would proceed, and that states to be accepted into the alliance would be named in the summer. In the context I described above, NATO provided the necessary basis for a return to isolationism and
authoritarianism. The ideology of the "geopoliticians" has made the final step in its progression from German and American theorists to Russian nationalists, and ultimately in the fall of 1996 was adopted by the "party of power."

The issues posed by NATO enlargement, engendered primarily by the hasty and immature approach of the Western powers and the inflexibility of the Russians, are secondary to the crisis in Russia's political consciousness. This crisis was brought about and continues to be exploited by influential domestic factions. The situation would become more dangerous if the population as a whole was more excited by the anti-NATO propaganda; however, it seems to have made little impression and most remain indifferent to it. However, anti-NATO propaganda falls on fertile soil in that Soviet anti-NATO stereotypes survive, at least among the older generations, and there is no telling how the story will end. If the anti-NATO national consensus that they have been seeking materializes, the propagandists themselves may lose control of its effects.

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The preceding should not be taken to mean that the author unequivocally favors NATO enlargement. The inclusion of the Central European states, as far as I am concerned, does not affect Russia's real interests in any way. Clearly, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and other former Soviet satellites, as well as the states that have replaced Soviet republics, are panic-stricken by their fear of Russia. This fear is well-founded and likely to persist for a long time to come. The NATO alliance is acting reasonably, even humanely, towards these states by offering security guarantees to calm their apprehensions. At the same time, one cannot but wonder if there are other means of ensuring their security.

The Warsaw Pact and the military-political division of Europe are in the past. NATO is a contemporary reality and its enlargement is the way of the future. The effect this will have on international affairs is largely dependent on the steps that Western diplomats will take and the character which they will give the enlargement.
Clearly, any sovereign state can seek membership in any international alliance and the alliance may accept or reject the petitioner without looking for approval from third parties. But in this particular case, why the haste? Of course Russian politicians frequently make inappropriately threatening statements towards our neighbors. Yet these threats represent not a growing menace but a growing powerlessness. Furthermore, instability in Russia will in the first instance threaten Ukraine, the states of the Caucasus and the Baltic States. But these are not invited to join NATO—the states most likely to be the target of Russian aggression are not being offered protection. The key principle of international relations, albeit one that it not always applied, holds that all states are equal. If the security of some states is bolstered while others are left behind, a dangerous power gradient develops.

Notes:
1 Sergei Kovalev served as the president's Human Rights Commissioner until he resigned his post in protest over Russian human rights abuses in Chechnya.
2 A year later, Yel'tsin said essentially the same thing in official communiqués he signed at the end of his visits to Prague, Bratislava, and Warsaw.—Ed.