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# NATO enlargement and US foreign policy: the origins, durability, and impact of an idea

# NATO Enlargement and U.S. Foreign Policy: The Origins, Durability, and Impact of An Idea[1]


## Abstract

Since the Cold War, NATO enlargement has moved from a contentious issue in U.S. foreign policy debates, to an accepted plank in U.S. strategy. What explains this development - why has support for enlargement become a focal in U.S. foreign policy? After first reviewing U.S. policy towards NATO enlargement, this paper evaluates a range of hypotheses from international relations theory and policy debates that might explain the trend. It finds that no one factor explains the United States' NATO policy. Instead, the United States' "enlargement consensus" reflects the confluence of several international and domestic trends that, collectively, progressively made NATO expansion a lodestone of U.S. foreign relations. Regardless, the development carries a range of consequences for U.S. national security: although enlargement afforded the U.S. significant oversight over European security and political developments, it came at the cost of increased tensions and diminished flexibility with Russia, allied cheap-riding, and U.S. over-extension.


## Introduction

Over the course of a quarter century, NATO enlargement went from a topic barely discussed in public by U.S. policymakers for fear of the strategic and political blowback, to a central pillar of U.S. engagement in Europe. Evolving in spurts, the emergence of what I term the "enlargement consensus" has been a striking feature of U.S. foreign relations. Immediately after the Cold War, the George H.W. Bush administration spent two years quietly discussing the possibility of NATO enlargement internally, yet avoided raising the issue in public for fear of

[1] On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest. The author gratefully acknowledges the Charles Koch Foundation's support in sponsoring Boston University's "Evaluating the Legacy of NATO Enlargement" workshop in May 2019, for which this paper was composed.

Soviet (and later Russian) opposition, backlash from the United States' Western European allies, and uncertainties surrounding U.S. public support for the move. Instead, NATO after the Cold War was presented simply as one of several institutions that could help contribute to European security.[2] A quarter-century later, however, the trend has reversed. As former Undersecretary of State William Burns notes, "expansion of NATO membership" has "stayed on autopilot as a matter of U.S. policy" since the initial push to enlarge.[3] Indeed, policymakers from both Democratic and Republican administrations now argue that keeping NATO's "door open" for future members is a key plank to the alliance's mission in crafting "a free and peaceful European continent."[4] Even the Trump administration – often believed critical of transatlantic cooperation – is publicly supportive of the alliance's continued expansion to Ukraine and Georgia.[5] Increasingly, an expanded alliance is depicted as "the core of an American-led liberal order," and threats to NATO enlargement a challenge to the order itself.[6]

What explains this shift? Why has NATO enlargement dominated U.S. strategy discussions vis-à-vis Europe, and what have been the consequences of enlargement for U.S.

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[2] George Bush, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993), 7. On U.S. policy at the time, see Joshua Shifrinson, "Eastbound and Down: The United States, NATO Enlargement, and Suppressing the Soviet and Western European Alternatives, 1990-1992," draft manuscript; Timothy Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), chap. 10.

[3] William Burns, *The Back Channel* (New York: Random House, 2019), 413.

[4] Nicholas Burns and Douglas Lute, *NATO at 70: An Alliance in Crisis* (Cambridge: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2019), 7; Madeline Albright's 2010 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *NATO: Report on the Group of Experts*, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., May 20, 2010, 15.

[5] The White House, "Remarks by the Vice President and Georgian Prime Minister in a Joint Press Conference," August 1, 2017, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-georgian-prime-minister-joint-press-conference/.

[6] Editorial Board, "Why NATO Matters," *New York Times*, July 8, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/08/opinion/editorials/why-nato-matters.html; Paul Miller, "This is How the Liberal International Order Dies," *Atlantic Council* (blog post), July 12, 2018, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/this-is-how-the-liberal-international-order-dies; see also G. John Ikenberry, "End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018), 7-23; https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/this-is-how-the-liberal-international-order-dies; John Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (Spring 2019), 23.

engagement in post-Cold War Europe? Strikingly, these issues are understudied. To be sure, a large body of work examines the process by which a decision to expand NATO emerged in the 1990s and continued thereafter.[7] Likewise, prominent research traces the evolution of the United States' post-Cold War grand strategy and assesses its merits and drawbacks.[8] Still, despite the significant effort put into expanding NATO since the early 1990s, little work examines why U.S. strategy places such a premium specifically on NATO enlargement, nor evaluated the consequences of this conceptual shift for U.S. national security.

Answers to these questions matter for both historical inquiry and international relations (IR) theory. On one level, explaining and evaluating a complex historical event such as sustained U.S. backing for NATO enlargement can shed light on the sources of contemporary debates over the future of the U.S. role in European security, as well as highlight linkages between international IR theory and diplomatic history.[9] Equally important, the analysis can inform theory itself. After all, a foundational question in international relations (IR) theory concerns the relative weights of structural factors (e.g., polarity) or agency (e.g., individual leaders) in influencing foreign policy.[10]

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[7] James Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999); Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Mary Sarotte, "How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 7–41; Ryan Hendrickson and Kristina Spohr Readman, "From the Baltic to the Black Sea: Bush's NATO Enlargement," *White House Studies* 4, no. 3 (June 2004): 319–36.

[8] Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Barry Posen, "Stability and Change in U.S. Grand Strategy," *Orbis* 51, no. 4 (October 2007): 561–67; Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*, 1 edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016); Hal Brands, "Fools Rush Out? The Flawed Logic of Offshore Balancing," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (April 2015): 7–28.

[9] On the utility of historical explanation, see Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), chap. 5; for applications, see Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), chap. 4; Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen, eds., *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

[10] For work engaging this debate, see David Dessler, "What's at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?," *International Organization* 43, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 441–73; Colin Elman, "Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?," *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (1996): 7–53; Elizabeth Saunders, "Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy," *International Security* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 119–61.

This is particularly true when discussing U.S. policy under unipolarity – the period stretching for roughly three decades following the death of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and perhaps continuing today.[11] As Robert Jervis argues, unipolarity is the rarest and least-theorized structural condition in world politics.[12] Although there is a natural tendency to theorize about the dynamics of unipolarity using the American experience, there may therefore be particular features of U.S. politics and policy that make the United States' behavior under unipolarity distinct from how other unipolar powers may act.[13] Analyzing the drivers and consequences of sustained American support for NATO enlargement in the period which corresponded with the unipolar era therefore pushes researchers to assess the degree to which core elements of American foreign policy can be explained by structural elements related to unipolarity, or require *sui generis* variables that may not obtain in other cases.[14] Put differently, insofar as backing for NATO expansion was among the seminal aspects of U.S. foreign policy during American unipolarity, explaining the course and results of this trend helps theorize the dynamics of unipolarity writ large.

Building on existing historiography and IR theory, this project makes two inter-related arguments. First, NATO enlargement emerged as a central pillar in U.S. strategic debates owing to a perfect storm of systemic and domestic conditions. Consistent with other research on U.S. strategy debates, unipolarity and the permissive conditions it fostered facilitated the United States' enlargement fixation. Nevertheless, the translation from unipolarity to enlargement required a

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[11] William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 5–41.
[12] Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009): 188–213; for extensions, see Nuno Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[13] Jervis, "Unipolarity," 200–201.
[14] For similar efforts to examine the sources and drivers of post-Cold War unipolarity, see Christopher Layne, "The 'Poster Child for Offensive Realism': America as a Global Hegemon," *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002): 120–164; Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Stephen Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 86–120; Barry Posen, "European Union Security and Defense Policy: Response to Unipolarity?," *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 156–60; Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War," *International Security* 21, no. 4 (1997): 49–88.

particular set of ideological and policymaking practice. In this sense, unipolarity allowed a particular strategic mindset to develop and abetted its continuation, but the content of this mindset stemmed from particular elements of American politics and policy; by extension, a different unipole might have made overseas assertiveness a core plank of its grand strategy, but may not have turned to (1) a multilateral alliance such as NATO, or (2) enlargement, to attain this result. Regardless – second – the principal consequence of enlargement has been to maximize U.S. influence in Europe at the cost of mounting threats to the United States, cheap-riding by allies, and intra-alliance friction. I return to these themes below.

The remainder of this paper proceeds in four sections. Following this Introduction, I discuss the evolution of U.S. policy vis-à-vis NATO enlargement and solidification of the enlargement consensus. Second, I outline a range of hypotheses that might explain the trend, before evaluating the arguments and synthesizing the results. Third, I identify merits and drawbacks of NATO enlargement for U.S. strategy in Europe. Finally, I conclude with implications for theory, history, and policy.

**The United States and NATO Enlargement: A Brief History**

NATO enlargement emerged soon after the Cold War as a predominant and, in many ways, counterintuitive theme in U.S. foreign policy. Of course, NATO had expanded during the Cold War itself, incorporating Greece (1952), Turkey (1952), West Germany (1955), and Spain (1982) even before the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989-1990 and the 1991 implosion of the Soviet Union itself.[15] Still, with the Soviet threat eliminated, analysts and policymakers wondered in

[15] Sayle, this volume.

early 1990s whether NATO itself was soon destined for the dustbin of history.[16] This concern was never realized.

Within a year of the Berlin Wall's fall, U.S. policymakers were already debating whether "the United States and NATO [should] now signal to the new democracies of Eastern Europe NATO's readiness to contemplate their future membership" in the alliance.[17] Indeed, by mid-1992, a "consensus" emerged in the higher reaches of the George H.W. Bush administration that – as the National Security Council staff explained – "we do want to open up the Alliance to new members."[18] In doing so, Bush and his team worried that failure to embrace enlargement would create an opportunity the nascent European Union to fill the security vacuum in Eastern Europe, raise questions over whether NATO could adapt to post-Cold War security conditions, ultimately challenge the United States' post-Cold War influence in and over Europe.[19] As one high-level report explained in mid-1991, if the United States was to "continue to be a European power," then it needed to "deepen NATO's liaison mission to the East" and "examine where NATO is headed in its policies toward Eastern Europe."[20]

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[16] Stanley Sloan, *Defense of the West: NATO, the European Union and the Transatlantic Bargain*, 1 edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 104; John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (July 1, 1990): 5–56; Kenneth Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18, no. 2 (Autumn 1993): 74–76.

[17] Quoted in Joshua Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 38.

[18] Barry Lowenkron, "Prime Minister Major and NATO Membership," June 5, 1992, folder "NATO [1]," CF01329, Rostow Files, George Bush Presidential Library (hereafter GBPL). For discussion, see Shifrinson, "Eastbound and Down," 51-52.

[19] Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, 232-240.

[20] No author, "Transatlantic Relations: The Next Five Months," undated, folder "European Strategy [Steering] Group (ESSG)," CF01301, Gompert Files, GBPL; context of the document indicates mid-1991 date. Similarly, NSC staff member Robert Hutchings later reflected that "if NATO had no role in [Eastern Europe], it had no role at all except as an insurance policy [. . .] NATO would be marginalized as an agent of European security;" Robert Hutchings, *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War: An Insider's Account of U.S. Policy in Europe, 1989-1992* (Washington: Wilson Center Press, 1997), 277.

Bush's defeat in the 1992 presidential election temporarily put these initiatives on hold as the subsequent Clinton administration sought its foreign policy footing.[21] By 1993-1994, however, Clinton and his team came around to the same basic policy. The main shift was in the ostensible rationale: where Bush's team emphasized protecting the U.S. role in Europe, the Clinton administration presented NATO enlargement as a way of buttressing democracy and liberalism in former Soviet client states,[22] while hedging against a Russian challenge to Europe's post-Cold War equilibrium.[23] Driving this process were enlargement proponents such as National Security Advisor Anthony Lake and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Richard Holbrooke. Critics of NATO expansion (including those in the administration) fretted that enlargement would render NATO unmanageable and indefensible, re-divide Europe, have little effect on democratic development, and antagonize Russia.[24] In contrast, Lake, Holbrooke, and other expansion advocates believed such concerns were overstated: Russia could be persuaded to embrace NATO, enlargement would help socialize states into embracing democratic-liberal norms, and adding members would revitalize the organization while giving the United States new partners with whom

[21] Stephen Flanagan, "NATO From Liaison to Enlargement: A Perspective from the State Department and the National Security Council 1990–1999," in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, ed. Daniel Hamilton and Kristina Spohr (Washington: Foreign Policy Institute and Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, 2019), 103–8; Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*, 18–19.

[22] Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11: The Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2008), 117–125.

[23] As Secretary of State Madeline Albright testified in 1997, the U.S. could not "dismiss the possibility that Russia could return to the patterns of the past." Hence, enlarging NATO assisted in "closing the avenue to more destructive alternatives" in Russia's future; see U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The Debate on NATO Enlargement*, 105th Cong., 1st sess., October 7, 1997, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1998), 8. See also Strobe Talbott, "Bill, Boris, and NATO," in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, ed. Daniel Hamilton and Kristina Spohr (Washington: Foreign Policy Institute and Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, 2019), 412.

[24] For illustration of the skeptics' position, see Walter Clemens, Jr., "An Alternative to NATO Expansion," *International Journal* 52, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 342-365.

to shape alliance policy.[25] Enlargement, in short, was viewed as a way of making NATO relevant to post-Cold War Europe while facing few downsides.[26]

Playing off Clinton's personal predispositions, policy entrepreneurs thus succeeded over the next several years in bypassing, isolating, or corralling intra-administration skeptics while mobilizing bipartisan political support for expansion within the Congress. Rather than emphasize the risks of counterbalancing, leash-slipping, and/or an open-ended commitment, the U.S. strategic logic held that NATO enlargement would ultimately be a force for stability. By 1995-1996, the consensus was such that neither sustained Russian opposition to expansion, ambivalence on the part of European members such as France, nor continued warnings from diplomats and scholars that enlargement could imperil East-West relations and – in any case – required the United States to take on new and potentially costly commitments, affected the basic approach.[27] Instead, the United States successfully pushed its current NATO allies to invite Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary (the latter of which was physically separate from the rest of NATO) to begin accession talks at the July 1997 Madrid Summit.[28] Indeed, the drive for expansion was such that American policymakers did not even fully consult existing NATO members when selecting the three countries for inclusion.[29] The net effect was the alliance's eastward move following the formal admission of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic at NATO's 1999 Washington Summit.

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[25] Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*, 27–29; Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When*, chaps. 2–3; William Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions Since 1989* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 109–16.
[26] Chollett and Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars*.
[27] On French opposition, see Sloan, *Defense of the West*, 120; on strategic problems, see Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When*, 73–76, 86–88, 99.
[28] Paul Gallis, "NATO Enlargement: The Process and Allied Views," *Congressional Research Service*, July 1, 1997; Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When*, 119.
[29] Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When*, 121.

Yet even before the first round of expansion was complete, U.S. policymakers were contemplating future rounds of enlargement.[30] The Congressional debate over expansion, for instance, saw several senators push for Slovenian and/or Romanian accession to NATO; likewise, many of the existing European members of NATO similarly favored a broader set of countries in the alliance if NATO expansion had to happen at all.[31] This translated into a U.S. declaration at Madrid that it recognized the need to promote the "increasing integration" of other Eastern European states into the "Euro-Atlantic Community," followed by a NATO pledge at the Washington Summit that the alliance would "continue to welcome new members."[32] Embracing this declaration, nine states in Eastern Europe pledged to work together towards gaining NATO membership.[33] Significantly, both Republican nominee George W. Bush and Democratic candidate Al Gore supported this Eastern European initiative during the 2000 presidential election, giving further momentum to the emerging consensus that NATO enlargement was to be ongoing.[34]

If anything, a striking feature of U.S. policy since the early 2000s has been the absence of debate over NATO's continued expansion. As one former diplomat describes, the second round of expansion in the early 2000s was marked by "bureaucratic continuity at the working level [. . .] as debates raged at the political level over which [states] should be admitted." The issue, in other words, was not *whether* other states would be admitted but *how many*.[35] This paralleled maturation

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[30] Stuart Croft, "Guaranteeing Europe's Security? Enlarging NATO Again," *International Affairs* 78, no. 1 (2002): 97-101; F. Stephen Larrabee, "NATO Enlargement after the First Round," *International Spectator* 34, no. 2 (April-June 1999): 73-86; Ronald Asmus and Robert Nurick, "NATO Enlargement and the Baltic States," *Survival* 38, no. 2 (1996): 121-142. Asmus joined the Clinton administration in 1997 as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State.

[31] Senate, *Debate on NATO Enlargement*, 196, 255; Karl-Heinz Kamp, "NATO Entrapped: Debating the Next Enlargement Round," *Survival* 40, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 170-186.

[32] NATO, "Madrid Declaration on Euro-Atlantic Security and Cooperation," July 8, 1997; NATO, "Washington Summit Communique," April 24, 1999.

[33] Andrew Moyer, "Prospects for NATO Enlargement: Examining the 'Big Bang' Approach," Naval Postgraduate School Thesis, 2000.

[34] Stanley Sloan, *Permanent Alliance?: NATO and the Transatlantic Bargain from Truman to Obama* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 115; Ryan Hendrickson, "NATO's Open Door Policy and the Next Round of Enlargement," *Parameters* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2000-2001): 58.

[35] Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 200.

of the view (as one former member of Clinton's NSC staff put it with a coauthor in the early 2000s) that NATO enlargement "helped the historically factious Europe become a peaceful, united, and democratic continent."[36] Reflecting the trend and maturation of the enlargement consensus, this period saw NATO admit 7 new states in 2004, 2 new members in 2009, 2 more states in 2017-2019, and engage in extensive membership discussions with Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ukraine, and Georgia.[37]

Domestic political behavior, too, indicates the relative equanimity and automaticity with which U.S. strategists treat continued expansion. Where, for example, the first round of post-Cold War enlargement saw the Clinton administration undertake extensive efforts to cultivate Congressional and popular opinion, subsequent rounds have not seen similar efforts.[38] Congress, meanwhile, only voted for the first round of enlargement following months of debate, testimony by dozens of experts, and even then backed the move on an 80-19 vote.[39] In contrast, post-2000 enlargement witnessed a far more limited Congressional deliberations, including discussions

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[36] Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier, "Global NATO," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 5 (October 2006): 108; also Ivo Daalder, "The End of Atlanticism," in *Beyond Paradise and Power: Europe, America, and the Future of a Troubled Partnership*, ed. Tod Lindberg (London: Routledge, 2005), 42.

[37] Andrew Michta, "NATO Enlargement post-1989: Successful Adaptation or Decline?" *Contemporary European History* 18, no. 3 (August 2009): 363-379; Michael Garcia, *NATO Enlargement: Senate Advice and Consent*, Congressional Research Service Report RL31915, January 16, 2009; [Name redacted], "NATO's Warsaw Summit: In Brief," Congressional Research Service Report R44550, November 14, 2016; Steven Pifer, "NATO's Ukraine Challenge," *Brookings Institution* (blog), June 6, 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/06/06/natos-ukraine-challenge/; Lorne Cook and Sabina Niksic, "NATO Gives Bosnia Green Light to Advance on Membership Path," *US News and World Report*, December 5, 2018, https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-12-05/nato-gives-bosnia-green-light-to-advance-on-membership-path; "Stoltenberg: Georgia Will Join NATO, and Russia Can Do Nothing About It," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 25, 2019, https://www.rferl.org/a/stoltenberg-georgia-will-join-nato-and-russia-can-do-nothing-about-it/29840885.html.

[38] Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When*, chap. 5; Hendrickson and Spohr Readman, "From the Baltic to the Black Sea," 326-329. In addition, and as Hendrickson and Spohr observed, subsequent rounds of NATO enlargement required lesser efforts to overcome reduced domestic opposition.

[39] On the debate, see Senate, *Debate on NATO Enlargement*; Eric Schmitt, "Senate Approves Expansion of NATO by Vote of 80 to 19; Clinton Pleased by Decision," *New York Times*, May 1, 1998.

bundled with other Senate business[40] and near-unanimous votes favoring enlargement;[41] in fact, even Senators who opposed the first round of NATO expansion in the late 1990s signaled their support for subsequent expansion after the early 2000s.[42] In short, U.S. support for NATO enlargement by the 2000s had become rote. Thus, just as George W. Bush could argue in 2002 that "enlargement of NATO is good for all who join us. The standards for membership are high, and they encourage the hard work of political and economic and military reform" that contributed to a peaceful Europe,[43] so could Barack Obama remark in 2014 that NATO was critical to "progress toward the vision we share – a Europe that is whole and free and at peace" and remained open to other members which facilitated this end.[44]

Nor did this trend end with the Trump administration. Tellingly, the administration welcomed Montenegro's 2017 accession to NATO with a press release affirming both that "the NATO Alliance has been central to ensuring peace and security on the European continent" and that "the door to membership in the Euro-Atlantic community of nations remains open."[45] It followed up by supporting Macedonia's accession to NATO, and reaffirming its support for

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[40] For example, the 2003 Senate Foreign Relations Committee enlargement discussion coincided with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and saw Senators discuss plans for Iraqi reconstruction; U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *NATO Enlargement: Qualifications and Contributions, Parts I-IV*, 108th Cong., 1st sess., March 27 and April 1, 3 and 8, 2003 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2003). On the limited evaluation, compare the range of witnesses and length of testimony in the 1998 debate to Senate, *NATO Enlargement* and U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *NATO: Enlargement and Effectiveness*, 110th Cong., 2nd sess., March 11, 2008 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2008).

[41] The 2003 enlargement vote was unanimous, and the 2009 enlargement passed without opposition by a division vote; the 2017 vote on Montenegro's accession passed 97-2; see Garcia, "NATO Enlargement;" Andrew Hanna, "Senate Votes Overwhelmingly to Admit Montenegro to NATO," *Politico*, March 28, 2017, https://www.politico.com/story/2017/03/senate-approves-montenegro-nato-treaty-236606.

[42] Hendrickson and Spohr Readman, "From the Baltic to the Black Sea," 328–29.

[43] George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President of the United States to the Atlantic Student Summit," November 20, 2002, https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s021120f.htm; also George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President of the United States at the NATO Accession Ceremony," March 29, 2004, https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2004/s040329b.htm.

[44] Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama to the People of Estonia," September 3, 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-people-estonia.

[45] The White House, "Statement by the Press Secretary on Montenegro's NATO Accession Protocol," April 11, 2017, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-montenegros-nato-accession-protocol/.

Ukrainian and Georgian membership in the alliance.[46] To be sure, analysts have reasons to question Trump's personal commitment to the NATO project.[47] In response, however, many opinion leaders and members of the U.S. foreign policy establishment have doubled down on the idea that NATO enlargement remains a core pillar of U.S. strategy while portraying NATO itself as key to what several analysts argue is a liberal international order promoting "global peace."[48] In short, the 2010s are closing out with a renewed and re-energized interest by much of the U.S. foreign policy community to sustaining NATO and its enlargement as a centerpiece in U.S. foreign policy. Ultimately, having emerged as a tentative concept in the immediate aftermath of Cold War, NATO expansion has come to occupy a premier place in U.S. strategy. The "enlargement consensus" dominates the U.S. discussion vis-à-vis European security.

**Explaining the Trend**

The preceding section begs the question: why has the enlargement consensus taken hold in Washington and dominated policy discussions? Moreover, what explains the durability of the

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[46] The White House, "Remarks by Vice President Pence at NATO Engages: The Alliances at 70," April 3, 2019, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-nato-engages-alliance-70/. On Georgia and Ukraine, see The White House, "Remarks by Vice President Pence and Georgian Prime Minister in a Joint Press Conference," August 1, 2017, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-georgian-prime-minister-joint-press-conference/; also useful is Will Ruger, "NATO at 70: Will Continued Expansion Endanger Americans?" *War on the Rocks*, April 4, 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/nato-at-70-will-continued-expansion-endanger-americans/.

[47] Uri Friedman, "Trump vs. NATO: It's Not Just About the Money," *The Atlantic*, July 12, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/07/trump-nato-allies/564881/; *The Washington Post*, "Trump is Poisoning NATO. Why?" July 11, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trump-is-poisoning-nato/2018/07/11/7c8bdc66-851d-11e8-8553-a3ce89036c78_story.html; Julian Barnes and Helene Cooper, "Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. from NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns over Russia," *New York Times*, January 14, 2019.

[48] *New York Times*, "Why NATO Matters;" Steve Erlanrger and Rick Gladstone, "With North Macedonia's Inclusion, NATO Gets a Boost that Sends a Message," *New York Times*, February 6, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/world/europe/north-macedonia-nato-russia.html; Hal Brands, "If NATO Expansion Was a Mistake, Why Hasn't Putin Invaded?" *Bloomberg*, May 14, 2019, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-05-14/nato-expansion-if-it-was-a-mistake-why-hasn-t-putin-invaded; James Stavridis, "Why NATO is Essential for World Peace, According to its Former Commander," *Time*, April 4, 2019, https://time.com/5564171/why-nato-is-essential-world-peace/; Robert Kagan, "Things Will Not Be Okay," *Washington Post*, July 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/everything-will-not-be-okay/2018/07/12/c5900550-85e9-11e8-9e80-403a221946a7_story.html.

enlargement concept in U.S. strategy? Few studies expressly evaluate the reason(s) behind the United States' pervasive and persistent focus on NATO expansion. This absence may be partly methodological. To reach a full assessment of persistent U.S. support for NATO enlargement requires access to primary sources that are unlikely to be available for decades. Still, in keeping with this special issue's focus on offering an initial assessment of NATO enlargement's legacy, it is worth developing and evaluating a series of hypotheses rooted in both IR theory and historiography that might be able to account for the sustained U.S. interest in NATO expansion.[49] In what follows, I therefore outline a range of such arguments, use a combination of congruence procedures and process tracing to identify what aspects of the phenomenon each can and cannot explain, and attempt to synthesize the results. [50]

*Enlargement as a byproduct of unipolarity*

First, the U.S. focus on enlargement might be explained a byproduct of U.S. unipolarity. This argument is suggested by several realist scholars,[51] as well as (less charitably) by several Russian critics of NATO,[52] and treats NATO expansion as the result of unchecked American power following the demise of the Soviet Union. In effect, absent the Soviet Union, the United States enjoyed the ability to act largely without concern regarding international opposition to its policies – it could pursue nearly any objective it wanted in international affairs (including NATO enlargement) irrespective of others' interests. In this, it acted as many other powerful states have

[49] In this, I use a range of established IR to develop potential specific explanations for the enlargement consensus; on this approach, see Van Evera, *Guide to Methods*, 40-43.
[50] On congruence procedures and process tracing, see Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), chaps. 9–10.
[51] Posen, "European Union Security and Defense Policy," 156-157n19; Christopher Layne, "The Waning of U.S. Hegemony – Myth or Reality?: A Review Essay," *International Security* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 148–49; Layne, "Poster Child," 163; Kenneth Waltz, "The Balance of Power and NATO Expansion," University of California Center for German and European Studies, Working Paper 5.66, October 1998.
[52] Andrew Radin and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order* (Rand Corporation, 2017); Andrew Monaghan, "'Calmly Critical': Evolving Russian Views of US Hegemony," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 6 (December 2006): 987–1013.

done when enjoying a surfeit of power.[53] By this logic, the enlargement consensus took root and gained traction as U.S. leaders came to understand (implicitly or explicitly) the United States' relative advantages in the post-Cold War world. By extension, analysts would only expect the consensus to shift if and when U.S. power was seriously challenged by other, highly capable actors.

The timing of NATO enlargement alone suggests there is something to this proposition. NATO expansion is fundamentally a post-Cold War phenomenon. As noted, U.S. policymakers first fixed on enlargement as Soviet power unraveled. Conversely, not only did the Cold War's bipolar system see NATO expansion not under consideration, but real concerns existed that NATO was unlikely to survive the end of the U.S.-Soviet contest.[54] This intra-case variation – from non-consideration of enlargement during bipolarity, to support for enlargement during unipolarity – lends credence to the idea that shifts in the distribution of power were central to at least the emergence of the enlargement consensus.[55] Similarly, it is likely no accident that the period of NATO's most rapid enlargement in the late 1990s and early 2000s coincided with what other researchers note was a belief in many policymaking and analytic circles that American dominance was likely to last for some time.[56] Freed of the need to factor in the risk of great power opposition (including war), U.S. policymakers could attempt to shape European security in whatever fashion the U.S. deemed attractive – in this case, via NATO expansion.

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[53] The canonical statement of this logic remains John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

[54] This is not to discount the instances of Cold War-era expansion in Western and Southeastern Europe that Sayle (this issue) notes. However, post-Cold War expansion was both more expansive and involved areas formerly in the Soviet sphere.

[55] For discussion of the broader set of issues the US and NATO could focus upon after the Cold War, see Charles Glaser, "Structural Realism in a More Complex World," *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (2003): 412.

[56] Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," *The National Interest*, December 1, 2002, https://nationalinterest.org/article/the-unipolar-moment-revisited-391; Wohlforth, "Stability of a Unipolar World;" Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Knopf, 2008) 86; William Clinton, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (Washington: The White House, 1999), iii.

Conversely, had the United States not enjoyed a unipolar era and been forced to contend with a peer competitor from the 1990s and beyond, then NATO enlargement was unlikely to have occurred in either the form or fashion it did.[57] Even if Eastern European states had the wherewithal to seek entry to the alliance, competition with a peer competition would likely have compelled the U.S. to weigh the costs and benefits of doing so differently. At minimum, U.S. analysts would have been compelled to consider whether taking on additional security commitments in the face of a peer challenger – recognizing that the commitments might entail risks, and the resources involved potentially needed elsewhere – was a net gain. At maximum, sustained opposition from another great power might have made expansion an unattractive proposition. Neither the emergence nor durability of the enlargement consensus was necessarily likely under such conditions.

That said, unipolarity cannot provide a complete explanation for the enlargement consensus. Unipolarity is a structural condition, liberating the United States from fixing on the concerns of other great powers. Within this framework, the unipole can embrace a range of objectives. Although expanding its influence and/or attempting to lock-in its preferred institutional order may be likely, there is nothing automatic about the result. It is therefore a bridge too far to link American unipolarity per se with NATO expansion. At least in theory, the United States could have also kept NATO within its immediate post-Cold War borders and offered bilateral or informal security commitments to Eastern Europe; crafted a new security system (as many Soviet and some Western European leaders desired);[58] or pulled up the ramparts and withdrawn from the continent[59]

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[57] Many opponents of NATO expansion expected that (1) new great powers might soon emerge – suggesting that expansion was strategically risky – just as (2) enlargement might encourage states to counterbalance the U.S.; Kenneth Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18, no. 2 (Autumn 1993): 44-79.
[58] On alternatives to NATO in the early 1990s, see Mary Sarotte, *1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
[59] As, indeed, some advocates proposed; see Eugene Gholz, Daryl Press, and Harvey Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997): 17-18.

– freed of great power constraints, the U.S. could have embraced any of these options or oscillated between them. That it did not, and that U.S. policymakers instead chose to expand the U.S. presence on the continent via NATO enlargement, indicates the explanation lies elsewhere.

*Expansion as power maximization*

Closely related to the preceding, NATO expansion is sometimes presented as an exercise in American power maximization. Here, unipolarity did not fix American interest in NATO expansion. Instead, it took a particular desire to reify U.S. advantages after the Cold War to foster the enlargement consensus that may or may not be due to unipolarity as such.[60] By this logic, a consensus favoring NATO enlargement emerged and solidified as U.S. part of what other analysts call a grand strategy of "primacy" – reinforcing and sustaining the United States' post-Cold War dominance by preventing the emergence of other great powers.[61] NATO was useful in this task as both a platform for sustaining U.S. power projection into Europe via an institution dominated by the United States, as well as a venue for expanding the U.S. reach on the continent. In tandem, it helped deprive potential Western European competitors of oxygen in crafting an alternative security system to one dominated by the U.S. and limited potential Russian opportunities from reconstituting the former Soviet empire.[62] Ultimately, the more American policymakers fixed on sustaining American dominance, the more valuable NATO and its enlargement became.[63]

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[60] On the link between these ambitions and NATO enlargement, see Posen, *Restraint*, xi, 164-165; Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World," 100; Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 111-112; William Wohlforth, "The Right Choice for NATO," in *Sustainable Security: Rethinking American National Security Strategy*, ed. Jeremi Suri and Benjamin Valentino (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 248-249; John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (November/December 2014): 78-80.

[61] Barry Posen, "Stability and Change in U.S. Grand Strategy," *Orbis* 51, no. 4 (2007): 561-567.

[62] Shifrinson, "Eastbound and Down;" Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, chap. 10.

[63] This dynamic may have created a related problem: having decided to suppress alternatives, the United States exposed itself to a form of entrapment whereby hints that states were considering security structures besides NATO could spur enlargement; in effect, the U.S. reduced its control over events.

As with the unipolar argument, there is evidence to support this explanation. For one thing, U.S. policymakers often spoke in terms consistent with a basic power maximization story. As early as 1990, for instance, members of the U.S. State Department underscored that NATO could help "organize" Eastern Europe in ways conducive to U.S. interests,[64] just as members of the NSC and Defense Department underlined that throughout 1991-1992 enlargement was needed to keep NATO relevant in the face of European integration efforts.[65] Likewise, U.S. strategists from the mid-1990s discussed enlargement as a way of spreading democracy and free-market economics deemed valuable to American influence while hedging against a Soviet backslide.[66] By the mid-2000s, this view had morphed further into an argument that NATO enlargement abetted power projection even beyond Europe – a key task if one seeks primacy – by both providing the United States an operational springboard from which to go abroad and allowing the U.S. to mobilize allied will and capabilities in service of this task.[67] Meanwhile, U.S. policymakers from the 2010s framed enlargement as a way of countering a Russian challenge to Europe's post-Cold War borders.[68]

Additional evidence comes from the manner in which enlargement occurred. In pushing NATO expansion, U.S. strategists not only increased the United States' reach in Europe, but also

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[64] Quoted in Shifrinson, "Deal or No Deal," 37.

[65] As the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance put it, "While the United States supports the goal of European integration; we must seek to prevent the emergence of European only security arrangements which would undermine NATO;" Dale Vesser, "Extracts from 18 Feb 92 DPG Draft," March 26, 1992, online via https://www.archives.gov/files/declassification/iscap/pdf/2008-003-docs1-12.pdf.

[66] Dan Reiter, "Why NATO Enlargement Does Not Spread Democracy," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001): esp. 41-56. See also Interview with Anthony Lake, November 6, 2004, William J. Clinton Presidential History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia, 27-28, http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp_2004_1106_lake.pdf.

[67] As Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Ian Brzezinski put it in 2003, among the "principles that serve as the foundation" for enlargement were that "Europe remains essential to the maintenance of the forward presence for the United States military," and that enlargement created momentum for additional allied military growth and out-of-area operations; Senate, *NATO Enlargement: Qualifications and Contributions*, 15-16, 30.

[68] Comments are documented in Doug Bandow, "Washington Should Not Defend Ukraine or Expand NATO: US Should Shift Responsibility for Europe's Defense to Europe," *Forbes*, April 7, 2014; see also the remarks in Hillary Clinton, "NATO's Future," February 22, 2010, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/transcript/transcript-hillary-clinton-on-nato-s-future/.

tried to use the process to undercut prospective challengers. The firmest evidence for this comes from the interaction between NATO and the various alternative security structures. On one level, the U.S. initial decision to explore NATO enlargement soon after the Cold War only emerged as U.S. officials felt pressured to block (1) Soviet/Russian initiatives to transform the CSCE into a competing security institution to NATO, and (2) Western European efforts to craft an EC/EU-based security system.[69] Before these respective initiatives seemed to challenge U.S. power and influence on the continent, little consideration had been given to NATO enlargement. Once they emerged, however, U.S. officials quickly moved to ensure NATO filled the security vacuum in Eastern Europe. As importantly, later U.S. officials then leveraged NATO's post-Cold War preeminence to hinder alternative structures from gaining traction. Thus, faced in the late 1990s with an EU demand that an enlarged NATO make room for European security integration, U.S. policymakers agreed only on condition that there be no "de-coupling" of European security initiatives from NATO, no "duplicating" of existing NATO strengths, and no "discriminating" against non-EU members;[70] not coincidentally, a major subset of U.S. policy then saw NATO allies' growing dependence on U.S. military power, complementarity to U.S. forces, and inability to independently conduct high-end military operations as a virtue.[71] This approach thus protected NATO prerogatives and U.S. oversight over both NATO and EU security efforts. Moreover, confronted with Russian opposition to NATO expansion and claims that the U.S. used its influence without regard for Russian interests, the U.S. responded by agreeing to consult with Russian officials but expressly refused to halt enlargement.[72] Although these steps do not provide

[69] Again, see Shifrinson, "Eastbound and Down;" Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, chap. 10.
[70] Robert Hunter, *The European Security and Defense Policy: NATO's Companion – or Competitor?* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2002), chap. 6. See, too, comments during the 2003 enlargement debate by Ambassador Nicholas Burns on the dangers of an independent European security identity; Senate, *NATO Enlargement: Qualifications and Contributions*, 54-56.
[71] Paul Van Hooft, this issue.
[72] See Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 114-137, 168-169.

dispositive evidence the enlargement consensus resulted from a U.S. emphasis on power maximization, they do suggest a strong linkage.

A final piece of circumstantial evidence comes from the fact that NATO enlargement consensus correlated with the solidification of a post-Cold War strategic approach favoring some form of U.S. dominance in Europe. Whether in the form of liberal hegemony, militant primacy, or deep engagement, one of the striking features of post-Cold War U.S. grand strategy is the presence of a bipartisan coalition embracing an expansive American footprint in international affairs writ large and Europe in particular.[73] To be sure, not all strategic approaches operate in the same manner or carry the same risks (or yield the same advantages). Nevertheless, the post-Cold War period saw the U.S. commit itself to sustaining its strategic preeminence. It follows, therefore, that support for NATO enlargement – as the premier tool of U.S. power projection into what was long the wealthiest and most militarily-potent area of the world – may have fit neatly into such an agenda.

Still, like the unipolarity argument, power maximization does not offer a wholesale account for the NATO enlargement consensus. If power maximization were the major objective, one would expect the enlargement consensus to also dictate an *end* to NATO expansion when (1) the costs to U.S. power exceeded the benefits, or (2) there was little more to be gained in denying Russia and/or the EU opportunities for their own expansion. By this logic, one might be able to explain expansion to countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, and Hungary as a way of keeping strategically valuable states out of others' orbits, but explaining NATO enlargement to southeastern Europe or the Baltic states is significantly harder. After all, these states do little to affect the distribution of power, the viability of competing international

[73] Patrick Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 9–46.

institutions, or others' ability to project influence; by the same token, several of these states (especially the Baltics) increase the risks of the U.S. having to fight a major regional conflict under sub-optimal conditions.[74] Although some degree of power maximization may have been at play in fostering support for enlargement – particularly early on – the argument therefore has difficulty explaining the *continued* support for enlargement to militarily and strategically ineffectual actors.

*Expansion as leadership via prestige and credibility*

A third argument might treat the enlargement consensus as a result of U.S. prestige and credibility concerns stemming from the desire to demonstrate 'leadership' after the Cold War. Per this approach, enlargement served to showcase U.S. purpose after the Cold War – it functioned as a litmus test of American intentions, signaled that the United States would remain engaged in Europe despite the end of the Soviet threat, and underscored that U.S. policymakers recognized the United States' role as the 'victor' in the Cold War and world's only superpower.[75] Moreover, with the alliance moving into Eastern Europe largely at the United States' behest, NATO expansion could not be stopped without raising questions regarding the U.S. commitment to Europe (and potentially beyond). To back down from further expansion would raise questions over American intentions, its political resolve in engaging Europe, and call into doubt whatever commitments it still sought to maintain.[76] In this sense, the enlargement consensus could reflect

[74] Joshua Shifrinson, "Time to Consolidate NATO?," *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 112–13; Michael Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, "Landpower and American Credibility," *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2015-2016): 17–26; David Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

[75] On arguments that U.S. foreign policy requires efforts to promote credibility, see the discussion in Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). Recent work similarly shows that concerns with demonstrating credibility and resolve can lead to military action; Ahsan Butt, "Why Did the United States Invade Iraq in 2003?," *Security Studies* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 250–85.

[76] For discussion of how commitments may be seen as interlinked, see Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 39–40.

the internalization of a strategic argument treating expansion as the premier test of U.S. will and purpose in European security affairs.[77]

As with power maximization, there is something to the logic of credibility, prestige, and leadership as a source of the U.S. enlargement consensus. It is certainly true that U.S. policymakers in the early 1990s viewed enlargement as a way of counteracting perceived drift in post-Cold War U.S. grand strategy.[78] Bush and his team, for instance, regularly emphasized both publicly and in their private conversations with foreign leaders that the United States was wedded to post-Cold War engagement via NATO.[79] Similarly, work by James Goldgeier, Ronald Asmus, and others highlights that many enlargement proponents on Clinton's team treated expansion as a way of underscoring the United States' resolve in structuring post-Cold War European security affairs. Moreover, both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations looked to highlight that NATO represented what Bush termed the United States' commitment to "a close and permanent partnership with the nations of Europe," within which the U.S. supported "the enlargement of NATO" because it equally embraced "a more united Europe."[80]

The argument also garners circumstantial support from the deliberations over expansion to include Georgia and Ukraine. When broached in the late 2000s, inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine was opposed by many of the United States' European allies, fearful that doing so would antagonize

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[77] Though not on enlargement per se, see Robert Lieber for exposition of this general logic; Robert Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States Is Not Destined to Decline* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
[78] Goldgeier and Chollett, *America Between the Wars*, op. cit.
[79] Jeffrey Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017), 280, 305, 350–55; Kori Schake, "NATO after the Cold War, 1991–1995: Institutional Competition and the Collapse of the French Alternative," *Contemporary European History* 7, no. 3 (November 1998): 379–407.
[80] "Bush's Speech on NATO Enlargement," *New York Times*, November 21, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/21/international/bushs-speech-on-nato-enlargement.html. For Obama, see "Remarks by President Obama at Press Conference after NATO Summit," July 9, 2016, https://nato.usmission.gov/remarks-president-obama-press-conference-nato-summit/.

Russia.[81] Despite this, the United States persisted in pushing for a pledge that these states would eventually become NATO members. In this, concerns with the credibility and influence of NATO were at least a partial driver: Bush later recalled in his memoirs, "the threat from Russia strengthened the case for extending [membership plans] to Georgia and Ukraine. Russia would be less likely to engage in aggression if these countries were on a path into NATO."[82] Nor was Bush alone in this: since 2008, a bevy of think tank and policy analysts from across the political spectrum have emphasized the desirability of keeping Ukrainian and Georgian membership a possibility less NATO and American credibility be undermined.[83]

That said, prestige and credibility factors borne of leadership concerns face two important limits in explaining the consensus. First, if prestige and credibility drove the enlargement consensus, then one expects policymakers to be mindful of the need not to expose NATO to failures that might undercut its credibility. As noted, however, the opposite trend often obtained. In particular, expanding to countries along Russia's flank and promising future expansion to countries with active disputes with Russia raised the likelihood of crises and confrontations that could challenge NATO's willingness[84] to act. That these countries have questionable strategic value, and that the U.S. embraced political expansion without the concomitant military capabilities to defend these areas, reinforced the problem by undercutting the security foundation on which the

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[81] Steven Lee Myers, "Bush Backs Ukraine Bid to Join NATO," *New York Times*, April 1, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/01/world/europe/01iht-prexy.4.11593095.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[82] George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2019), 431.

[83] See, inter alia, Tedo Japaridze, "If NATO Delays Path to Georgia's Membership, What Is the Alternative?" *Atlantic Council* (blog), June 30, 2014, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/articles/if-nato-delays-path-to-georgia-s-membership-what-is-the-alternative; Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier, "NATO: A Mockery of Enlargement," *Brookings Op-ed*, April 8, 2008 https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/nato-a-mockery-of-enlargement/; William Tobey, "Responding to Russian Aggression in Ukraine and Restoring U.S. Credibility," *Foreign Policy*, Marc, 3, 2014, https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/responding-russian-aggression-ukraine-and-restoring-us-credibility; Damon Wilson and David Kramer, "Enlarge NATO to Ensure Peace in Europe, *Atlantic Council* (blog), August 7, 2018, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/enlarge-nato-to-ensure-peace-in-europe.

[84] A risk Russian officials warned about in the early-mid 1990s Celeste Wallander, *Mortal Friends, Best Enemies: German-Russian Cooperation After the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 1999), 159–62.

United States' commitment to NATO rests.[85] In short, if credibility and prestige dynamics formed and maintained the enlargement consensus, one would expect a reciprocal focus on avoiding situations that might challenge NATO's credibility and prestige; that this has not occurred poses problems for the thesis.

*Enlargement as socialization*

Fourth, one might explain enlargement by reference to the attitudes, ideas, and experiences – in effect, the socialization – of American elites.[86] NATO enlargement did not emerge from a vacuum. Instead, the alliance existed for over four decades before enlargement began, having survived the twists of the Cold War and proven effective in organizing Western Europe against the Soviet bloc. Furthermore, a narrative had grown up around the alliance and the American commitment to Europe that it anchored during this period:[87] the world wars ostensibly showed that Europe absent the United States was prone to self-destruct with exceptionally dangerous geopolitical consequences, whereas Europe with the United States – again via NATO – could be kept peaceful and cooperative.[88] This background/narrative left U.S. policymakers enjoying wide familiarity with and enthusiasm for the organization, making NATO a natural focus of attention as the U.S. sought to chart a course in the post-Cold War space. Furthermore, because such policymakers were in a position to influence the careers and expectations of subsequent generations of officials, Cold War-era support for NATO had a natural pathway into ensuring

[85] The decision to enlarge politically without adding the military forces needed to protect these areas was an intentional feature of U.S. policy; see Alexander Vershbow, "Present at the Transformation: An Insider's Reflection on NATO Enlargement, NATO-Russia Relations, and Where We Go from Here," in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, ed. Daniel S. Hamilton and Kristina Spohr (Washington: Foreign Policy Institute and Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, 2019), 435.
[86] For a related argument, see Patrick Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 9-46.
[87] On narratives and foreign policy, see Ronald Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[88] Jeffrey Engel, "Bush, Germany, and the Power of Time: How History Makes History," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 4 (Summer 2013): 1–25.

support for NATO after the Cold War. In essence, policymaker familiarity with and support for NATO during the Cold War generated impetus to keep NATO around after 1991, while at the same time fostering conditions encouraging subsequent officials to share similar ideas.

Socialization played some role in crafting the enlargement consensus. Many of the key policymakers pushing NATO enlargement such as James Baker, Madeline Albright, Tony Lake, and Condoleezza Rice were dedicated trans-Atlanticists, committed to the idea that American engagement in Europe was intrinsically valuable.[89] After the Cold War, such officials fixed on preserving the alliance in near-automatic fashion and quickly determined that NATO enlargement would simultaneously give the organization a lease on life and allow it to pacify the areas of Europe newly liberated from Soviet influence as it had the rest of the continent.[90] Furthermore, the reasons often given for this behavior – that NATO had proven its mettle and worth during the Cold War – reflected less a careful analysis and more a reflexive argument that what had worked in times past would work in the future. Had it been otherwise, one would have expected policymakers to carefully delineate the promise and perils of the post-Cold War space and debate the strengths and drawbacks of NATO in addressing these challenges.[91] As importantly, anecdotal evidence suggests that once NATO enlargement began, incentives for official to embrace the approach quickly emerged. Opponents of enlargement, for example, were reportedly isolated, and – as one former official put it – support for enlargement became a "litmus test" in which one was either

[89] This is a pervasive theme in the memoirs collected in Daniel Hamilton and Kristina Spohr, eds., *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Foreign Policy Institute and Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, 2019).

[90] As Goldgeier observes, the initial decision to expand was made outside of normal policy review channels following a series of ad hoc decisions by Clinton and key advisors Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When*; on the impetus to preserve NATO, see Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*; John Kornblum, "Redrawing the Maps: Rethinking Atlantic Security in the 1990s," in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, ed. Daniel Hamilton and Kristina Spohr (Washington: Foreign Policy Institute and Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, 2019), 277–95.

[91] On the distinction between reflexive and reasoned policy, see Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

"with us, or against us."[92] Under such circumstances, individuals seeking to continue rising in their profession were incentivized to embrace enlargement as well. Combined, NATO survival and enlargement became a lodestone in post-Cold War foreign policy circles.

That said, socialization does a better job of explaining enthusiasm for enlargement rather than the enlargement consensus itself. Even if policymakers were interested in enlargement because (1) Cold War experience left them interested preserving NATO, and (2) expansion was the key to continued career advancement, it still required that policymakers have the opportunity to expand NATO without risking U.S. interests. Policymakers, after all, tend to be experts balancing tradeoffs, and to enlarge NATO when doing so risked harming U.S. interests – as might occur by antagonizing Russia or roiling European politics – would put the cart before the horse. Under such conditions, careers could be endangered and new approaches to European security affairs required. At root, even policymakers socialized to believe in NATO and to see enlargement as a way forward first needed an opportunity to expand the alliance at limited cost or risk to the United States, and this – as noted earlier – was most directly a byproduct of the United States' post-Cold War unipolarity. In this sense, the drawbacks of socialization as an account are the inverse of the unipolarity explanation: although accounting for why U.S. official fixed on NATO after the Cold War, socialization cannot explain why the enlargement consensus was able to take root in the first place – it ignores the geopolitical conditions needed for enlargement to appear a plausible and viable activity.

*Enlargement as domestic politics*

A final argument might emphasize the domestic utility of NATO enlargement in generating popular support for continued U.S. internationalism (broadly defined). By this logic, American

[92] Author e-mail communication with Sean Kay.

policymakers eager to assert the United States' role in world affairs needed to justify this mission to the American people. Popular support for this mission was not foreordained: after all, the United States had to be dragged into both world wars as the American public was slow to embrace foreign engagement, just as the Cold War saw repeated pressure from the U.S. public to reduce or limit foreign commitments. With the Soviet threat eliminated, it was not unreasonable for U.S. policymakers to worry that similar pressure for disengagement could resurface. Sustained NATO enlargement, on the other hand, might help overcome this possibility: by taking on new (and open-ended) commitments in Eastern Europe, presenting the alliance as a democracy-and-liberalism promotion device, and downplaying the military/security obligations involved, policymakers might be able to mobilize public and political opinion for continued foreign activism. Moreover, the effort might yield a second-order benefit as, having linked NATO expansion with continued U.S. internationalism, policymakers advocating expansion would be able to label proponents of alternative foreign agendas as isolationists and so link them with one ostensible source of World War Two.

Consistent with this argument, we know that policymakers after the Cold War were concerned with the task of "justify[ing] national security expenditures and build[ing] support for sustained American engagement overseas" absent a Soviet threat.[93] More directly, American policymakers presented NATO and its post-Cold War enlargement as a lodestone of American internationalism after the Cold War.[94] Clinton's early national security strategies were explicit on this point, arguing that the United States had an important role to play in seizing the "great promise" of the post-Cold War world, presenting NATO as "central to that process," and arguing

[93] Lawrence Eagleburger, "Parting Thoughts: U.S. Foreign Policy in the Years Ahead," January 5, 1993, supplied to author by Jim Goldgeier.
[94] FOn this issue, see Stanley Sloan, "US Perspectives on NATO's Future," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 71, no. 2 (April 1995): 217–31.

that enlargement would "expand stability, democracy, prosperity and security cooperation" to make post-Cold War possibilities a reality.[95] This logic continued through the 2000s. For example, as two former members of the Clinton wrote early in the W. Bush administration:

> For all the differences between the foreign policies of the Bush administration and the Clinton administration, policy toward NATO enlargement has been one area of significant continuity. The core of the Clinton strategy was to promote peace and stability on the European continent through the integration of the new Central and Eastern European democracies into a wider Euro-Atlantic community [. . .] A revitalized NATO was an important tool for the maintenance of American engagement and leadership [. . .] President Bush has largely picked up where Clinton left off."[96]

And as President Barack Obama put it during his final NATO summit in 2016, the United States retained an "unwavering commitment [. . .] to the security and defense of Europe, to our transatlantic relationship, to our commitment to our common defense" even as "the door to NATO membership remains open."[97]

The inverse was also true: policymakers and pundits opposed to NATO enlargement have frequently been presented as acting contrary to American interests. The starkest example of this trend came in 2017 when Senator John McCain accused Senator Rand Paul of "working for Vladimir Putin" when Paul objected to NATO enlargement to include Montenegro.[98] However, the trend was also in evidence in the 1990s. As Jeremy Rosner – later charged with spearheading

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[95] William Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington: White House, 1994), i, 22; also William Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington: White House, 1995), i-ii; Robert Hunter, "NATO at Fifty: Maximizing NATO: A Relevant Alliance Knows How to Reach," *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 3 (May/June 1999):

[96] James Steinberg and Philip Gordon, "NATO Enlargement: Moving Forward; Expanding the Alliance and Completing Europe's Integration," *Brookings Institution Policy Brief #90*, November 15, 2001, https://www.brookings.edu/research/nato-enlargement-moving-forward-expanding-the-alliance-and-completing-europes-integration/.

[97] The White House, "Press Conference by President Obama after NATO Summit," July 9, 2016, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/09/press-conference-president-obama-after-nato-summit; also "Remarks Following a Meeting With Secretary General Jakob Gijsbert "Jaap" de Hoop Scheffer of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, March 25, 2009," *Public Papers of the Presidents: Barack Obama 2009, Vol. 1* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), 341.

[98] Burgess Everett and Andrew Hanna, "Rand Paul's Latest Lonely Fight Incenses Fellow Senators," *Politico*, March 31, 2017, https://www.politico.com/story/2017/03/rand-paul-senate-backlash-obamacare-russia-236272.

the Clinton administration's campaign to mobilize public and Congressional opinion in favor of the first round enlargement – wrote at the time, "America's allegedly isolationist mood" was "the favorite scapegoat of frustrated internationalists" seeking NATO expansion.[99] Indeed, then-Senator Joe Biden critiqued the "strong strain of isolationism" in U.S. political discourse when arguing in favor of NATO expansion in 1997, just as Michael Mandelbaum noted at the same time that many analysts presented NATO expansion "a test of American international commitment and that if we fail to expand NATO as indicated, we will be guilty of isolationism.[100]

Still, though the domestic political utility of NATO expansion cannot be understated, it too is insufficient to explain the enlargement consensus. Like socialization, domestic arguments confront a chicken-and-egg problem. Although enlargement was used to frame political debates over the United States' role in the world, there is still a question over why such a role was seen as plausible and viable in the first place. After all, narratives and framing devices do not float freely: a policy approach expected to yield strategic disasters is unlikely to be embraced (or embraced for long). Domestic actors' ability to use NATO enlargement to shape political debates thus related directly to the plausibility that NATO enlargement would actually benefit the United States. Insofar as foreign policy is intended to chart a state's course in a competitive international system, the capacity to sell this narrative therefore depended at least as much on strategic conditions such as unipolarity as on domestic factors. Put differently, political leaders certainly used NATO expansion for a domestic purpose, but it took a particular set of international conditions that made

[99] Jeremy Rosner, "NATO Enlargement's American Hurdle: The Perils of Misjudging Our Political Will Comment," *Foreign Affairs*, no. 4 (August 1996): 14.
[100] Senate, *Debate on NATO Enlargement*, 55, 75. Not to be outdone, former State Department official John Kornblum later reflected, "And, as the current U.S. Administration demonstrates, isolationist tendencies remain strong in America. Without NATO and the military security link [surviving the Cold War], it is unlikely that the American commitment to an Atlantic partnership would continue." Kornblum, "Redrawing the Maps," 278.

the link between U.S. internationalism and enlargement a domestically palatable one in the first place.

*Integrating the Results*

In sum, none of the preceding explanations wholly explains why NATO enlargement gained a prominent perch in post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy discussions and remained fixed despite changing international circumstances. Unipolarity can explain the opportunity for enlargement but not the specific form; power maximization can explain elements of the U.S. approach but not its continuation; prestige and credibility might account for sustained American interest but not risky U.S. behaviors; socialization might explain policymaker enthusiasm for NATO enlargement but not the opportunity to expand; domestic politics help contextualize the enlargement debate and why policymakers saw enlargement as politically advantageous but does not necessarily capture the attractiveness or durability of the enlargement idea. What, then, accounts for the enlargement consensus?

The enlargement consensus is ultimately best understood as a result of mutually reinforcing domestic and systemic factors. Independently, no one variable might have pushed the United States to embrace NATO enlargement and make it a focal point of post-Cold War U.S. strategy. Together, however, the factors described above helped make the NATO enlargement consensus a nearly overdetermined feature of U.S. foreign policy. Unipolarity provided the key necessary condition. Faced with few constraints on U.S. power after the Cold War, U.S. officials were free to pursue whatever foreign agenda they deemed appropriate and – crucially – to continue operating in this vein with a substantial margin for strategic error; it allowed U.S. policy a wide range of choice for a long period of time. Against this backdrop, and with (1) supporters of NATO in key policy positions, (2) many U.S. elites embracing the desirability of crafting a world in which the

U.S. remained the preeminent power, and (3) policymakers seeking to mobilize the U.S. public for international action after the Cold War, the stage was set to expand NATO as a way of reinforcing the United States' position in Europe – NATO served as a useful vehicle for U.S. ambitions while overcoming the domestic hurdles to this end. Once begun, enlargement then had no natural end point. With U.S. credibility and prestige now invested, U.S. policymakers personally engaged in the enlargement project, and domestic critics of expansion at risk of being labeled isolationists, incentives to pull back on enlargement were at best limited. Moreover, the absence of a geopolitical rival ensured that what opposition to NATO expansion did emerge could be normalized and deflected; for example, pushback from Russia and the Western European allies could be ignored as it never involved immediate risks to U.S. power or security, nor rose to the level so as to reveal an obvious failure of the U.S. course.

In short, the enlargement consensus emerged from a particular and potent blend of systemic and situational factors. Unipolarity create the opportunity for expansion and allowed it to proceed with little meaningful push back; a power maximization impulse provided the immediate impetus for enlargement; credibility, prestige, and socialization reinforced the power maximization motive, and later ensured that the process continued. No one factor created the NATO enlargement consensus (though unipolarity provided a key backstop). Collectively, however, there were few reasons *not* to turn to NATO enlargement, and – in context – many reasons to embrace it. The drivers described above were individually insufficient, but became mutually reinforcing. As Patrick Porter has observed in a different context, the enlargement consensus reflects a particular blend of U.S. power and U.S. purpose.[101]

**Consequences of Enlargement: The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly**

[101] Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed."

Irrespective of its sources, the United States' firm backing of enlargement carries a range of consequences so far as U.S. European interests are concerned. Others in this special issue highlight the particular consequences for the European members of the alliance, for relations with Russia, and on the institution itself. So far as the United States is concerned, however, the consequences of enlargement constitute a mixed bag.

*The Good*

First, U.S. backing for enlargement has guaranteed the United States as Europe's preeminent power over the last several decades. This is a sea-change from Cold War bipolarity, as well as an outcome that one could not have necessarily expected after the Cold War. After all, the 1990s saw a range of proposals for cutting the U.S. presence in Europe, as well as European and Russian schemes for crafting alternative European security frameworks; it was not obvious that the United States would remain a European power nor enjoy a decades-long period as the arbiter of European security.[102] That U.S. leaders – individuals skilled in the assessment and exercise of power – feared that a Western European grouping might slowly supplant winnow down American strength suggests the trend.[103] The United States' quick backing for NATO enlargement and its sustained interest in this topic helped foreclose this possibility – enlargement help reify U.S. power in Europe by suppressing the emergence of alternatives that might challenge the U.S. position.

The benefits of this outcome may be overstated. Power in international relations is not an end to itself – it has to be translated into security and/or other outcomes.[104] In light of the downsides identified below, it is possible that American security, economic, and ideological interests would

[102] Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (April 1993): 5–51; Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics."
[103] Shifrinson, "Eastbound and Down," op. cit.
[104] On power as a means to security, see Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*.

have benefitted as much if not more from a different distribution of power. Still, ensuring U.S. dominance in post-Cold War Europe minimally mattered by clarifying the European distribution of power.[105] This, in turn, may have reduced whatever chance there was that Europe would return to the internecine geopolitical contests that prevailed in the 19th and early 20th centuries and see (reunified) Germany, Britain, France, Russia, and/or others (e.g., a more cohesive European Union) jockey for position.[106] With the U.S. as number one and exercising oversight over European security, the chance of conflict and competition among major European powers may have waned. To the extent that preventing major geopolitical contests in Europe is in the United States' interest, then clarifying the European distribution of power via NATO enlargement may have abetted that objective.[107]

Second, and related to the preceding, enlargement may have reduced the risk of nuclear proliferation in post-Cold War Europe. Again, whether this is intrinsically an advantage for the United States depends on one's views of the utility of nuclear weapons in stabilizing or undermining international security; it is certainly true that many analysts argue that nuclear proliferation limits U.S. freedom of action and increases the probability that nuclear weapons fall into the hands of hostile actors.[108] And here, one heard rumblings after the Cold War that states not yet in NATO – and even some (e.g., Germany) that were – might pursue independent nuclear

[105] On miscalculation of the distribution of power as a source of conflict, see Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).
[106] This comes on top of a range of ideational, normative, and institutional factors that many scholars argue independently reduce the risk of European competition and conflict; see John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Identity in a Democratic Security Community: The Case of NATO', in The Culture of National Security, ed. Peter Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 357-399.
[107] On this interest, see Robert Art, "Geopolitics Updated: The Strategy of Selective Engagement," *International Security* 23, no. 3 (1999): 89-92.
[108] Francis Gavin, "Strategies of Inhibition: U.S. Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Nonproliferation," *International Security* 40, no. 1 (Summer 2015): 9–46.

programs to obtain security.[109] By enlarging the alliance and extending the U.S. nuclear umbrella, the U.S. reduced the incentive for states to invest in such efforts and so improved U.S. security on the nonproliferation front.

Lastly, enlargement may also have helped the United States structure European security affairs in ways that promoted other U.S. interests in, e.g., seeing the spread of democracy and the growth of free markets. The consequences here should also not be overstated. By the Cold War's end, democracy and free markets already enjoyed widespread appeal in much of Europe, as highlighted by the policies adopted by Eastern European states following the 1989 Revolutions; U.S. backing for NATO enlargement did not cause these phenomena.[110] Still, U.S. support for NATO's expansion may have reinforced the international antecedents that allowed these trends to continue: in spurring NATO's move into former members of the Warsaw Pact, the U.S. helped craft an Eastern European security framework that limited external pressures (e.g., local security dilemmas) that might have undercut liberalizing reforms in the region and which many analysts at the time were likely to erupt. This trend may therefore have abetted U.S. economic growth and made it comparatively easier for the U.S. to project political influence on the continent.[111] Although NATO enlargement appears to have been neither necessary nor sufficient for democratic and free-market growth after the Cold War, it may have thus worked at the margins to promote non-security American interests.

*The Bad*

On the other hand, and more problematically, NATO enlargement exposes the United States to a variety of security ills while limiting the United States' ability to respond to these

[109] Jane Sharp, "Europe's Nuclear Dominos," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 49, no. 5 (June 1993): 29–33.
[110] See Seva Gunitsky, *Aftershocks: Great Powers and Domestic Reforms in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
[111] Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad,* 115-118, 171-184.

dilemmas. First, ongoing expansion requires the United States to prepare to defend several Eastern European states of questionable strategic value, up to and including the use of nuclear weapons. Even if some of the members to which NATO has expanded are useful for denying prospective rivals a breathing space to prove their mettle (e.g., the European Union) or expanding their geographic reach (e.g., Russia), many of the member states to which the U.S. offered security guarantees via NATO are of minimal long-term importance. Loss of the Baltic states to Russia, for instance, would do little to shift Europe's strategic map, while none of NATO's new southeastern European members are of use in either reinforcing U.S. power or denying power to others.[112] Having taken on the commitment, the United States – as NATO's principal military backer – is now stuck having to try to defend these actors.

This is no easy task, and especially so in the Baltics: local geography is unfavorable, the distances involved make reinforcement difficult, and the proximity to local prospective threats – in this case, Russia – means it is nearly impossible to obtain favorable force ratios. Nevertheless, the United States and other NATO members have tried to play this game, committing growing assets to the problem.[113] The alliance is therefore playing a fraught game. The U.S. and its partners can certainly try to develop the military tools to meet NATO's expanded military commitments, but doing so is expensive, may exacerbate tensions with prospective rivals (here, Russia), stands a real chance of failure, and – insofar as allies are under the U.S. security umbrella – even risks seeing the U.S. puts its own survival on the line by involving U.S. *nuclear* guarantees in the face of a nuclear armed opponent. Put simply, U.S. backing for enlargement has left the U.S. with a

[112] Shifrinson, "Time to Consolidate NATO?"
[113] See Ulrich Kuhn, *Preventing Escalation in the Baltics* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018); Michael O'Hanlon and Christopher Skaluba, "A Report from NATO's Front Lines," *The National Interest*, June 13, 2019; Michael Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, *Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe* (Carlisle Barracks: Army War College, 2019).

suppurating sore of a strategic commitment. NATO expansion puts the U.S. on the firing line in Eastern Europe.

Relatedly, NATO enlargement limits U.S. flexibility with Russia. Arguably the premier counterfactual in post-Cold War Europe concerns whether U.S. relations with Russia have turned as contentious as they have absent NATO enlargement. It is certainly true – as the Marten and Lanoszka papers in this issue highlight – that U.S.-Russian friction was likely inevitable after the 1990s as Russian power recovered from its post-Cold War nadir. Still, the persistent warnings proffered by Russian analysts from the 1990s onward that NATO enlargement was likely to be uniquely harmful to Russian policymakers arguing for cooperation with the West suggests that the U.S. push for expansion exacerbated, reinforced and/or accelerated problems.[114] By this logic, the enlargement consensus imposes a large opportunity cost on the United States' relations with Russia. Even if expansion was not uniquely responsible for the downturn, the continued emphasis on enlargement limits flexibility in dealing with Russia, hindering the United States' ability to explore options such as retrenchment, spheres of influence, or buffer zones in Eastern Europe that might potentially dampen bilateral tensions. Put differently, with enlargement enjoying substantial domestic support, linked to broader U.S. power maximization, and taken as a sign of U.S. leadership and credibility, policy options that might ameliorate relations with Russia are screened out of the policy agenda.

Along similar lines, the enlargement consensus may also exacerbate the intensity with which the U.S. reacts to challenges to (the now-enlarged) alliance. This is partly a product of U.S. efforts to keep NATO the lodestone of European security affairs, as well as the link drawn between U.S. leadership, prestige, and internationalism with NATO enlargement. Seeking, for instance, to

[114] Wallander op. cit; Talbott, "Bill, Boris, and NATO."

assert U.S. prerogatives and to be seen as opposing Russian pressure, U.S. policymakers have led the charge on keeping NATO's door open for Georgia and Ukraine irrespective of the problems this poses for East-West relations.[115] Likewise, U.S. support for and investment in the Kosovo (1999) and Libyan (2011) air campaigns seems to have been partly motivated by a desire to avoid questions over the U.S. commitment to NATO and its efficacy outside of Cold War borders. For instance, one former U.S. official remarked during the Kosovo campaign that failure to obtain NATO's ends in Kosovo could reopen "the question of why American troops are still in Europe."[116] Similarly, the Libyan campaign saw U.S. policymakers ultimately decide that the United States would take the lead in the bombing campaign despite having sought a European-led effort – actions that are difficult to explain if not for concerns over NATO's credibility.[117]

Any one of these behaviors is not necessarily problematic. Nor are they unique to the NATO enlargement era. Concerns with preserving a credible U.S. commitment to NATO were a major feature of U.S. strategy during the Cold War. Still, in an era without great power threats to justify and motivate the U.S. interest in European security, concerns with sustaining U.S. credibility loom larger and have motivated the United States to undertake a range of risky behaviors for unclear ends. Today, the tendency is such that the U.S. is reluctant to allow an enlarging NATO to be seen as a 'failure' for fear of the blowback on the post-Cold War organization. Such an outcome is difficult to explain without a post-Cold War policy consensus

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[115] See, e.g., Congressional Research Service, *Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy*, R45307, October 17, 2019, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45307.pdf, 15; Kevin Cirilli, "McCain: Put Ukraine on Track to Join NATO," *The Hill*, May 15, 2014, https://thehill.com/policy/international/206241-mccain-put-ukraine-on-track-to-join-nato; Steven Lee Myers, "Bush Backs Ukraine's Bid to Join NATO," *New York Times*, April 1, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/01/world/europe/01iht-prexy.4.11593095.html.

[116] Peter Rodman, "The Fallout from Kosovo," *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 4 (July-August 1999): 45-51; also, Andrew Cottey, "The Kosovo War in Perspective," *International Affairs* 85, no. 3 (May 2009): 593-608.

[117] Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016; Robert Gates, *Duty* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 520-522. On concerns with NATO credibility at the time, see Bernard Gwertzman, "Interview with Robert Hunter – NATO's Decline over Libya," Council on Foreign Relations, April 19, 2011, https://www.cfr.org/interview/natos-decline-over-libya.

mandating that NATO remain a potent force in European security with options for the future: after all, having sidestepped NATO opposition on issues ranging from the MLF debacle to the INF treaty during the Cold War, one would similarly expect the U.S. to settle or de-escalate at least some of NATO's post-Cold War disputes as well. Instead, the U.S. has proven to be trigger happy and prone to use NATO to escalate confrontations rather than go over NATO's head to defuse crises.

Lastly, enlargement encourages allied cheap-riding upon the United States. This is a byproduct of both structure and strategy. Structurally, alliances tend to witness greater cheap-riding the larger the alliance becomes, and the lower the external threat.[118] Having pushed for NATO enlargement after the Cold War, the United States confronts both conditions. With upwards of 30 rather than 14 members, many of the alliance's relatively small states can expect others to pick up the security slack. As importantly, because NATO continues in the absence of a clear strategic threat, NATO's eastward move undercuts the incentive otherwise capable states such as Germany, France, and Britain have to contribute effective forces: with the better part of a continent between them and Russia, the rationale for assisting against the Russian military threat – which many analysts suggest is limited in any case – Russian threat is low; likewise, calls to develop 'expeditionary' forces for NATO out of area operations is of questionable attraction owing to the limited military challenge emanating from overseas humanitarian or civil war contingencies.

The United States' approach to enlargement reinforced these structural incentives. As noted, the U.S. pushed for NATO enlargement partly to deflect an EU-based alternative to the

[118] The canonical statement of the first point is Mancur Olson and Richard Zeckhauser, "An Economic Theory of Alliances," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 48, no. 3 (August 1966): 266–79. The second point needs elaboration. Alliances tend to wax and wane as states pool resources in response to threats. This is costly and risky domestically – requiring resource mobilization – and internationally – as states rely on one another for their security. For alliances facing limited threats, it is reasonable to expect states to buckpass and underinvest in military forces as much as possible, hoping that their allies will instead bear the burdens of confronting what threats there are.

United States' post-Cold War preeminence. In doing so, American policymakers struck an implied deal with the European allies: Western Europe would continue to rely upon NATO (and thus the United States) for European security, and the United States would tolerate a degree of European cheap-riding. This logic, for instance, was at the core of early post-Cold War efforts to ensure the EU focused on 'out of area' operations while leaving European defense and security to NATO's purview.[119] Later, this approach was implicit in the U.S. effort to ensure EU-based security forces neither duplicated nor distracted from NATO function: if EU members were not to craft an autonomous security apparatus, then reliance on NATO and the structural cheap-riding noted above was the logical corollary.

Regardless of its sources, cheap-riding has now reached crisis levels. The once-vaunted German military, for instance, looks to be militarily ineffectual and unable to deploy militarily significant forces.[120] Similarly, even allies such as Italy, France, and Britain that have invested in some degree of power projection lack assets relevant to the modern battlefield: tellingly, the United States was compelled to resupply allies with modern munitions during the Libya campaign when allied stocks gave out.[121] Meanwhile, European logistics and mobilization rate have atrophied, so much so that it might take several weeks or more for the non-American members of NATO to assemble and begin moving forces to address contingencies on NATO's flank.[122] Collectively,

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[119] Van Hooft, this volume.

[120] Matthew Karnitschnig, "Germany's Soldiers of Misfortune," *Politico*, February 15, 2019, https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-biggest-enemy-threadbare-army-bundeswehr/; "German Army Problems 'Dramatically Bad,' Report Says," *BBC News*, February 20, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43134896.

[121] Karen DeYoung and Greg Jaffe, "NATO Runs Short on Some Munitions in Libya," *Washington Post*, April 15, 2011,https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/nato-runs-short-on-some-munitions-in libya/2011/04/15/AF3O7ElD_story.html; Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, "Seeing Limits to 'New' Kind of War in Libya," *New York Times*, October 21, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/world/africa/nato-war-in-libya-shows-united-states-was-vital-to-toppling-qaddafi.html.

[122] Kuhn, *Preventing Escalation in the Baltics*, 28; Michael Shurkin, *The Abilities of the British, French, and German Armies to Generate and Sustain Armored Brigades in the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

the European allies seem to have taken free-riding to a degree unforeseen by U.S. policymakers, culminating in efforts by the Obama and Trump administrations to push the European allies to reverse course.[123] The net result leaves the United States exposed as the military buck-catcher within the alliance, increasing the prospective burdens the United States might face in wartime and requiring the United States to work harder if NATO is to matter for deterrence and reassurance in peacetime.

*The Ugly*

Finally, these dynamics may carry second-order consequences, with enlargement and the accompanying U.S. policy consensus making it comparatively more difficult for the U.S. to manage the alliance. During the Cold War, transatlantic relations were complicated by a series of crises over burden sharing, military strategy, and relations with the Soviet Union. At such times, American policymakers were compelled to negotiate with their European counterparts, resulting in a series of compromises (e.g., over German rearmament in the 1950s and the Dual Track decision in the 1970s) that shaped the alliance's course. With NATO's growth of NATO to nearly thirty members, however, this process is now substantially more complicated. Because NATO operates via consensus, the United States faces pressures from a broader set of partners, each of which must be brought on board and engaged if the United States is to keep NATO operating; this situation is further exacerbated as the absence of a collective threat to the alliance and the greater geographic sprawl of the organization leave member states with varying interests and threat perceptions. Despite several years of negotiations, for example, the United States faced substantial difficulties obtaining buy-in from all NATO members on whether and – increasingly – how to

[123] Michael Birnbaum, "Gates Rebukes European Allies in Farewell Speech," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/gates-rebukes-european-allies-in-farewell-speech/2011/06/10/AG9tKeOH_story.html; Julie Davis, "Trump Warns NATO Allies to Spend More on Defense, or Else," *New York Times*, July 2, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/02/world/europe/trump-nato.html.

buttress NATO's eastern flank.[124] Similarly, efforts including public cajoling, public threats, and private negotiations have failed to convince all partners of the need to strengthen NATO members' conventional military capabilities.[125] Friction is inherent in any alliance. Still, NATO enlargement has likely exacerbated the management difficulties faced by the United States.

**Conclusion**

The preceding analysis carries implications for historiography, theory, and policy. For historiography, the work here highlights that scholars need to move beyond trying to understand the drivers of NATO enlargement writ large (especially in the 1990s) and directly grapple with the United States' post-Cold War fixation on enlargement in particular. These issues are related but analytically distinct: the former bears on why the alliance began moving eastward, whereas the latter engages the underlying drivers of American policy across the short post-Cold War era. Doing so, moreover, calls for rigorously blending both political science concepts and policy discussions, with developments in historiographic treatments and access to new primary sources. The above analysis offers an initial syntheses aimed at engaging some of the core issues, but is certainly not intended to be the last word.

For IR theory, meanwhile, this article reinforces Jervis' observation that the dynamics of *American* unipolarity should not necessarily be taken as the norm for *any* unipole. Again, unipolarity after the Cold War liberated the United States from the immediate pressure of great power competition; the enlargement consensus, however, required that unipolarity be married to a

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[124] See, e.g., Steven Keil and Sophie Arts, "NATO After the Brussels Summit: Bruised or Emboldened?" *German Marshall Fund Policy Brief*, September 15, 2018, http://www.gmfus.org/publications/nato-after-brussels-summit-bruised-or-emboldened; Judy Dempsey, "NATO's Eastern Flank and Its Future Relationship with Russia," Carnegie Paper 23, October 23, 2017, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_318_Eastern_Flank_FNL4WEB.pdf; John Deni, "Poland Wants More Than NATO Can Give," *The National Interest*, February 10, 2016, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/poland-wants-more-nato-can-give-15162; Paul Belkin, *NATO's Warsaw Summit: In Brief*, Congressional Research Service, R44550, November 14, 2016, 2-3, 12.

[125] Burns and Lute, *NATO at 70*, 3-4.

particular theory of how the United States could obtain security for itself after the Cold War and an array of political and domestic factors. Scholars interested in examining the course and conduct of unipolarity as a systemic condition would therefore be wise to take the American experience in Europe with a grain of salt. Even if we allow that post-Cold War unipolarity may well have made U.S. expansionism more likely than not, repeated and regular NATO enlargement was not a necessary result. Instead, and like other foreign policy decisions, the United States' enlargement consensus requires us to blend systemic conditions with domestic variables. That said, future research might fruitfully abstract back from the American experience and consider the *conditions* under which unipoles may act in manners similar to the United States and continue to prioritize security structures developed under different systemic conditions. The United States' unipolarity saw particular foreign policy behaviors, but the behaviors themselves may be more or less likely for some unipoles than others.

As for policy, this project raises questions over the future of U.S. engagement in Europe. On one level, and far from being water under the bridge, showing that U.S. backing for NATO enlargement has relied upon a set of interlocking domestic and international variables highlights that an American course adjustment may be more difficult than proponents of alternate approaches to the U.S. grand strategy may expect. Critics of U.S. grand strategy suggest that shifts in the international distribution of power and/or adjusting the ends sought by the United States in world politics may be sufficient to reorient U.S. foreign policy.[126] If, however, U.S. interest in NATO enlargement stems from both domestic and international factors, then these arguments may not go far enough: it may take not only an end to U.S. unipolarity or power-maximizing tendencies but equally the creation of a domestic consensus and political establishment committed to a new course

[126] Posen, *Restraint*; John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (August 2016).

to fully move the U.S. back from continued NATO enlargement. Absent such a sea-change internationally, strategically, and domestically, we can expect an ongoing and extended debate over continued NATO expansion between proponents seeking to still enlarge the alliance (potentially under systemic conditions such as renewed great power competition) inhospitable to further expansion, and advocates of more circumscribed efforts unable to generate consensus for their position. In other words, at a time when U.S. power and purpose in the world are hotly debated, the preceding discussion raises the possibility that discord – at least vis-à-vis NATO – may be the new normal.

At the same time, the above analysis should give both critics and proponents of enlargement pause in advocating for their respective positions. As highlighted earlier, it is too much to claim that enlargement has been wholly positive or wholly negative so far as U.S. national security is concerned. Rather, enlargement yielded a mixed bag for the United States itself, helping the United States dominate Europe but also imposing large direct and indirect costs in the process. Before recommending either more enlargement or shifting gears and pursuing a new course, further research is therefore needed on the range of positive and negative effects of such move and how such effects compare with the status quo. The NATO enlargement consensus may ultimately change, but policymakers would be well informed to carefully consider the merits and drawbacks of a range of alternatives before changing course. In this sense, the United States would do well to avoid fixing on a new consensus too soon - judicious appraisal of the potential roads taken is needed.