THE NATO EXPANSION IN EUROPE – ALLIANCE OF LIBERAL STATES

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Abstract
Alliances are common in the world history. In the framework of international relations, several theoretical explanations were applied to answer the questions of why and how states enter into alliances. The traditional approach explains the concept of alliance through the assumptions of the theory of balance of power. Game theory is also a theoretical approach to analyze the behavior of states used in academic and strategic analysis.

In this paper, the basic assumption about the behavior of the states of the collective West is the theory of balance of threat. In the geographical sense, the subject of analysis is Eastern and South-Eastern Europe as a response to the behavior of the states.

When faced with a significant external threat, states can balance or join. Balancing is defined as an alliance with other states against a current threat; the association is brought to the association with the source of danger. This theory is presented through an analysis of state decisions on critical issues in the international security depending on whether states balance or join by Stephen Walt, systematically exposed in the capital work The Origin of Alliances. (Bölt, 2009)

In this paper, the subject of analysis is the expansion of the NATO pact after the end of the Cold War, trying to give answers to the question of why the countries of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe "joined" this military alliance after the fall of the "Iron Curtain".

Keywords: alliance; balance; international security; Russian Federation

1. INTRODUCTION

The Second World War paved the way to the future world order, which was basically divided on ideological grounds: liberal, multi-party based on freedom of market – “the West”, as well as socialist, one-party and based on planned production and economy – “the East”. This division led to the creation of a bipolar model of international relations lasting for several decades, which symbolically ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The economic, technical-technological and cultural victory of the Western system caused the uncontrolled collapse of a huge number of states. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the liberation of Eastern and Central European countries from the socialist system
based on party dictatorship, as well as strict military control from Moscow, released huge energy, which in these countries caused panic, poverty, fear, thoughtlessness and apathy.

Some of these countries that have a state-legal and socially liberal tradition based on capitalism and market freedom, such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia relatively quickly "restructured" into the new economic-political currents.

NATO was formed in 1949 with twelve founding members and has added new members nine times. The first additions were Greece and Turkey in 1952. In May 1955, West Germany joined NATO, which was one of the conditions agreed to as part of the end of the country's occupation by France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, prompting the Soviet Union to form its own collective security alliance (commonly called the Warsaw Pact) later that month. Following the end of the Franco regime, newly democratic Spain chose to join NATO in 1982.

In 1990, the negotiators reached an agreement that a reunified Germany would be in NATO under West Germany's existing membership. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, many former Warsaw Pact and post-Soviet states sought to join NATO. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic became NATO members in 1999, amid much debate within NATO itself and the Russian opposition. NATO then formalized the process of joining the organization with "Membership Action Plans", which aided the accession of seven Central and Eastern Europe countries shortly before the 2004 Istanbul summit: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Two countries on the Adriatic Sea - Albania and Croatia - joined on 1 April 2009 before the 2009 Strasbourg-Kehl summit. The next member states to join NATO were Montenegro on 5 June 2017, and North Macedonia on 27 March 2020. (Enlargement_of_NATO, 2023)

NATO expansion looking through the geographical context is natural. It has its "natural borders", being in the region of North Atlantic. And this is also applicable from a strategic point of view. For example, it is hard to imagine a single command structure spreading from Atlantic through central Asia, thus in this case Georgia not being in the "gravitational force" of the alliance. The latest news of Japan being at the NATO summit in Vilnius is just as it says: further enhance cooperation in areas like arms control, new technologies, space, supply chains, resilience, and innovation. (Stoltenberg, n.d.)

Unlike Japan, the East and Central European countries are historically and geographically part of Europe.

It is understood that this realignment is not the result of their traditions being revived. The European Union as an economic-political union, the largest single market, as an economic (material) base on the one hand, but also the inclusion in the military pact of NATO on the other hand, enabled the galloping development of these societies.

In the case of the NATO expansion, we can see clearly the fulfillment of the accession hypothesis. Thus, NATO is the most powerful political organization in the world history, and especially in the last 30+ years.

On one side we have the bad experience with the socialist system and Soviet force used in Hungary and Czech Republic, as well in the Baltics in the past century, and on the other there is the liberal and economically developed world that dominates in the world. In this case Russia is the threat, not just in military sense, but much more in terms of democracy.

The accession hypothesis is particularly popular among statesmen trying to justify overseas engagements or increased military budgets. For example, the Soviet Union's attempts to intimidate Turkey and Norway from joining NATO only encouraged these countries to move even closer towards the West. These assumptions contain a familiar theme: states are attracted to force. The same happened to Sweden and Finland.
The more powerful the state is and the better it shows it, the greater the chances that others will ally with it. Otherwise, the decline in the country's relative position will lead its allies to opt for neutrality as the best option or to defect to the opposite side. This is what happened in Europe. The projected force of the US is firm and steady.

Due to the possibility of projecting the reduction of power from a distance, the states that are nearby represent a greater danger than those which are further away. The danger in the central and eastern European countries joining NATO is Russia.

2. BEFORE SEPTEMBER 11th 2001

In the case of Central and Eastern European countries, the former communist countries that joined NATO had a lot in common: they have perceived Russia as an aggressor, a threat to their societies. And they have reasons to do so. The invasion of Hungary by the USSR (Encyclopaedia, Hungarian Revolution, 2023) in 1956 and the Prague Spring (Soviet Invasion) in 1968 (Hauner, Bradley, Zeman, & Luebering, 2023), the strikes in Poland of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union Solidarity (Encyclopaedia, Solidarity, 2011) are only on top of the Iceberg of oppression during the period of Soviet influence.

The Baltic states perhaps are most affected by being part of the former Russian Empire, then the Soviet Union. And it seems that it is better for them to be in a liberal Alliance than to be a subordinate of an authoritarian state with little or not having experience in democracy. This is one way of explaining the “hard stance” that the Baltic states and Poland have on Russia and its War in Ukraine.

One needs only a brief look at the historical record to confirm this. In perhaps the most known incident in the NATO expansion narrative, Russian President Yeltsin on 25th August 1993 delivered a political bombshell during a visit to Warsaw by bestowing Moscow’s – apparently unsolicited – blessing on Poland’s membership in NATO (he did the same for the Czech and Slovak Republic). With this act, Yeltchin opened Pandora’s box of NATO expansion, and no attempts at backtrack could close it. Indeed, the Russian President’s actions in Warsaw can only be interpreted as a gratuitous concession to NATO and the West by a leader eager to support the expansion goals of his NATO allies; no analysis has demonstrated otherwise. (Surovell, 2012, pp. 162-163)

The History of NATO expansion is not a single decision, but policy initiative that came through a series of decisions and presidential statements made during Clinton’s key phases of the process in 1993 and 1994. The product was the October 1993 proposal to develop a Partnership for Peace (PFP), which would increase military ties between NATO and its former adversaries. (Goldgeier M., 1997, p. 86) In 1994, Clinton signaled that the expansion is not “whether”, but “when”. At the end of this period, the newly installed assistant secretary of state for European affairs, Richard Holbrooke, (who is well known in the Balkans) bludgeoned the bureaucracy into understanding that expansion was presidential policy, and an idea that had been bandied about for a year and a half finally started to become reality. (Goldgeier M., 1997, p. 86)

The personal experience by living in communism of Lech Walesa (Poland) and Vaclav Havel (Check Republic) by delivering the same message for their countries being the priority of NATO membership. As National Security adviser Anthony Lake says that the personal passion of these leaders had turned Clinton to think positively on expansion. The corruption and the non-functional states that arose from the former Soviet sphere of influence, as well as the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia being on the border of
NATO countries is also not a good thing. On the Balkans there is a saying: “if the bear is playing in the neighbor’s yard, do not be happy, it is a matter of time before it will come to yours”.

But Clinton was also advised by Madeline Albright, who was a university professor of international relations and a liberalist, that democracies do not go to war with one another and thus US foreign policy should focus on promoting democracy.

At the same time, a prominent figure such as Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski and James Baker called for movement to bring Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic into some kind of qualified membership. (Goldgeier M., 1997, p. 92) These figures are not so much of a liberalist, but their views are through the theory of realism. Anyway, the realists and the liberalists in US agreed that the full membership of new countries from Eastern and Central Europe are essential for US strategic interests. But this was not the case with majority of the Western European countries, such as Germany and France, two of the most important continental members of NATO in Europe. This is understandable taking into consideration the fact that in case of military conflict of NATO the battle is going to be in Europe and the most difficult positions are on these countries.

But a liberal society as the American is expected to have an opinion different than the official presidential policy. That is what makes it a liberal and free society.

As McGwire wrote that in an open letter to president Clinton at the end of June 1997, fifty former US senators, cabinet secretaries and ambassadors, as well as US arms control and foreign policy specialists, stated their belief that the current US-led effort to expand NATO … is a policy error of historic importance for the following reasons:

- In Russia, it would bring into question the entire post-Cold-War settlements;
- In Europe, it would draw a new line of division between pro-NATO and against…;
- In NATO, it would degrade the alliance’s ability to carry out its primary mission, and involve US security guarantees to countries with serious border and national minority problems and unevenly developed systems of government;
- In the US, it would trigger an extended debate over its intermediate (but certainly high) cost and would call into question the US commitment to NATO… (McCgwire, 2008, p. 1282)

Beside the debates and the different and opposite opinions the first tier of countries for NATO enlargement included Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, which became formal members in 1999.

3. AFTER SEPTEMBER 11th 2001

The aftermath of 11th September 2001 gave Moscow’s leaders a window to openly join the US-led war against terrorism and Russia’s hoped-for partnership with the West. In addition to his pro NATO statements Putin then set the ball rolling on 24th September by giving his assent to the use of Central Asian military base by Washington and its NATO allies, a move so shockingly partisan to Western interests that is ‘jolted Russia’s hard-liners and Pro-westerners alike’. (Surovell, 2012, p. 173) This was followed by future concessions to the West, including a meeting at NATO headquarters on 3rd October, where Putin ‘softened’ his opposition to NATO expansion to the Baltics. (Index, 2001)

In discussions about why the Russian officials de facto agreed with NATO expansion there are few opinions. Some of them suggest that Russia was calculating in regard for its own benefit in terms of economic cooperation by selling weapons to the new
member states of NATO - most of the new one’s were equipped with Soviet origins weapons, which was mostly supplied by Russia. But if we look through the prism of realism, in the 90-es and the beginning of the 21st century, Russia really had no other choice.

As Sergei Medvedev notices - Russia’s elites are so eager to secure the economic benefits from acquiescence (or that opposition to expansion would make more difficult) that they feel little, if any, antagonism toward NATO and the West. They are willing to sacrifice on the altar of economic self-interest their country’s most fundamental security interests. They apparently do not see an appreciable threat from NATO enlargement. (Surovell, 2012, p. 177)

In 2004 seven nations were admitted to NATO: Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

The last straw that made the difference was President Bush’s statement that he “strongly supported” Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO in 2008. (Harding, 2008) In 2007 Putin opposed plans for the missile shield in Europe making Russia resentful and mistrusting.

This was followed by the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and escalated in 2014 with the occupation of Crimea.

The confrontation between Russia and NATO was in full scale starting from 2007, especially manifested on the Balkans, using Greece – Macedonian name dispute, Kosovo status and Bosnia and Herzegovina uncertainties.

In the Balkans, two countries on the Adriatic Sea, Albania and Croatia joined on 1 April 2009 before the 2009 Strasbourg–Kehl summit. The next member states to join NATO were Montenegro on 5 June 2017, and North Macedonia on 27 March 2020. The conflicts are still ongoing with the Serbian–Kosovo discussions and Bosnia and Herzegovina – being an active hotspot in the region.

4. NATO AND THE EXPANSION

The 1991 and 1999 Strategic Concepts of NATO also recognized the fact that the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the violent breakup of the Yugoslav Federation has created a new and uncertain strategic environment in Europe where “conventional aggression against the alliance is highly unlikely”. (Seroka, 2007, p. 26) The need to be surrounded by an environment which has political and economic stability is necessary for every organization. For NATO member countries this means that the country neighbors of the alliance should be stable in every sense of the word. The Strategic Concept of 1999 because of the above-mentioned reasons has shifted towards crises and crisis management. “For NATO, crisis management must be met with flexibility and through "partnership, cooperation, and dialogue with other states" and other international organizations, particularly the OSCE and European Union.” (Seroka, 2007, p. 27)

NATO in the 90s successfully adapted to the new challenges and endured all the challenges, such as: Europe being no longer enemy of Russia, instead for most of the countries one of the most important economic partners. Assisting the post-communist transformation in Central and Eastern Europe along with the European Union towards democratization. Preventing from happening in other parts of Europe what happened in Yugoslavia related to ethnically based conflicts was also a NATO task in this period. The Yugoslavia breakup during the 90s was the evidence when unfortunately, the European diplomacy failed, the UN also showed no results with peace-keeping missions. The most visible evidence for the need of NATO in this “era” is the NATO bombing in 1999, which
was breaking the international law and unfortunately a precedent used by Russia in Georgia and Ukraine.

This decade ended with NATO-directed conclusions of the Bosnian civil war ratified by the Dayton Accords (1995), Kosovo War (1999), and Ohrid Agreement in Macedonia (2001) each represented a new stage in the learning curve for NATO, as well as a new application of force and coercive diplomacy for the Alliance. In each case, NATO carried out the mission and then adjusted its Strategic Concept to fit the new reality. (Seroka, 2007, p. 28)

The history of NATO after the collapse of the Soviet Union has often been seen as an alliance that is divided and obsolete. Not only by President Donald Trump, but also by Joseph Biden Jr., a Chairman of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on a hearing (11 March 2008), who deemed NATO to be an alliance “especially fractured and incoherent”. (Kampark, 2008, p. 443) Even with this remark President Biden as today, has pushed NATO enlargement with interest, in Biden’s view since 2008 Ukraine and Georgia should be granted Membership Action Plans (MAPs). (Kampark, 2008, p. 444) Today we are seeing this policy being implemented, but obviously this has drawn the line for Russia.

Even Finland and Sweden, which after the Second World War were neutral countries were pushed to membership. Not until the attack on Ukraine these two states have held unilateral neutral position for decades. Even Helsinki, Finland’s capital was the place where Helsinki accords creating the largest regional security organization in the world, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was signed.

5. RUSSIA’S VIEW

A very big part of the world including, China, India, South American states, African states, as well Asian countries does not condemn the war on Ukraine. This undoubtedly shows that Russia does not stand alone in the international community. But what is the vital connecting part that unites this stand? No one likes bullies. And US is the bully in the eyes of these countries because they are asked to comply with the moral rules of our civilization. This means the politicians in these countries are not able to do what they want in “their territory”.

Putin in his speech notes that what he is saying does not concern only Russia, and Russia is not the only country that is worried about this. This has to do with the entire system of international relations, and sometimes even US allies. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a redivision of the world, and the norms of international law that developed by that time and the most important of them, the fundamental norms that were adopted following WWII and largely formalized its outcome - came in the way of those who declared themselves the winners of the Cold War. (Putin, 2022)

Russian leaders since the mid-90s have claimed that the United States violated a pledge that NATO would not expand into Eastern Europe following German reunification. More recently, they have argued that Russian actions during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and in Ukraine were in part responses to the broken Non-Expansion Agreement. (R.Itzkowitz Shifrison, 2016, p. 7)

More recently, John Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt have argued that NATO enlargement is (or in Walt’s case, might be) to blame for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Mearsheimer claims the ‘main cause’ for Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to invade ‘was that Ukraine was becoming a de facto member of NATO’ because of the US and other NATO-country weapons sales and military training provided to Kyiv.
Walt argues that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine ‘might’ have been a response to the security dilemma, and Russian beliefs that ‘NATO’s eastward expansion is threatening’. (Marten, 2023)

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The expansion of NATO helps keeping its vital traditional role as defensive pact by strengthening the military capabilities of the member states aiming to deterrent Russia. Russia is answering with deployment of weapons on the west borders as well in Belarus, its closest ally. Knowing that nuclear war cannot be won, it is not clear on what the deterrence is directed.

The world is left on the moral law that binds humanity to be human. The fact that the collective west stands united on the front shows that moral virtue is on the side of the west. The question which remains is whether we can have European security without Russia and can Russia develop itself without the collective west?

The fact that at the time of its disintegration at the end of 1991, the Soviet Union was the contemporary manifestation of a state entity that had, for the most part, existed in its current form for some 200 years; an entity that within the living memory of the living “Tsar” had been successfully defended against foreign invasion at a very great cost. As McGwire noticed it, the most striking part of the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the peaceable nature of the process.

As it is noted by strategists, Belarus and Ukraine provided defense in depth. Moscow is now within 250 miles of its country’s western border, while the territories on its southern flanks have been opened to hostile reinforcement by sea. So, is Ukraine the last straw for Russia and what is the path to peace?

The shortly living situation where Finland and Sweden were neutral, and the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and former Yugoslavia countries that formed a neutral band stretching across Europe from the Arctic to the Black Sea is no longer a possibility.

The Western Balkan security environment reflects the European and maybe furthermore, reflecting the Eurasian security, even the global security if we consider the NATO - Russia current position.

The deployment of nuclear weapon in Belarus is obviously an answer to Finland and Sweden joining NATO.

The fact that for the biggest two world nuclear superpowers the only valid treaty is the New Start which expires on February 4th, 2026 (U.S. Department of State, 2023) is not good news. And it also has global consequences for international security. We have war happening in Europe and the world as before is feeling the consequences.
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