The Cracks in NATO’s Fault Narrative: Why NATO Enlargement Fails to Explain Russian Aggression

Many who study the Russian Federation’s post-Cold War path point to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) actions in the early 1990s as a key factor in understanding Russia’s attitudes and actions in the 21st century. Specifically, they cite NATO’s decision to enlarge its membership as the cause of Russia’s shift away from integration with the West and towards an independent path emphasizing its great power history and uniquely Eurasian identity. While there is some truth to this argument, it is, at best, an over-simplified one. This article will explore the greater context of Russia’s initial divergence from the West focusing on the fundamentally different and ultimately incompatible understandings of the post-Cold War order, and the fact that any security arrangement that incorporated Russia was anathema to many of the newly independent states and to NATO. It will then address the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine in the context of both NATO’s initial enlargement and its 2008 summit in Bucharest. Ultimately NATO bears, at most, partial responsibility for events to its east. The situation now, as in 1994, is not so much the direct result of NATO’s decisions, pronouncements, and actions as it is an inevitable divergence of Russia’s and NATO’s paths after the end of the Cold War.

A Perpetual Great Power Narrative
It is generally agreed that in the early 1990s, Moscow, under President Boris Yeltsin, was determined to integrate Russia with the West, including the security community and structures. Russia’s support of NATO’s involvement in Bosnia’s civil war through 1993 and its initially positive reaction to the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program both support this observation. Vincent Pouliot, director of the Centre for International Peace and Security Studies, suggests that NATO managed to ”lose Russia…at a time it was begging for inclusion” when it announced in December 1994 that the Alliance would consider whether – and how – to enlarge its membership. This decision, he posits, suppressed pro-Western voices in the Russian leadership, created a sense of exclusion in Russia, and prompted the spread and entrenchment of a great power narrative. In combination, these effects turned Russia away from integration and cooperation with the West and, as made opposing NATO a foreign policy objective in and of itself.

To dispute the allegation that NATO’s expansion frustrated and angered the Russian government would be inaccurate, but to point to this event, or to NATO generally, as the primary cause of Russia’s divergence and modern hostility towards the West is specious. First of all, the “NATO’s fault narrative” ignores the impact of shock therapy, or the immediate liberalization of the market, on Russian popular attitudes towards the West. Economic reform was launched in earnest in January 1992 and produced significant and severe hardship for millions of people. Many Russians became convinced that the West – and especially the U.S. – deliberately proffered economic advice designed to undermine and further weaken Russia. They faulted Yeltsin and his pro-West advisors for the imposition of debilitating reforms. One can reasonably argue that this suppressed the pro-integration minority at least as much as NATO’s later enlargement announcement.

The shocks inflicted by economic reform and structural adjustment, combined with significantly smaller-than-expected aid from the U.S., forged a painful economic reality and sense of isolation in Russia entirely unrelated to NATO. This likely played an important role in the evolution of Russia’s relations with the Alliance. According to Dmmitri Trenin, Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, Russia sees NATO as a “code word” for U.S.-led and –oriented power structures and alliances in Europe. Thus, Russian perception of U.S. stinginess – especially when Yeltsin seemed to concede everything the West asked of him – likely hardened Russia against NATO expansion early on. Russia understood the U.S. to be undermining it economically, so NATO – and therefore American – enlargement eastward was merely an extension of the U.S’s effort to establish permanent and indisputable dominance and to fundamentally eradicate Russia’s great power status.

The NATO explanation also fails to acknowledge the fact that the Duma elections of December 1993 saw a clear victory for nationalist forces over pro-West forces. Vladimir Zhirinovskii and his far-right Liberal Democratic Party specifically ran on a platform promising to restore Russia to its great power status. This election predated NATO's announcement that it was considering expansion by a full
Disagreements over the appropriate response to the crisis in Bosnia in the early 1990s also suggested incompatibilities early on. Although Russia (along with several NATO members) supported dozens of U.N. Security Council resolutions on Yugoslavia, it often did so with reluctance and only after much hesitation and prodding from the U.S. Finally, Trenin highlights an absence of a true and widespread commitment to political reform and democracy in Russia in the early 1990s. This reality sets it apart from Central and Eastern Europe and helps explain Russia’s exclusion from developments to its west. Russia was unable or unwilling to fully and convincingly commit to the European path that NATO represented. Permanent reconciliation and integration required either Russia or NATO to profoundly alter its own nature and its understanding of security. Neither was able or willing to do so, and thus divergence was inevitable.

**Incompatible Ideas**

A pre-existing great power narrative has important implications for Russia’s failure to integrate into Western institutions. Trenin notes that great powers do not integrate themselves into systems for which they did not establish the governing rules. This suggests that Russia’s favorable attitude towards NATO and integration with the West more generally was more precarious than is popularly appreciated, even in the early Yeltsin years. Of particular importance is the fact that Russia’s great power narrative was directly related to its self-understanding as a uniquely Eurasian country that never fully adopted a truly European identity. Indeed, some argue that only small groups of Russia’s liberal intelligentsia ever attempted to incorporate the values associated with the European Enlightenment. The implication here is that Russia would find it especially difficult to integrate with Western institutions because not only did it not create those rules to which it would become beholden, but those rules are largely based on values not inherent to or even prevalent within the Russian state. Overall, any rapprochement with the West could only be temporary – Russia was bound to diverge at some point, and at most NATO’s enlargement discussion merely caused it to do so sooner than it otherwise might have.

There are other reasons to believe that a Russia-West split was unavoidable. For example, the West saw NATO enlargement as an important (and perhaps the only) tool for ensuring the success of political and economic reform in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as avoiding the outbreak of the sort of conflict that was ravaging the former Yugoslavia. Enlargement was thus vital to NATO security, while Russia perceived it as profoundly inimical to its own. Despite efforts on both sides to reassure the other, these contradictory understandings remain true today.

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**The Shadow of the Warsaw Pact**

A vital component of the “NATO’s fault narrative” is the idea that some alternative European security arrangement – be it Russia’s inclusion in NATO, an entirely new framework, or something else – was possible in the early 1990s. There are certainly arguments to be made for Russia’s proposals that it jointly guarantee East European security with NATO, or that NATO be subordinated to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It is important to appreciate, however, the extent to which NATO members desired the Alliance’s perpetuation and freedom of action and how eager many Central and Eastern European governments were to win security guarantees from the West against Russia. NATO was cognizant of the desirability and even the need to find a place for Russia in the European security structure, but any framework
that forced former Warsaw Pact members to rely on Russia for their security was unacceptable to those states. This was especially true of the Visegard states – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – who saw the electoral success of the far right in Russia’s 1993 Duma elections as indicative of a long-term threat to their hard-won independence. Even today – nearly twenty-five years after the fall of the U.S.S.R – Poland sees Russia as a menace and acts as a significant stumbling block in the latter’s relations with the EU (which ostensibly focus primarily on economic issues). Central and Eastern Europe’s memory of abuse and oppression made the integration of Russia into a security system impossible. From its perspective, then, NATO faced a choice between two security frameworks: one in which the Alliance enlarged while trying to reassure Russia of its benign intent, or no security structure for the East at all. They discounted the latter option as it invited perpetual instability and conflict on NATO’s borders. Thus strong Eastern European voices and NATO’s own institutional incentives for survival (as well as U.S. President Bill Clinton’s personal determination to pull Eastern Europe westward), combined with Russia’s own uncertainty about the path it wanted to follow, led the Alliance to pursue enlargement and simply hope it would be able to placate Russian concerns and maintain cooperative relations while it did so. That this resulted in divergent paths for the two is as much Russia’s “fault” (here referring to the consequences of history and domestic politics) as it is NATO’s.

Enlargement and Conflict in the 21st Century
More recently, many argue that the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia is a perfect example of NATO’s self-defeating and destabilizing enlargement practices. Pouliot notes that the Alliance perceives Russian aggression as justification for enlargement while failing to acknowledge and/or understand that this aggression is itself a response to NATO expansion. The August 2008 war, for example, followed on the heels of NATO’s Bucharest Summit, where the Alliance announced that Georgia and Ukraine would one day become members (although it declined to present them with Membership Action Plans). Once again, isolating NATO pronouncements and decisions as the sole driver behind Russian policy is to set aside vital historical context that has an important role. Russia and Georgia have a history of tumultuous relations going back to Georgia’s independence. Russian involvement in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia since the early 1990s has been a particular source of tension largely unrelated to NATO-Russia interactions. The situation in Georgia in 2008 presented an ideal opportunity to punish Georgia for its anti-Russian orientation – itself an affront to Russian great power-ness. In addition, Russian frustration with American ballistic missile defense initiatives in Europe and Kosovo’s 2008 declaration of independence – both of which undermined Russia’s self-perception as a co-equal player with the U.S. in Europe – likely acted as additional incentives to undertake action in Georgia when the opportunity presented itself. All of this supports the idea that Russia’s war with Georgia was as much a demonstration that it had fully regained its great power status and demanded to be treated accordingly, as it was an attempt to keep Georgia out of NATO. NATO’s promise of membership for Georgia was undoubtedly a factor in Russian decision-making (and may have even been a primary one), but to ignore the role of these other elements is to create an incomplete understanding of Russian actions.

With regards to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, it should be noted that President Putin applied significant pressure to former president Yanukovich to reject closer economic ties with the European Union – a distinct (though not necessarily entirely unrelated) issue from NATO enlargement. Furthermore, Russia pressured a generally pro-Russia president who was unlikely to pursue NATO membership, and did so several years after American President George W. Bush had left office. NATO expansionary rhetoric had receded significantly, and the Alliance’s divisions over enlargement were no secret. All of this suggests that
Russian involvement in first the political crisis and then the rebel conflict has its basis in factors other than NATO enlargement. Such matters include economic decline in Russia, Putin’s surprisingly difficult election experience in 2012, Russia’s longstanding and complicated relationship with Ukraine, and other political issues. Additionally, the great power rhetoric that Russia never truly abandoned is back in play as Russia attempts – in true great power fashion – to get other states to adopt its “Eurasian” model and integrate themselves into its various structures. In other words, to assert that it all goes back to 1994 is to ignore history before and since that admittedly important – but perhaps not pivotal – time in East-West relations.

It is clear from this discussion that one must go beyond what I have labeled the “NATO’s Fault Narrative” in order to understand and effectively analyze Russian foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. While there is an undeniable relationship between NATO and Russian decision-making, the domestic political and economic context in Russia played a key role, independent of NATO, in how Russia’s attitudes and policies evolved over the course of the 1990s. The causal link between NATO expansion and Russian divergence and hostility is not as evident and direct as some would like to believe. Furthermore, the fact that the great power narrative never completely disappeared from Russian self-perception suggests that even Yeltsin’s early and eager cooperation with the West rested on precarious foundations: this narrative meant Russia could not accept a role as just another European state. The struggles the great power narrative created for integration with the West were further compounded by the West’s (and especially Central and Eastern Europe’s) reluctance to allow Russia in. Finally, while events in Georgia in 2008 can be linked rather clearly to the specter of Alliance enlargement, once again the situation was in fact more complex, with a legacy of stressed and hostile relations that predate NATO-Russian tensions. The ongoing crisis in Ukraine also has roots that reach far deeper than NATO’s decision to expand its membership, and illustrates the extent to which Russia-West divergence exists not just in the security realm but in political and economic ones as well.

All of these factors lead back to the fundamental issue of what precisely the post-Cold War order should look like. NATO and the West fervently promoted liberal democracies founded on Enlightenment principles and integration with their existing structures. Although Yeltsin and his cadre of pro-Westerners certainly tried to shift the Russian political system into something compatible with the West, ultimately there appears to have been no consensus within Russia on the path forward even before NATO started to contemplate enlargement. In fact, ascendant forces favored the great power path that, in the Russian narrative, inherently sought to challenge the West. The differences in each side’s vision of the future were too great to overcome, especially when neither was particularly motivated to try. The result is enduring distrust and low-level hostility that occasionally flares, but for which both NATO and Russia share responsibility.

Taken together, all of this suggests that Russia’s turn away from the West – and its continued movement on that path – is not so much a direct retort to any given NATO action or announcement but rather a response significantly shaped by the context (domestic and international) in which both parties act. Russia certainly reacts to NATO, but that is not the only thing to which it reacts.

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