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NATO Enlargement 20 Years On: Some Thoughts

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Almost three decades after NATO began to open its doors to countries in Central and Eastern Europe, it is time to revisit scholarly debates about enlargement. Most of the debate on this question took place from 1995 to the beginning of the 2000s. Consequently, a new analysis is warranted and, with the benefit of hindsight, we are now in a better position to assess the most prominent arguments that were put forward at the time. We are now also in a position to react to certain claims which, twenty years ago, were only speculation. We would therefore like to offer some arguments on which a renewed analysis of NATO enlargement should be based.

First, contrary to what some analyses have argued, the enlargement of the Alliance is not the act of a single state, however powerful that state may be. It is therefore wrong, as some do, to place sole responsibility for this decision on the Clinton administration or certain key players within that administration. The desire to join the Alliance reflects, above all, the collective desire of all the so-called Eastern countries – from Bulgaria to the Baltic – to return to the West and reconnect with their geopolitical, cultural, and economic heritage. As Browning notes about Finland, the roots of these countries "were perceived as lying in the West and hence [...] with the break-up of the Soviet Union they were returning to these organic origins in Western civilization." One can interpet this desire to return to the West as a kind of natural reflex. From this point of view, it is also wrong to separate the question of NATO's enlargement from the process of European Union (EU) integration. The two processes are, more often than not, inseparable. For the countries of Central Europe, while the EU symbolizes prosperity, NATO represents protection and security. As Suzanne Nies notes:

> "For most of the so-called Eastern countries, integration into NATO and the EU has been motivated by a concern for protection vis-à-vis the former dominating Soviet power – a concern which results in the willingness to join the opposing alliance and seek close cooperation with the United States. This is why all NATO candidates are also candidates for the EU, which is perfectly illustrated by the words of the Lithuanian Ambassador to France, Giedrius Cekuolis: "NATO and the EU are like mom and dad, and we can't choose between the two."

The necessary linking of the two processes, from this point of view, can only suggest one conclusion: the integration of the Central European countries, both within the EU and NATO, was probably inevitable. Could the Central European countries have been prevented from joining the EU? To ask the question is to answer it. And what applies to the EU applies equally to the Alliance. Enlargement, in either case, is a fact that is better to accept than to regret.

A Strategic Mistake?

One of the sharpest criticisms of Alliance enlargement, put forward by renowned historians and diplomats such as John Lewis Gaddis and George Kennan, is that it was one of the "worst strategic mistakes" made by the United States and its allies. Their argument rests, in particular, on the idea that the policies adopted by the West towards Russia after 1990 would resemble those which the allies of the First World War forced the Wilhelminian Reich to accept at war's end. Otherwise put, the United States would have imposed a leonine and humiliating peace on Moscow, the enlargement of the Alliance being the very symbol of this humiliation. This is, in our view, an erroneous comparison, because the two contexts are quite different. Russia did not have to accept an unconditional surrender, as Germany did. Moreover, contrary to Gaddis's argument, the integration of the countries of Central Europe into the Alliance follows an obvious strategic logic. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the fragmentation of the USSR created a geopolitical vacuum in the center of Europe. Should this vacuum be allowed to continue, at the risk of seeing this region develop its own system of regional or international relations? Wasn't there a risk of recreating an unstable and conflict-ridden situation similar to the interwar years? Should we risk seeing Russia regain a foothold in a region that it has considered, for more than a century, to be its preserve as much around the Baltics as in central Europe and in the eastern Balkans? What might be called the "gray zone" or "strategic vacuum" of Central Europe had to be secured, and what better solution than to open the door to the Alliance for these countries? No other institutional arrangement – whether the OSCE or WEU – could have offered these countries the same level of protection and security.

Was the process of integration of Central European countries improvised or poorly organized? Has there been any hiccups? Of course.[1] But, was it "a mistake"? Quite the contrary. As Andrew Michta notes: "Today, NATO enlargement may be seen to have been an obvious pathway to security in post-communist countries and as a means of stabilizing the 'grey zone of Europe.' While scholars and analysts continue to debate the actual scope and phases of the process, few seem to question its overall political utility... ". The commitment of the United States in favor of enlargement was not a mistake, but a choice which reflected the traditions of American foreign policy since 1945. As Mira Rapp-Hooper reminds us in her last book: "The overarching purpose of alliances has not changed: They should help the United States prevent a hostile hegemon from dominating Eurasia." However, these remarks also reflect what Henry Kissinger said at the end of the 1990s: "Our security is inextricably linked with Europe's and now that Soviet power has receded from the center of the Continent, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization needs to adapt itself to the consequences of its success."

Finally, we can add that the enlargement of NATO also responded to a broader politico-strategic logic. As Canada recalled at the time, the Alliance's vocation, according to Article 2 of the Charter, is "to develop peaceful and friendly international relations, while strengthening their institutions, and ensuring a better understanding of the principles on which these institutions were founded." In other words, far from being just a purely military organization, NATO is also a tool to promote international cooperation

[1] As Sara Moeller shows in a recent article, the process of reforming NATO's deployments and command structures was independent of the Alliance's enlargement process from 1991 to 1997, which was a major mistake. The Alliance authorities therefore did not consider the impact that enlargement would have on NATO's missions and military arrangements until 1996-1997. Roughly speaking, the Alliance's military capabilities have been cut by around 25%, and the command was restructured, while ignoring the defense missions that an enlarged NATO would have to undertake. NATO has also avoided demanding military capabilities from Central European countries to match these missions. The political criteria were sufficient. As a result, enlargement was carried out at a discount, even if all these problems were solved later.

and the strengthening of democratic institutions, which was useful for engaging the former eastern countries in the context of post-Cold War Europe.

While the geopolitical logic behind NATO enlargement is sound, the main argument against expansion still needs to be examined. According to its critics, the integration of the Central European countries into the Alliance, threatening the security of Russia in its backyard, is one, if not the main cause, of the tensions which again pit Moscow against the West. If it is true that the Russia of Vladimir Putin has once again become fundamentally hostile to the United States and to all that the West symbolizes, can we really say that the enlargement of NATO is at the source of the changes that have affected Russian politics for 20 years? Unlikely. Indeed, the humiliation represented by the liberation of the countries of Central Europe from the Soviet yoke in 1988-1989 and the breakup of the USSR in 1991 was not caused by the Alliance, nor by the the economic chaos that Russia experienced in the 1990s, nor the endemic corruption of the elites. The shift to the right in Russian opinion, including growing hostility to the West, also preceded the Alliance's enlargement by several years. This nationalist withdrawal is reminiscent of the complex and contradictory relationship that Russia has historically maintained with the West from Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin, a relationship coloured by fascination and proud resentment. This is reflected by pendulum-like arc that Russian foreign policy has travelled for centuries between hostility and attraction to the West. The enlargement of the Alliance certainly played a significant role in the symbolic humiliation of the former superpower, but it must be emphasized that the causes of Russia's authoritarian turn and what some call the 'new cold war' must be sought elsewhere than in NATO enlargement.

The three preceding arguments should obviously not lead us to ignore the problems raised by enlargement. Since the start of the last decade, the Alliance has indeed faced two new threats, one internal and political, the other external, and of a more military nature.

Towards a Separation From NATO?

The Alliance's internal political crisis is probably the most insidious. Since the early 2000s, the enthusiasm for liberalism and democracy, which characterized the first decade of the post-Cold War era, has been replaced all over Europe, especially among the countries of Central Europe and the Balkans. Integration into European institutions and globalization have often, in the eyes of of Central European public, not brought the expected prosperity and stability. The shocks that the emigration of their best talents have caused, in addition to the 2008 financial crisis and the waves of migration from the Middle East and Africa in 2015-2016, accentuated the political and social unrest. Is it any wonder that political movements that are anti-liberal, nationalist, critical of European institutions and xenophobic have taken advantage of this collective anxiety to get elected? This is what seems to have happened in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic.

The corollary of this phenomenon has been that several of these States have adopted anti-liberal measures, attacking either the independence of the judiciary, the freedom of the press, and going, in some cases, as far as opting for unlimited emergency powers in favor of the executive. Underlining the fragility of democratization in these regions, let us also note that seven other states among the new members of NATO (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Romania) deserve the name of 'hybrid regimes' or 'semi-consolidated democracies' as noted by Freedom House. Obviously, it is difficult to throw stones at these states, since the so-called populist wave has also manifested itself in the West, with varying degrees of success, not to mention the United States, with the election of Donald Trump, which also symbolizes the rejection of liberalism and internationalism in all its forms.

The consequences of these populist and authoritarian impulses are extremely important for NATO and for the European Union, insofar as they threaten their cohesion as communities of values. Is it possible that the populist phenomenon could shatter the European and Atlantic community? Some advance such a position. It should be noted, however, that most of the countries of Eastern Europe, from the Baltic Sea to the Balkans via Poland and Hungary, depend heavily on the European Union and the Alliance for their economic prosperity and their security. Paradoxically, Eastern Europeans are among the most fervent supporters of the EU and NATO, while electing deeply Eurosceptic governments which nonetheless benefit from the largesse of Brussels. The situation is therefore not hopeless, as central Europe remains anchored in the West by its own interests. On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that for anti-liberal leaders, like Orban in Hungary or Babis in the Czech Republic, the authoritarianism and anti-Western discourse of Putin is an example to emulate. Is there a danger of a drift to the east? For sure. In fact, even China is trying to increase its influence in the region. The danger of dissociating certain members of the Alliance therefore cannot be ruled out and the recent case of Turkey does not fail to give cause for concern from this point of view.

The Russian Resurgence

The second threat facing the Alliance is more directly military. How can we ensure the defence of the continent, and particularly its borders to the North and the East, in the face of an increasingly aggressive Russia? Since 2008, Moscow has more and more clearly manifested its desire to re-establish zones of influence on the outskirts of its former empire, even if it means using intimidation or force, as was the case in Crimea in 2014. All means have been justified to support this goal, giving rise to the concept of 'hybrid' warfare, which includes diplomatic gestures as well as disinformation operations or more military posturing.

NATO must therefore attempt to reestablish a relationship of deterrence against its traditional enemy, but within a larger geographic framework that is more difficult to defend. A quick glance at a map of Europe is enough to be convinced. The irony, of course, is that the Alliance for two decades endorsed the concept of collective security and emphasized the model of small expeditionary forces suited to multilateral peace operations. All European forces, with some exceptions, have therefore abandoned the territorial defence model, reducing the size of their forces proportionately. For example, in 1990 the FRG could deploy 215 battalions (infantry, armor and artillery). In 2015, that number fell to 34, a cut of 84%. The number of French battalions was reduced by 60% and that of the British army by more than 50%. The United States is going to emulate its European allies, with its forces going from 99 battalions to 14, a cut of 86% in terms of military personnel. Without even talking about budget or equipment, would the Europeans be able to defend a border that runs from the Baltics to Romania? The most serious scenarios underline, in this regard, the enormous capability gap of the Alliance in the event of a confrontation with Russia. The slope to be climbed is considerable, and it is questionable whether the collective political will of Alliance members will be sufficient to restore the balance of deterrence in the medium term.

But should we accept the French President's statement that the Alliance is "brain dead"? It is perhaps worth recalling, in this context, the remarkable longevity of NATO and its ability to survive crises and changes in the international order since 1945. Why would the NATO of 2021 be less able to meet the challenges of the 21st century? It should be noted, in this sense, that European public opinion remains overwhelmingly favourable to the Alliance, and that most Alliance members have been doing their best in recent years to meet the budgetary criteria of the NATO Alliance. Faced with the new challenges in the East, NATO has also embarked on a process of transformation aimed at strengthening its deterrent

capabilities against Russia. There is therefore no reason to despair, especially as the United States appears more willing, under President Biden, to once again assume its leadership role in the Alliance.

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