



Evaluating NATO enlargement: scholarly debates, policy implications, and roads not taken

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Abstract

NATO's enlargement into Central and Eastern Europe after the Cold War is the subject of significant debate in academic and policy circles. With few exceptions, however, this debate focuses on single issues, such as whether enlargement led to the decline of the West's relations with Russia. In this framing document, we look to expand the debate. We do so by sequentially reviewing the process by which NATO enlarged, outlining the array of issue areas within which to assess the consequences of NATO enlargement, and highlighting the particular importance of counterfactual analysis to any judgment of enlargement's legacy. Building on a May 2019 workshop at Boston University, we also summarize the results of several articles that collectively evaluate the consequence of expansion for the USA, Russia, non-US NATO members, and the organization itself. Finally, we conclude by outlining elements of a broader research program on the aftereffects of NATO enlargement.

Keywords NATO · Russia · USA · Europe · International security · Counterfactuals

Introduction

NATO's enlargement into Central and Eastern Europe—including states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union itself—has been among the preeminent features of post-Cold War US foreign policy and European security. It has also been among the most controversial. When NATO enlargement was first broached in the 1990s, proponents advanced a range of interrelated propositions to argue that enlargement

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would broadly help stabilize Europe east of Germany while facilitating the spread of democracy and market capitalism (Asmus et al. 1995; Flanagan 1992; Lukes 1999; Asmus et al. 1993). Critics, however, countered that enlargement required NATO's existing members to defend a host of Central and Eastern European states of questionable strategic value, would antagonize Russia, and in any case was not as important for spreading democracy and capitalism as the European Union (Brown 1995; Waltz 2000; Reiter 2001; McGwire 1998; Kennan 1997). Several rounds of expansion later, these debates remain broadly intact. Advocates of continued enlargement see NATO's ongoing growth as central to consolidating the US-led liberal order and countering an increasingly assertive Russia, whereas skeptics see NATO as a core impediment to improved East–West relations and superfluous to European stability (Kupchan 2019; Daalder 2017; Walt 2018; Bandow 2019). In short, nearly three decades after NATO enlargement began, its merits and drawbacks remain as up for debate as ever.

Without claiming to resolve the NATO enlargement debate, this special issue looks to advance the conversation by assessing the impact of expansion—for better and for worse—on NATO as an institution, on Russia and its relations with the West, on the new member states of Central and Eastern Europe, on the USA, and on contemporary European security affairs. This effort carries both scholarly and policy implications. On one level, by distinguishing among enlargement's international, domestic, and institutional consequences, we hope to sharpen the contours of the dialogue by bringing fresh evidence—including an array of primary sources—to bear on the precise ways in which enlargement has variously affected transatlantic, European, and national politics.

At the same time, in an era when many analysts believe NATO's future is in doubt because of the skepticism expressed by US president Donald Trump and French president Emmanuel Macron, and the counterreaction by other NATO leaders including German chancellor Angela Merkel, assessing enlargement's legacy offers insight into the ways in which a fundamental change in European security structures may or may not affect the political life of the continent (*Economist* 2019; Brennan 2019; Reuters 2017; Heisbourg 2016). Ultimately, the more NATO enlargement is judged to have played a central role in stabilizing Eastern Europe, deterring Russian revanchism, structuring the politics of the alliance itself, or consolidating postcommunist domestic orders in former Warsaw Pact and Soviet states, the more likely that there will be objections to altering NATO's role in Europe. Conversely, the less NATO's role is viewed as necessary or beneficial across these broad issues, the more room there will be for those who envision a withering of that role. In short, assessing the legacy of NATO enlargement is more than just a reconsideration of water under the bridge; it promises to provide insight into deliberations surrounding NATO's future.

This is not the first effort to assess the consequences of NATO's eastward move. Still, much of the existing discussion has remained at one of the two poles: that NATO remains an indispensable alliance or—conversely—that it is the source of many problems in the world, especially the souring of Russia's relations with the West (Mearsheimer 2014; Posen 2014; Vershbow 2014; Kramer et al. 2015, 3; Brands 2019; Cancian and Cancian 2019). That said, work by Kimberly Marten



(2018), and others (German 2017; Poast and Urpelainen 2018), has begun examining the prospective mechanisms and pathways by which enlargement may have mattered. These projects all make valuable contributions to the intellectual and policy debate. Still, even these studies tend to focus on individual aspects of expansion in support of particular research questions. Although appropriate for the work at hand, still more research is needed to evaluate enlargement's consequences across the multiple issues and actors involved. Moreover, any analysis of NATO enlargement relies on more or less explicit causal and counterfactual claims. Accordingly, it is worth attempting to directly analyze the course, conduct, and consequences of NATO enlargement to precisely identify enlargement's effects on European and transatlantic politics while considering the costs and benefits of possible alternatives to enlargement. Not only is this approach needed to ensure analytically rigorous and robust results, but it helps advance the state of debate for policymakers and scholars.

The remainder of this introductory article proceeds in five sections: First, it reviews the origins and history of NATO enlargement to frame the debate over enlargement's legacy. Second, it delineates the core issues on which analysts could assess NATO expansion and discusses the specific issues addressed in this exercise. Third, the article highlights the importance of counterfactual analysis in assessing the consequences of NATO enlargement. Fourth, it summarizes the results from the studies presented in this project. Finally, it briefly outlines avenues for future research.

NATO enlargement: review and reprise

NATO enlargement developed over the course of the early to mid-1990s as NATO member states and former Central and Eastern European members of the Warsaw Pact contemplated Europe's post-Cold War security order (Goldgeier 1999; Sarotte 2019a; Brown 1999). At the time, it was not obvious that NATO itself would persist in the post-Cold War world given the collapse of the communist threat it was founded to counter (Mearsheimer 1990; Cornish 2004; Sayle 2019; Waltz 1993, 76). If it did survive—so the logic went—it might need to transform into a largely political organization that would have more in common with the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) than the tight military alliance that existed during the Cold War (Kupchan and Kupchan 1991, 153–155; Duffield 1994/95, 766–772; Daalder 1999, chap. 1).

Lost in the deliberations over NATO's continuation were signs that NATO might not only survive but expand after the Cold War (Wallander 2000; Walt 1997). Preliminary hints came during the diplomatic dance surrounding German reunification. Coordinating with West German chancellor Helmut Kohl's administration, the USA under the George H.W. Bush administration successfully pushed to keep reunified Germany within NATO (Engel 2017; Kornblum 2018). This move not only formally enlarged the alliance east of its Cold War boundaries—encompassing the former East Germany, or what the USA referred to as the 'jewel in the Soviet imperial crown'—but blocked parallel Soviet efforts to use reunification to facilitate the creation of a new, pan-European security order that would see both the Warsaw



Pact and NATO dissolved (Shiffrinson 2018a, 149; Zelikow and Rice 1995). Concurrently, several Eastern European states began signaling that they wanted into the alliance, with policymakers from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland inquiring about NATO membership even at the start of 1990. Within months, US strategists were debating whether the USA and existing NATO members should signal ‘to the new democracies of Eastern Europe NATO’s readiness to contemplate their future membership’ (Shiffrinson 2016, 38).

By 1991–1994, the trend lines further clarified as the USA worked assiduously to keep NATO a vibrant security institution in post-Cold War Europe, and soon treated NATO enlargement as a prime way of doing so (Sayle 2019, chap. 10; Goldgeier 1999). The lessons of the twentieth century seemed clear to US policymakers and to many Europeans. In this narrative, the USA withdrew from Europe after the 1919 Versailles Treaty formally ended World War I and the result was another world war two decades later; America remained engaged on the continent after 1945, and the result was a prosperous and secure Western Europe (Chollet and Goldgeier 2008; Engel 2017, 77). As communist regimes crumbled, US officials decided that the USA had an opportunity to promote a Europe ‘whole and free.’ When they subsequently looked at the available institutions, NATO was the clear winner. It was a capable organization that the USA dominated, whereas the alternatives—the CSCE and the European Community (soon to become the European Union)—lacked either organizational capacity (CSCE) or US access (the EC/EU) to fulfill the USA’s hopes and ambitions.

The first steps toward enlargement came in the latter part of the George H.W. Bush administration. Amid the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and—subsequently—the Soviet Union, US policymakers developed NATO ‘liaison programs’ with former Warsaw Pact states to link them to NATO without offering membership. Given concerns with Western European outreach to the East, the possibility of a Soviet/Russian resurgence, and continuing calls from Eastern European states themselves, by mid-1992 this policy morphed into an effort to signal—as one interagency report put it—‘the new democracies that we do not rule out extending membership’ (quoted in Shiffrinson 2020b, 23). Soon thereafter, the USA began identifying ‘the conditions we want to see met before we consider new applicants to NATO,’ while preparing to mobilize support among existing allies for expanding the alliance in the near-to-medium term (52). The USA, in other words, looked to expand NATO even as the dust settled from the Cold War (Flanagan 2019).

Bush’s defeat in the 1992 US presidential election put these initiatives on hold. The newly inaugurated William Clinton administration, however, soon picked up where Bush left off (Flanagan 2019; Walker 2019). Despite internal fissures within the administration, President Clinton came to embrace NATO enlargement, seeing it as a way of anchoring the US presence in post-Cold War Europe and facilitating what Clinton himself termed the enlargement of the ‘community of market-based democracies’ (Goldgeier 1999, 39; Clinton 1994; Asmus 2004). After first proposing and agreeing on the Partnership for Peace as the primary focus for NATO’s eastern outreach, the Clinton administration’s push for enlargement—an outcome



favored by Republican and Democrats alike—reached a critical mass by the fall of 1994.¹ Soon, discussions were underway within NATO and with the leaders of various Eastern European states (particularly the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland) seeking admission to the alliance (Goldgeier 1999; Sarotte 2019b).

To be sure, efforts to expand the alliance into Eastern Europe were not accepted in all quarters. For one thing, although many Eastern European elites were enthused about joining the alliance, support was not universal in the former Eastern Bloc. Into early 1993, for example, Czech president Václav Havel mused about crafting a pan-European security order that would eliminate Cold War era alliances; likewise, many former communist officials were unenthused about integrating with former adversaries (Havránek and Jireš 2019). Still, with Havel coming around and Western-oriented leaders such as Poland's Lech Wałęsa eager to see their countries formally join the West, Eastern European support for enlargement coalesced (Sarotte 2019a). More intransigent opposition, however, came from Western Europe and Russia. Some Western European members of NATO were lukewarm toward the prospect of enlargement. France, in particular, viewed expansion as a challenge to European Community efforts to craft an independent foreign and security role (Schake 1998). Firm support for enlargement in Western Europe resided mainly among German national security officials, particularly Defense Minister Volker Rühle, who saw an opportunity to ensure that the eastern border of Germany would no longer be the eastern border of NATO (Voigt 2019).

Likewise, Russian leaders—including Russian president Boris Yeltsin—took a dim view of NATO's plans to expand. Even in 1992, US planners recognized that Russian policymakers might resist NATO enlargement, seeing it as a step toward redividing Europe (Lowenkron to Howe 26 March 1992). Still, as NATO enlargement took off, Russian opposition intensified. Already in late 1993, for instance, Yeltsin warned Clinton that NATO enlargement would be perceived in many Russian circles as 'a sort of neo-isolation of our country' (SecState to NATO Posts 9 October 1993; AmEmbassy Moscow to SecState 20 October 1993). Late 1994 saw the Russian leader flag similar issues, cautioning Clinton that enlargement 'will be interpreted and not only in Russia as the beginning of a new split in Europe' (SecState to AmEmbassy Moscow 6 December 1994), just as the Russian president bluntly stated in May 1995 that he saw 'nothing but humiliation for Russia' if NATO expansion proceeded (Summary Report 10 May 1995). Nor was Yeltsin alone; other Russian policymakers, including parliamentary leaders and officials in the Ministry of Defense, echoed Yeltsin throughout this period (Secretary of Defense 5 January 1994; Federal Assembly 25 April 1995).

US officials were not unmindful of Russian opposition, but they did not stop the enlargement process. Rather, US policy moved along parallel tracks with the USA's Western European partners and Russia. With Western Europe, officials in the Bush and Clinton administrations carved out a security role for the EC/EU via

¹ In the original logic for Partnership for Peace, the program would offer Eastern European states (and Russia) institutional ties to NATO but stop short of full membership. This approach was favored by the Pentagon as well as officials at the State Department who worked on Russian policy.



the Western European Union, while protecting NATO's prerogatives as the primary forum for European defense and security deliberations (NATO 1991; Pond 1992; Shiffrinson 2020a, b, 33–54; Sayle 2019, 235–240). This effort limited Western European states' ability to pursue a separate security policy, creating room for the USA to coordinate with European actors open to enlargement and use the resulting leverage to drive expansion (Hill 2018, 53–65, 79–87, 109–122).

At the same time, the Clinton administration coordinated closely with Russian elites, listening to their critiques and attempting to convince Yeltsin's team that enlargement would not pose a threat (Talbot 2002; Goldgeier 2018, 46–51). This approach was predicated on Clinton's assumption that Yeltsin's opposition was primarily due to fears that nationalists at home would use NATO enlargement against him politically—rather than being driven by national security concerns—and so could be assuaged by (1) adjusting the pace of enlargement to suit Yeltsin's domestic political needs and (2) cooperating with Russia in other venues (Goldgeier 1999). To this end, the Clinton administration agreed to delay concrete steps on NATO enlargement until after the 1996 Russian presidential election; explored ways of limiting the scope NATO enlargement (e.g., agreeing that permanent NATO forces would not be posted to Eastern Europe in the near term) to make the process more palatable to Russian sensibilities (Hill 2018, 136); and ultimately crafted what became the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act as a way of signaling that enlargement was not meant to redive Europe (Carr and Flenley 1999). To the extent that Russian officials sincerely viewed enlargement as a threat to the country's status and/or security rather than as political in nature, these steps did not—indeed, could not—address Russian complaints; after all, engagement was defined by issues the USA was willing to discuss, on terms decided by US policymakers (USDel Secretary to SecState 16 January 1994; O'Hanlon 2017, 5). Nevertheless, US efforts were intended to make the outcome more acceptable in the hopes that Russia would eventually accommodate itself to a new European security landscape featuring an expanded NATO.

The net result of Eastern European pressures, US enthusiasm for expansion, and limited opportunities for effective Western European and Russian opposition became clear as expansion became a reality. NATO's 'Study on Enlargement' was published in September 1995. It synthesized the Clinton administration's discussions within NATO and its outreach to Eastern Europe, underscoring that the alliance was open to new members and laying out criteria that states would have to meet to join the organization (NATO 1995). Though deference to Russian sensitivities delayed immediate follow-up (Goldgeier and McFaul 2003, 183–210; Savranskaya and Blanton 2017), NATO's July 1997 Madrid Summit saw the alliance formally invite the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to begin NATO accession talks. These three states were formally admitted to NATO in March 1999.

This was only the start of an expansion process that continues through the present—as former deputy secretary of state William Burns notes, 'expansion of NATO membership' has 'stayed on autopilot' since the 1990s (Burns 2019, 413). Indeed, with NATO members on record supporting the alliance's continued growth, and with leading Western officials from the late 1990s framing the alliance as a way of contributing to 'stabilization, stability, and democratization' in Central and Eastern



Europe (Hill 2018, 200), NATO's eastward move had no obvious geographic end within Europe (Art 1998, 341–342).²

With calls for membership continuing in the late 1990s from Eastern European states excluded from the first round of enlargement, NATO moved to routinize the enlargement process, creating the Membership Action Plan (MAP) in the spring of 1999 to guide future applicants. Almost immediately, seven new states (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) joined the MAP; subsequently, they were formally invited to begin accession talks in 2002 and admitted to the alliance in 2004 (NATO n.d.; NATO 2019). From there, NATO turned toward incorporating a range of states in Southeastern Europe, admitting states such as Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia from the mid-2000s onward. More dramatically, and despite Russia's warnings that it would strongly oppose the effort, the 2008 Bucharest Summit saw NATO pledge that Georgia and Ukraine would 'become members of NATO' (NATO 2008). In fact, outreach to Ukraine and Georgia remains ongoing despite the fact that the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and subsequent Ukraine conflict nominally convinced many NATO members that their admission was inadvisable (Ruger 2019).

Five broad, unstated assumptions appeared to underlie NATO policy. First, with the Soviet Union defunct, Russia in decline, and reunified Germany firmly anchored within NATO, the prospect of great power war on the continent was virtually nonexistent. As such—second—NATO could expand eastward at limited risk while using membership to incentivize Eastern European states to embrace and internalize Western domestic institutions and values. Third, in doing so, the USA and its partners would construct a growing security system in which war would be off the table even as conditions—open markets and pluralist domestic institutions—that reinforced Western influence would expand; in effect, expansion would become a perpetual motion machine in which Western influence would grow alongside the alliance. Fourth, and partly as a product of the preceding, NATO would continue as Europe's premier security institution, under whose auspices other intra-European security institutions might be fostered (the view of some Western Europeans) or US dominance reified (the US preference) (Waltz 2000, 28–29). Finally, Russian complaints were manageable; provided the USA and its allies reached out, Russia could hopefully be convinced to accept a security system that threatened to leave it isolated if it didn't go along (Asmus et al. 1995, 20–25). If not, however, then an enlarged NATO would be in a better position to compete with Russia by virtue of its expanded roster and the resulting reach.³

Of course, NATO expansion did not occur in a strategic vacuum. In particular, enlargement from the late 1990s onward occurred as East–West relations deteriorated. This deterioration stemmed from many sources, including mutual suspicions of the other side's intentions, worries in Moscow that Russian interests were

² The 1949 Washington Treaty establishing NATO provided that the alliance was open for invitation to 'any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area.' See NATO (1949).

³ Clearly, not all of these assumptions are in harmony—the logic faced a number of internal tensions.



increasingly ignored by NATO member states, and concerns in Washington and other Western capitals that Moscow sought to revise Europe's post-Cold War settlement (Hill 2018; Stent 2014; Rumer and Sokolsky 2019). Although one might have expected these developments to call for a reassessment of the principles undergirding NATO expansion, the main consequence has instead been to reinforce the logic of NATO enlargement. Since the mid-2000s, Russian officials from President Vladimir Putin down have highlighted NATO enlargement as a particular problem for East–West relations, just as reciprocal fears of Russian behavior have driven many NATO members (particularly in Eastern Europe) to focus on using the alliance to confront and deter Moscow (Shanker and Landler 2007; Oliphant 2016; Landler and Cooper 2016). In effect, this process has redivided Europe as post-Cold War Russian leaders (and many Western officials and analysts) once feared. The collapse of East–West relations has thereby given new life to an enlarged NATO—in fact, judging from pronouncements by US and allied analysts and policymakers, enlargement itself has become a symbol of Western resolve in opposing Moscow and sustaining the West's preferred vision of Europe's security order (e.g., Burns and Lute 2019). At the same time, the EU's continued inability to create an effective security apparatus exacerbates the growing NATO–Moscow standoff, leaving European states seeking a hedge against Russian bellicosity with few alternatives besides the transatlantic alliance, and generating ongoing calls from Georgia, Ukraine, and others for further NATO expansion (O'Hanlon 2017, esp. 41–49; Jozwiak 2018; *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty* 2018).

To this end, the post-2014 period has seen the alliance expand the scope of its military and defense efforts in and around Eastern Europe. Both the Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations allocated billions of dollars to upgrade military infrastructure in NATO's post-Cold War member states and called upon other NATO members to match US efforts; military exercises focused on securing and defending NATO's Eastern flank against possible Russian aggression are growing (Shiffrinson 2018b); rotational troop deployments have accelerated; and the permanent stationing of NATO-allocated forces east of Germany is under discussion (Hunzeker and Lanoszka 2018). This change is particularly stark considering that NATO expansion since the 1990s involved comparatively little effort to prepare for the defense of its new members or project military power beyond the German border—the political commitment exceeded the alliance's military reach.⁴ NATO, having entered the post-Cold War era as an alliance primarily between the USA and the states of Western Europe, has expanded politically and (increasingly) militarily up to the border of Russia itself, encompassing an array of former Soviet allies and states that were once part of the Soviet Union.

⁴ Illustrating the point, testimony by Defense Department officials at the time of NATO enlargement focused primarily on the budgetary implications of NATO enlargement rather than the tasks of defending new NATO member states; see U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations 1998, 131–152. For subsequent military difficulties, see Sara Moller's and Paul Van Hooft's articles in this issue.



Framing the debates over enlargement's legacy

Given this complex history, evaluating the legacy of NATO enlargement is not easy. Large-scale and long-lasting policies generally carry multiple consequences, including some unanticipated at the time of the policy's creation. This is especially true with NATO expansion, where proponents and critics of the effort identify a range of positive and negative externalities. As noted, prior discussions have tended to focus narrowly on either enlargement's costs or its benefits, with critics making the case that enlargement has caused the collapse of US–Russian relations (and is even responsible for provoking the Russian invasion of Ukraine) and proponents praising the policy as one of the great success stories of US post-Cold War foreign policy.

This disinclination to weigh both costs and benefits may be partly paradigmatic. Realist scholars tend to downplay the relevance of NATO enlargement's effects on domestic societies in and around Europe to emphasize issues related to European security and great power politics. Conversely, constructivists and liberal analysts focus on enlargement's success in promoting Western values (broadly defined), democracy, and capitalism in post-Cold War Europe, rather than exclusively (or primarily) evaluating the hard security dimension of expansion. And students of policy processes, for their part, have written about the policy management aspects of enlargement, including what it tells us about national security decision-making in the USA and other allied countries and how enlargement has affected NATO as an organization (Brown 1995; Russett and Stam 1998; Reiter 2001; Epstein 2005; Thies et al. 2006; Bunde and Noetzel 2010; Adler 2008).

Recognizing the limits of single-paradigm treatments, we argue that the NATO enlargement debate does not lend itself to identification of a single aspect of enlargement's legacy as its *sine qua non*. Instead, the distinct approaches and issues embraced by scholars (and NATO itself) underscore the need for a broad-based effort to assess different aspects of enlargement, in order to arrive at a net assessment of enlargement for any or all of the actors involved. A quarter century after enlargement began in earnest, it is time to assess the costs and benefits of the policy and to consider the costs and benefits of potential alternatives proposed for securing Western interests, providing security to newly free countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and/or finding a place for Russia in a post-Cold War Europe. The point, in short, is to leverage analytic eclecticism to arrive at overarching judgments of the policy.

Building upon Kenneth Waltz's 'levels of analysis' (1959) approach toward understanding the sources of international competition while modifying it for an issue that is as much institutional as international, we argue that NATO enlargement's legacy needs to be analyzed at the *international level*, at the *domestic level*, and at the *organizational level*. In doing so, it's necessary to also account for the fact that the consequences of enlargement can vary by the *actors* involved. After all, even if NATO enlargement has antagonized Russia and harmed US–Russian relations, it may have also plausibly added to the security enjoyed by different states in Western or Eastern Europe; likewise—and as some US



policymakers suggest—enlargement may facilitate the European allies' tendency to cheap ride on the USA, but subsequently give the USA greater influence over European security debates (Posen 2014; Williams 2013; Layne 2001; Tonelson 2001). Moreover, and as emphasized below, it is important to keep in mind that any policy available to address European security after the end of the Cold War carried costs and benefits of some kind. The core question facing analysts evaluating the legacy of NATO enlargement is not whether enlargement was normatively good or bad, but in what aspects enlargement yielded positive or negative effects and how those compare to the effects of the alternatives available.

International debates

The first set of issues addressed in this volume concerns enlargement's international consequences and, in particular, its effects on the primary players vis-à-vis enlargement: Russia, the USA, and non-US NATO members. Here, scholarly and policy attention tends to fix on NATO members' relations with Russia. When the possibility of enlargement was first broached, many analysts and former policymakers cautioned that it would sully East–West relations by rousing Russian suspicions and redivide the continent (e.g., Brown 1995; Mandelbaum 1995, 9–13; Friedman 1998). As noted, Russian policymakers railed against the policy starting in the early 1990s, just as US analysts strove to reconcile NATO enlargement with Russian concerns.

With the downturn in East–West relations beginning in the late 2000s, the question became whether and to what extent the collapse of Moscow's relationship with the USA and its allies was at least partly a response to NATO enlargement. Certainly many Russian officials and a number of Western analysts view East–West tensions in these terms, treating NATO enlargement as a major source of Russian insecurity and thus a significant factor in prompting Moscow's recent bellicosity (e.g., Hertzshorn 2014; Matlock 2014; Mearsheimer 2014). Given that the NATO expansion discussion began in the early 1990s, however, and yet East–West relations did not worsen until the 2000s, there are debates over the extent of causality (Marten 2015, 2018; McFaul et al. 2014).

The question remains: To what degree, if any, did NATO enlargement prompt deterioration in East–West relations from their initial post-Cold War high, and how does enlargement compare to other policies (e.g., the wars against Serbia, Iraq, and Libya, and Western support for civil society in Russia and other post-Soviet states) in the panoply of Russian grievances? Closely linked to this is an ongoing policy issue: Given current attitudes in Washington, Moscow, and beyond, would a credible end to further NATO enlargement substantially improve East–West dynamics, particularly if the alliance committed not to extend further into the former Soviet Union (O'Hanlon 2017; Rumer and Sokolsky 2019)?

If relations with Russia present one criterion for evaluating the international consequences of enlargement, then US grand strategy offers another. The USA is the largest member of NATO financially, militarily, and demographically and has long been the principal proponent of enlargement inside the alliance. Although



US policymakers were not always fixed on expanding the alliance, the last quarter century has seen enlargement occupy a progressively more prominent place in US strategic discussions vis-à-vis Europe (Porter 2018). Still, the growing centrality of enlargement is not universally accepted as a net gain for the USA (Kay 1998, 103–114). Proponents see the link between the USA and an expanded NATO as contributing to European peace and economic growth in ways that redound to the USA's advantage (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016, 115–118, 171–184; Brands 2016, 3). Critics, however, allege that treating NATO and its continued ability to expand as the lodestone of US engagement in Europe is problematic; not only does it encourage allies to cheap ride on US security largesse, but it may encourage risky allied behaviors that can ensnare the USA in a broader set of security problems than it would otherwise face (Posen 2019; Walt 2017). In other words, NATO enlargement might be in the interests of the new member states, but might not bolster US security.

Still a third lens through which to evaluate the international consequences of enlargement concerns its effect on non-US NATO members. At the start of NATO enlargement, many policymakers in non-US NATO member states—including leaders in the UK, France, and Germany—were lukewarm about enlargement (Waltz 2000; Wolff 2000). Echoing skeptics in the USA, even policymakers who wanted to sustain NATO questioned the rationale for the alliance taking on new members and expanding its security obligations in Europe at a time when defense budgets were falling. To what degree have such concerns been vindicated by subsequent events, or been proved overly skeptical? On the other hand, the end of the Cold War left countries formerly under Soviet domination without a natural security anchor and facing great uncertainty over their relations with Russia and their immediate neighbors. Admission into NATO could help solve these problems while further adding the prestige of joining with the winning side in the Cold War and the benefits of aligning with the USA at the height of its power. A thorough analysis should probe whether these advantages have accrued in the form intended.

NATO went east while trying to accommodate competing imperatives by limiting NATO's military presence around Eastern Europe, engaging Russia (albeit in limited form) to forestall the possibility of a military confrontation, and insulating the process from domestic and foreign critics. Twenty-five years later, the effort to harmonize the West's myriad goals after the Cold War has demonstrably failed. Tensions with Russia are spiking, NATO planners confront the possibility that the alliance might need to undertake military action in Eastern Europe, and there are ongoing discussions about permanently stationing forces beyond Germany. Currently, it is unclear whether NATO's security commitments to Eastern Europe are viable—that is, whether the alliance has military options to protect states in the area at an acceptable political and strategic price. Questions also remain over (1) the willingness and/or ability of NATO's traditional members to secure Eastern Europe in whole or in part, and (2) whether other security options exist for structuring Western and/or Eastern European security. Scholars thus need to know the extent to which NATO can credibly honor commitments to its post-Cold War members, as well as how enlargement has altered Europe's security architecture and the nature of security problems on the continent. Underlying all this is a basic counterfactual: All



things being equal, are NATO's members better or worse off with the alliance having expanded after the Cold War?

Domestic-level considerations

The domestic consequences of NATO expansion provide another way of evaluating enlargement's legacy. Policymakers must generate political backing for any foreign policy initiative, especially if it is to prove sustainable (Hagan 1995, 122–124; Foyle 1999; Howell and Pevehouse 2007). Objectives must be clarified and tools to obtain those objectives identified to give guidance to the organs of government and to address domestic critics.⁵ Above all, policymakers must engage domestic constituencies to encourage domestic winners from any policy while placating any losers (Mayer 1992; Friman 1993). NATO enlargement—with its contentious domestic debates and implications for European security—is no exception. Further, domestic politics are often shaped by international politics, raising debates over how domestic security discussions are colored by the international repercussions (for good and for ill) of NATO's eastward move (Gourevitch 1978).

This dynamic has been on display in many NATO members. The US case is instructive. At the start of the enlargement debate in the early 1990s, the scope of the pro-enlargement coalition remained unclear. A number of senior officials in the Bush and Clinton administrations supported the initiative. Still, opposition came from certain quarters of the Departments of State and Defense—where officials worried about relations with Russia, the provision of new security guarantees, or both—as well as from some senior Congressional leaders, such as Georgia senator Sam Nunn, and from a range of analysts in the academy and at think tanks (Stuart 1996, esp. table 1). By the fall of 1994, however, the internal enlargement debate was largely over, even if some opposition to the policy remained (particularly at the Pentagon). The political coalition that enabled enlargement to go forward in the coming years was taking shape. Proponents inside the Clinton administration presented enlargement as a tool of democracy promotion in Central and Eastern Europe while Republicans on Capitol Hill, who gave enlargement a push in their 1994 Contract with America, were intent on showing their resolve to defend the newly free areas of Central and Eastern Europe from possible Russian revanchism. Both groups sought in part to appeal to voters of Eastern European descent, who were viewed as important constituencies in key midwestern states (Goldgeier 1999, 73–85).

Soon, a strong domestic consensus favoring enlargement formed and became predominant in US policymaking circles (Porter 2018). Alternative approaches discussed in the early to mid-1990s, such as emphasizing NATO's Partnership for Peace, using CSCE as the basis for a pan-European security architecture, or encouraging security solutions in Eastern Europe through the European Union, fell by the

⁵ An example illustrates the point. As the historian John Lewis Gaddis noted in *Strategies of Containment*, a major difficulty confronting the US' initial approach to containment was the inability of George Kennan—its principal architect—to clarify the strategy's objectives for those charged with implementing the policy; see Gaddis (1982, 53–86).



wayside as policymakers treated an expanded NATO as the crux of the US' post-Cold War efforts to craft a Europe whole, free, and at peace (Kornblum 2019).

More dramatically, US policymakers on both sides of the political aisle have made support for NATO's presence in Europe and continued expansion eastward a lodestone of US strategy. Senior officials from both parties regularly pledge US fidelity to the alliance, whereas suggestions that the USA might not fully embrace the alliance—as some inferred from Trump's failure to commit to NATO's Article V security guarantees early in his presidency—have been criticized (Wright 2017). This consensus, however, raises two interrelated issues central to understanding the course and consequences of NATO enlargement in US foreign policy. First, why did an enlargement consensus rapidly take hold in Washington, swamp challengers, and dominate policy discussions? Second, and more difficult to assess, is the strategic question: What, if any, strategic risks follow from treating NATO in its post-Cold War borders as the central pillar of US engagement in Europe and bypassing consideration of alternative options in shaping the US approach toward Europe?

In important ways, the Russian debate was the mirror image of that in the USA. As the Soviet Union broke apart, Yeltsin and many of the Russian reformers around him sought a cooperative relationship with the USA and NATO, seeing NATO's continuation as an element of stability in the post-Cold War world. As, however, it became increasingly clear that NATO was to expand into Eastern Europe, Russian opposition spiked. As early as the mid-1990s, Yeltsin and some of his advisers warned Clinton that enlargement would empower Russian nationalists, threaten reformers' tenure, and endanger vital Russian interests (Goldgeier and McFaul 2003, 183-210). Moreover, Russian discomfort remained even after Clinton responded by delaying enlargement until after Yeltsin's 1996 reelection—and became especially salient once former Warsaw Pact and Soviet states began entering the alliance from the late 1990s.

Seemingly both playing to and reifying the resulting sense of what many analysts describe as 'humiliation,' Russian presidents Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev have made opposition to NATO's presence in Eastern Europe a tenet of their foreign agenda and domestic narratives since the mid-2000s. Significantly, there is ongoing scholarly and policy discussion over whether this opposition primarily stems from genuine security concerns or from politically useful appeals to Russian nationalism (Mydans 2004; Eurasia News 2018; Sweeney 2010). Still, any assessment of NATO enlargement must grapple with the extent to which (1) it undercut Russian proponents of a more cooperative East–West relationship since the 1990s, and (2) the prospect of future expansion empowers Russian hawks today. Answers to these questions are of more than historical interest—they can help guide strategists seeking to stabilize relations with Moscow.

With regard to non-US NATO members, two distinct domestic considerations merit engagement. The first concerns political support for NATO versus its continental competitors. As noted, it was not impossible after the Cold War to imagine that NATO would gradually be supplanted by various European-based security schemes. Indeed, even after agreeing in the early 1990s that NATO would remain the primary venue for European security discussions, efforts to construct semi-independent European security arrangements under EU auspices continued, ranging



from the European Security and Defense Initiative to the more recent Permanent Structured Cooperation (*NATO Review* 2000; *DW* 2017). These designs have often failed to meet their stated operational intentions.⁶ Nevertheless, given ongoing European efforts and the mismatch between desired ends and outcomes, how has NATO enlargement affected the intra-European debate over an independent European security identity and, alongside it, support for NATO?

The second consideration is the domestic political fallout of NATO enlargement. This is highly relevant for those Eastern European states that entered the alliance after the Cold War. When first broached, NATO enlargement was presented as a way of (1) fostering economic and political liberalism in former communist states and (2) helping these countries adjust their security and foreign policies so as to diminish the risk of violence in the region (Asmus et al. 1993, *inter alia*). In furthering these goals, however, NATO enlargement plausibly created domestic political winners (e.g., political reformers, military reformers, and economically competitive industries) and losers (e.g., those seeking an independent Eastern Europe, traditional security sectors, etc.). Two decades of peace and stability in and around Eastern Europe long seemed to validate the claims of enlargement's proponents (Epstein 2005; Thies et al. 2006; Lanoszka 2020). However, democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland—and the risk of further backsliding in other NATO members—has reopened the debate (Wallander 2018; Burns and Lute 2019, 18–21). If nothing else, recent changes highlight that the domestic political consequences of NATO membership have not been entirely resolved. It therefore remains an open issue whether NATO enlargement has truly delivered on the domestic transformations highlighted by expansion proponents. On balance, has NATO helped these countries transition to liberal democratic capitalism while managing the domestic fallout from these changes, or is the post-Cold War status quo more fraught than proponents of enlargement would claim?

Organizational impact

Finally, and separate from the international and domestic repercussions of NATO enlargement, are enlargement's consequences for the alliance as an organization. To be sure, NATO—like other institutions—only exists at the behest of its members; it does not exert independent agency in world politics (Mearsheimer 1994, 13–14). Still, to the extent that its members aggregate resources via the alliance, it is worth investigating how NATO's eastward move has affected the alliance's ability to perform needed security functions. After all, NATO is first and foremost a military alliance. Hence, if the alliance is to meet its commitments and address the interests of its members, it must be able to conduct the military missions necessary to these ends (Waltz 2000, 32–34). Assessing enlargement's effects on the alliance as a military organization tasked with preparing for and deterring conflict is therefore as important as assessing its consequences internationally or domestically.

⁶ That said, they may be fostering deeper institutional integration; see Zielinski and Schilde (forthcoming).



One set of issues concerns the coherence of the alliance. During the Cold War, NATO members invested significant time and energy erecting a plausible defense against the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies (Duffield 1995; Kugler 1991; Davis 2008). Battle lines were sorted out; competing military doctrines were tested, evaluated, and integrated; military equipment was standardized so far as rival defense requirements and industrial bases allowed; command and control obligations were established; and military exercises allowed the alliance to train to fight as a more or less coherent unit. Faced with the prospect of NATO enlargement in the early to mid-1990s, critics argued that such tasks would be difficult to replicate if NATO moved eastward. By this logic, the alliance might increase in breadth but sacrifice depth by taking in new member states with little experience in Western approaches to defense, at a time of falling military budgets and absent a pressing external threat to give impetus to sorting out the array of tasks modern militaries must undertake when fighting with partners (Clemens 1997, 353–357).

Hints of problems along these lines emerged in NATO operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan, where even longstanding allies faced interoperability problems, as well as difficulties in sharing intelligence and structuring rules of engagement (Giegerich and von Hlatky 2019; Auerswald and Saideman 2014; Frontline 2000; Department of Defense 1999). Still, so long as NATO did not face the prospect of having conflict forced upon it, the risks seemed tolerable. Confronted, however, with resurgent tensions with Russia after the mid-2000s, the alliance has found itself working to accommodate the renewed possibility of high-intensity combat operations against a capable challenger (Binnendijk and Priebe 2019; Barrie et al. 2019, *inter alia*). Accordingly, analysts need an accounting of the ways in which enlargement has shaped NATO's ability to craft an effective response to the alliance's contemporary military challenges, alongside its successes and failures in adjusting to post-Cold War military missions in Europe and beyond.

Related to the preceding is the question of NATO's credibility along its eastern flank (Shlapak and Johnson 2016, 3–4; Simón 2014, 67). Once NATO added the Baltic states as members, it eliminated most of the geographic barriers separating NATO and Russian military forces that had obtained since the breakup of the Soviet Union. At the time, enlargement skeptics challenged the logic of these moves, questioning whether NATO could meet its security obligations under such conditions (Hendrickson and Spohr 2004, 327–328). Proponents, however, emphasized that further expansion would reinforce Western security by helping to engage Russia, expand the alliance's reach, and foster European contributions to collective security and military contingencies; although unstated, it may also have been seen as a way of bolstering deterrence by increasing NATO's ability to deter or dissuade challenges (US Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations 2003). With the growth of NATO–Russian tensions over the last decade, these competing logics have been put to the test, with policymakers struggling to adapt the organization for deterrence along NATO's new eastern flank. The question thus becomes: To what extent has enlargement helped or hindered NATO's ability to address post-Cold War European military scenarios, especially those involving states near Russia's border?

Last, and perhaps most fundamental, are debates over enlargement's effects on the alliance's foundational purpose. Despite having been formed in large part to balance



the Soviet Union, NATO—at least rhetorically—was presented after the Cold War as a collective *security* rather than a collective *defense* organization, with a general security purpose no longer oriented against Russia (Yost 1998; Flanagan 1992, 142). In principle, this meant that the alliance would function as much to address the broader security concerns of NATO members (and, presumably other actors) as it would to defend them from attack from an outside country. How was the alliance repackaged for this task? As importantly, and given efforts such as the deployment of rotational military forces to the Baltic States and creation of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, to what extent is NATO adjusting itself to accommodate a new period of military tensions in Europe? Has the expanded alliance successfully refocused for today's collective defense missions, or does collective security—and perhaps further enlargement—still generate a pull in NATO circles? Moreover, in a period of renewed tensions with Russia, is refocusing on collective defense made more difficult with a geographically enlarged alliance that includes a diverse group of new member states? Evaluating NATO expansion, in short, requires understanding how enlargement has simultaneously reflected and affected the organization's own understanding of its role in European security.

The role of counterfactual analysis and inference

As the preceding section implies, any consideration of the costs and benefits of NATO enlargement relies on at least one of the two methodological options. The first is counterfactual analysis (Van Evera 1997, 25–26, 48; George and Bennett 2005, 167–168; Tetlock and Belkin, 1996). Counterfactuals rely on comparing the outcomes of interest in the case(s) at hand with the outcomes in a hypothetical case in which the independent variable in question (here, NATO enlargement) is absent or valued differently. As James Fearon describes the logic:

Suppose it is hypothesized that C was a cause of event E.... [W]hen experimental control and replication are not possible, analysts have available a choice between two and only two strategies for 'empirically' testing this hypothesis. Either they can imagine that C had been absent and ask whether E would have (or might have) occurred in that counterfactual case; or they can search for other actual cases that resemble the case in question in significant respects, except that in some of these cases C is absent (or had a different value). (1991, 171)

Clearly, this method is difficult to execute and often yields contentious findings (George and Bennett 2005, 230–231). Indeed, the causal weight assigned to any independent variable is often subject to debate in any body of social science or work of history, thereby leaving counterfactual arguments contestable and the results potentially suspect. Nevertheless, we believe the approach offers analytic utility in the NATO enlargement case.

On one level, the more analysts can offer a plausible explanation for why the case(s) observed occurred as they did—particularly one using general theoretical or historical arguments—the greater the ability to leverage counterfactual analysis



by asking how a causal chain would have played out if a certain independent variable were valued differently. This is a viable option in the context of NATO enlargement given the robust literatures describing the predicted and actual consequences of enlargement. Simply put, the alleged causal chains linked to enlargement (or the lack thereof) are often already specified or suggested in different literatures. This situation allows scholars to directly consider counterfactuals by leveraging the received wisdom while asking (1) whether the outcome(s) in question are clearly related to the alleged causes, and (2) whether and to what degree alternative outcomes would have occurred had these causes been absent.

At the same time, we believe it is unnecessary to adopt a strict counterfactual approach—one that relies on varying as little as possible of the historical record to consider alternative outcomes—to detail and evaluate the overarching consequences of enlargement. As noted earlier in this piece and discussed in greater detail in several of the articles in this issue, a number of alternatives to NATO enlargement have either been considered at various points, or are suggested by the history. Accordingly, a looser counterfactual approach—one that highlights plausible outcomes and processes that might have obtained if NATO enlargement had not occurred as it did while holding constant background conditions at the time—suffices to generate an informed judgment of NATO enlargement's results. This modified logic allows scholars to employ a historically grounded approach that leverages the arguments, expectations, and approaches of actors involved to investigate not only the role of NATO enlargement in the outcomes of interest, but also highlight potential alternate outcomes that might have come about had expansion not occurred or occurred in a different form.⁷

Again, this is not the first project to leverage counterfactuals to engage the NATO enlargement debate (Marten 2018). Still, the articles in this issue build upon existing work by considering a broader set of issues affected by NATO expansion and, in many instances, discussing a range of alternative policies that were discussed at various points over the past quarter century. This expanded set of counterfactuals helps to re-evaluate prominent issues such as whether the West might have avoided poor relations with Russia, alongside subtler concerns such as whether there were alternative ways of promoting democratic reform across Central and Eastern Europe or fostering European security after the Cold War. Put simply, counterfactual analysis in some form is critical both for assessing whether a different policy would have produced a distinctly different result (e.g., a different outcome in US–Russian relations), and for weighing the costs and benefits of the policy chosen relative to its primary alternatives.

The second methodological option for evaluating the costs and benefits of NATO enlargement relies on the logic of process tracing, that is, rigorously assessing sequences of events within a single episode in order to determine the mechanisms through and conditions under which an outcome occurred (George and Bennett 2005, 205–232; Bennett and Checkel 2015). This approach is especially useful

⁷ In Fearon's terms, we are interested not only in whether Cause C is linked to Outcome E, but in further identifying what outcomes *instead* of E would have obtained if C were absent.



in helping to determine the relative salience of NATO enlargement compared with other factors affecting the current state of European security affairs. At root, NATO enlargement is not the only variable shaping contemporary European security, be it on issues of East–West dynamics and the security of NATO’s eastern flank, or questions about alliance burden sharing, doctrine, and command and control procedures. European politics have been influenced by domestic political debates in the USA and elsewhere, external events (e.g., conflicts in the Middle East), the growth of other security structures, changing leadership priorities, and other variables that are only loosely (if at all) connected with NATO’s expansion.

Thus, in addition to determining how NATO enlargement affected European security given plausible roads not taken, it is also important to investigate the degree to which NATO enlargement is responsible for the current state of European security affairs compared to the other factors that may be at work. Process tracing can assist in this task by providing a framework within which analysts can assess whether, why, and how NATO enlargement and/or other variables shaped the range of outcomes (e.g., NATO operational difficulties, democratization in Eastern Europe) of interest in these studies. The key in doing so—as several studies in this issue highlight—is to carefully reconstruct the history and causal pathways involved while asking whether NATO’s expansion played a necessary, sufficient, or contributing role.

Summarizing the results

What, then, do the scholars in this special issue find? In lieu of an overarching net assessment, the results of this study showcase that the consequences of NATO enlargement have varied by the actors involved even when counterfactuals are considered. Overall, the results for the USA have been decidedly mixed. Although reinforcing US influence and dominance in Europe, enlargement has also obligated the USA to take on additional security commitments with less oversight of the issues involved, all while antagonizing Russia. Enlargement did not uniquely cause Russian aggrandizement or opposition toward the West, but NATO’s post-Cold War centrality and Washington’s growing ambivalence toward Russian concerns about continued NATO enlargement certainly contributed to the downturn in East–West relations.

Enlargement had advantages and drawbacks for Western Europe as well. Although the region’s member states have been able to cheap ride on US security guarantees as part of the NATO enlargement deal, expansion has also undercut Western Europe’s push to craft a separate security apparatus and increased its dependence on the USA for hard security. NATO as an organization has experienced similar dynamics. On the one hand, enlargement increased the reach of the organization. Nevertheless, it also hollowed out NATO’s military capabilities while increasing notional security commitments. Eastern European states, conversely, seem to have largely benefited from the alliance’s eastward drive. NATO expansion may not have been necessary for their liberalization and reform, but it likely helped them obtain more security than they could have achieved on their own.



Previewing the analyses

From historian Timothy Andrews Sayle's perspective (Sayle 2020), the age-old adage that NATO was there 'to keep the Russians out, the Germans down, and the Americans in' guided decision-making after the Cold War as it had earlier. Though some Western and Russian policymakers occasionally mused that Russia might eventually join NATO, Sayle highlights the pervasive concern that letting the Russians into the Alliance would bring trouble. There was therefore a limit on how far Western engagers were willing to go with Russia even as NATO was repackaged as a collective security organization for post-Cold War Europe. Nor was mistrust of policymakers in Moscow the only continuity with the Cold War period, as German unification kept the German question alive. In fact, Sayle writes, 'By the end of the Cold War, Margaret Thatcher was keeping a map in her handbag that showed the expansion of German territory over the centuries.' Meanwhile, the Americans, too, wanted to stay in—a call echoed by more than a few Western and European actors—and NATO was the way to that end. Given this trifecta, and given NATO's Cold War era expansion, Sayle argues that the strategic rationale for enlargement to Eastern Europe was strongly present even at the dawn of the post-Cold War era.

Still, even if the logic for NATO enlargement was present at the creation, it is nevertheless puzzling that enlargement has become a pervasive and durable theme in European security discussions given the alternatives available and opposition (at least early on) to the policy. To this end, Joshua Shiffrin examines the drivers of what he terms the 'enlargement consensus' in US foreign policy and the consequences thereof (Shiffrin 2020a). Laying out a series of hypotheses drawn from international relations (IR) theory and policy discussions that might explain the sustained push for enlargement, he finds that each explains some aspect of US policy toward expansion without capturing the overarching trend. Instead, Shiffrin argues that the enlargement consensus emerged because of a 'perfect storm of systemic and domestic conditions'—including a US leadership seeking preeminence in Europe, Russian weakness, and a policymaking system that limited reconsideration of the roads taken—that swamped possible alternatives. Regardless, the process has generated mixed results at best for US national security. Although enlargement may have helped pacify Eastern Europe and garnered US leverage over political and security affairs in Western Europe, it has come at the expense of limited flexibility with and tendency to overreact to Russia, alongside allied cheap riding.

If Shiffrin finds the results mixed, Rajan Menon and William Ruger (Menon and Ruger 2020) argue that enlargement has been a disaster for the USA. In their telling, enlargement has compromised US national security by antagonizing Russia, increasing the tendency of European allies to free ride, and requiring the USA to protect a series of weak and vulnerable states of questionable relevance to US interests. Driving this dynamic—they argue—has been the USA's post-Cold War realist grand strategy and the tendency to use NATO as a tool of US power maximization. Their conclusion is simple and provocative: the best path forward for the USA is attempting to improve burden sharing within an expanded alliance, reengaging with Russia, and potentially reducing US security commitments in Europe.



What, then, of Russia? Examining the West's relations with Russia, Kimberly Marten observes that NATO enlargement is not 'a discrete event in the panoply of Russia's security relationships with the West' (Marten 2020). Rather, Western policy after the Cold War provided plenty of fodder for Russian resentment. This included NATO's 1995 NATO airstrikes against Serbia, the 1999 Kosovo War, the 2003 Iraq War, and Western backing for the 'color revolutions' in states around Russia's periphery from 2003 to 2005. Given this, Marten proposes that the decline of Western-Russian relations was overdetermined and NATO enlargement hardly a decisive factor. Instead, to the extent that enlargement contributed to current tensions, it was not because NATO threatened Russia, but because expansion highlighted Russia's declining status. In the Russian assessment, the USA acted as if Russian interests were of limited importance and could be shaped by the West. Meanwhile, each side retained incompatible visions for the non-Baltic states of the former Soviet Union. The USA and its allies believed these countries were free to choose their own futures, whereas Russia believed that they belonged to its privileged sphere of influence. NATO enlargement may thus have reinforced Russian opposition to Western policy, but it was simply one factor among many in the renewal of estrangement.

Like Marten, Andrey Sushentsov and William Wohlforth underscore that NATO enlargement did not cause Western relations with Moscow to plummet. Instead, the continued centrality of NATO—itsself a cardinal point of US policy—as a security organization after the Cold War antagonized Russia by limiting its ability to shape European security developments (Sushentsov and Wohlforth 2020). This, in conjunction with Russia's desire to exert influence after the Cold War, primed European politics for Russian revisionism. Still, with the USA and its partners looking to use NATO to reshape European politics, revisionism was a two-way street. Just as the West responded to the threat of Russian revanchism, so too did Russia respond to Western revisionist impulses. Sushentsov and Wohlforth therefore reach the powerful conclusion that the estrangement of NATO and Russia over the post-Cold War period 'is best understood as an offensive-realist tragedy featuring two egoistic security seekers as opposed to a morality play with only one side in the bad guy role.' At root, 'both Russia and the USA were revisionists.'

Just as NATO enlargement affected the USA and Russia, so too has it affected NATO's other members along with transatlantic and European politics (broadly defined). Several of the articles capture the range of internal and external consequences involved. Alexander Lanoszka argues that NATO enlargement has proved strongly beneficial for Europe and carried few negative consequences (Lanoszka 2020). The prime benefit comes from an expanded NATO having offered a needed hedge against Russian attempts to reconstitute the former Soviet empire and more generally assert itself in its near abroad. By extension, had NATO not enlarged, one would not see the broadly stable Eastern Europe nor the comparatively geographically and strategically constrained Russia of today. At the same time, the costs of expansion have been limited. In this assessment, not only can NATO successfully extend deterrence to eastern flank countries that might seem difficult to secure, but even ostensible limits and drawbacks to enlargement (e.g., the eroding relationship with Moscow and democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe) are difficult to link to NATO expansion. Lanoszka thus concludes that, with costs low and benefits high,



expansion has been a boon for Europe—or, as he pithily puts it, ‘thank goodness for NATO enlargement.’

Taking a different tack, Paul Poast and Alexandra Chinchilla challenge the idea that NATO expansion was, as many analysts and policymakers claim, responsible for democratic consolidation across Eastern Europe after 1991 (Poast and Chinchilla 2020). By looking at the timing of democratization in states in the region, comparing across cases, and leveraging the fact that different states entered NATO at different times, they report that it was anticipation of membership in the European Union rather than NATO that primarily drove democratic development. In fact, Poast and Chinchilla even find that efforts to link democratization with NATO membership have been ‘inconsistently applied.’ Rather than being directly causal, NATO primarily affected the establishment of civilian control over the military—certainly an important political development, but hardly supporting the claim that enlargement facilitated and ensured democracy. Although it may still be the case that NATO enlargement was necessary for EU engagement in Eastern Europe (Talbot 2019, 409), the result raises important questions surrounding the domestic consequences of expansion for NATO’s newer member states.

Nor are the USA, Russia, and NATO’s European members the only states affected by enlargement. Importantly, Susan Colbourn reminds us that there is not one North American NATO member, but two (Colbourn 2020). Like the USA, Canada sought to remain involved in Europe after the Cold War and, to a degree seldom appreciated, helped push NATO’s expansion. Drawing on recently declassified Canadian sources, Colbourn quotes Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in September 1991 describing his desire to ‘prod the Bush administration and our other allies into taking the necessary next step in the continuing evolution of East–West relations.’ Furthermore, when the Partnership for Peace was proposed, Canadian policymakers were eager that it provide Eastern European states with a path to full membership in the alliance rather than offering a permanent waiting room. Driving this push was a mixture of memory and ambition. Ultimately, not only did Canadian leaders see NATO expansion as a way of retaining the alliance’s importance to post-Cold War security discussions, but doing so would ensure a Canadian voice in European security debates—no small concern given Canada’s sacrifices in two world wars and the long struggle with the Soviet Union.

As for organizational consequences, Sara Moller examines the impact of NATO enlargement on its role as a regional defensive alliance (Moller 2020). Her conclusion is stark: ‘At both the strategic and military level,’ she writes, ‘NATO enlargement was poorly planned and implemented.’ Because security considerations were never at the root of the Western decisions to enlarge the alliance, the USA and its allies did not engage the implications of expansion for NATO’s core military functions. Indeed, at the start of enlargement in the early to mid-1990s, planners assumed that the military environment would remain broadly hospitable for the indefinite future (irrespective of talk of possibly needing to hedge against Russian revisionism). ‘Officially,’ Moller offers, ‘NATO declared that it would invite candidates for membership using the criteria identified in the so-called Perry Principles—collective defense, democracy, consensus, and collective security.... In practice, the allies agreed to overlook the first principle in favor of the other three in order to implement



NATO enlargement quickly.’ This tendency to overlook defense issues continued into the 2000s as NATO spread across the continent. With the return of military tensions with Russia, the enlarged alliance thereby faces real difficulties in generating consensus about the scope of extant military problems, as well as allocating appropriate attention and resources.

In addition to imperiling NATO’s collective defense functions, enlargement also undercut European military capabilities. Here, as Paul van Hoof’s article shows, the US’ single-minded focus on making NATO the primary security venue in continental Europe and retaining US oversight of the alliance stifled European efforts to build independent capabilities (Van Hoof 2020). This manifested collectively (e.g., contributing to the limited success of different European Union military security arrangements) and individually (e.g., encouraging European member states to underinvest in their own military forces). Needless to say, this process has left both the organization and the USA (as NATO’s main security patron) overexposed. As van Hoof writes, ‘By insisting that NATO was the only game in town, and then using it as an all-purpose tool for US foreign policy interests, the United States increased the demand on its resources and left itself with few opportunities to share costs.’ Collectively, van Hoof’s findings amount to a strong argument that NATO enlargement, at least in the form practiced since the 1990s, has left European defenses less robust than might have otherwise been the case.

In the end, as Stéfanie von Hlatky and Michael Fortmann show, NATO has been torn between two conflicting impulses (von Hlatky and Fortmann, 2020). Prior to enlargement, many NATO members sought to move NATO away from its Cold War era collective defense mission toward serving as a cooperative security institution that would limit interstate tensions and conflict before they began. With enlargement, however, this impulse was challenged and eventually undermined by NATO’s new Eastern European members, which, despite paying lip service to cooperative security, primarily saw NATO as an insurance policy against Russia. These impulses were clearly in conflict, yet were not—indeed, could not—be reconciled. As a consequence, whereas the demands for collective defense went up thanks to enlargement (and Russia’s eventual reaction), the will and ability of all NATO members to provide for that defense languished for much of the post-Cold War period. It may well be the case that Russia is deterred by the prospect of NATO collective action in defense of its Eastern European member states, but, at the military level, the organization is now hurriedly trying to make up for lost time.

Conclusion: toward a research agenda

The articles in this special issue are designed to accelerate the process of evaluating the legacy of NATO enlargement at a time when the alliance’s future remains uncertain. Insofar as further enlargement remains a possibility, this effort can help policymakers and scholars alike assess the merits and drawbacks of expanding NATO’s commitments still further. Conversely, it may also help identify the opportunities, risks, and limitations of capping or even curtailing NATO’s existing obligations. Ultimately, the more enlargement is linked to outcomes believed to promote



a positive security environment for NATO member states, the stronger the case for expansion; the looser that connection, or the more expansion is found to have contributed to problematic security results, the stronger the case for capping or walking back NATO's presence. Baldly stated, rigorously evaluating NATO's post-Cold War history can provide insight into NATO's future.

This special issue is not meant to be the last word on NATO expansion's legacy—future work is needed to build on the results reported here. Four areas of research seem especially fruitful. First, future research may wish to further explore the themes discussed in this volume as new evidence comes to light. As an initial exercise in advancing a research agenda that speaks to contemporary policy concerns, the articles in this volume are necessarily limited in the data and evidence at their disposal. Particularly as archives open, interviews accumulate, and evidence on military, political, and economic trends clarifies, analysts should subject the findings in this project to further scrutiny, and grapple with the topics raised in this forum using new tools and sources.

Second, additional research may fruitfully explore the interaction between individual states' strategies and the consequences of NATO enlargement. NATO enlargement did not happen in a vacuum. As the process enlargement rolled forward, different states within and outside of the alliance adjusted their policies to respond to the rush of events; by the same token, the enlargement process likely accounted for such developments as NATO itself accommodated new facts on the ground. Future work may wish to explore these dynamics and assess the mechanisms by which (1) individual states' strategies affected the course and conduct of NATO enlargement and (2) NATO enlargement influenced individual state foreign and security policies, as well as assessing the successes and failures witnessed along the way.

Third, more work is needed to analyze the drivers of NATO enlargement both historically and in the contemporary world. To be sure, there is no dearth of discussion on the ostensible reasons the alliance has gone east and continues to do so. Still, scholars and analysts alike need to probe whether these match the empirical record, as well as whether the stated reasons are true drivers of the phenomena, or simply rationales used to justify a policy arrived at for other reasons. This issue is one where combining historical research and social science techniques may yield particularly valuable insights. It may also allow scholars to fruitfully engage in policy debates, given the tendency for policymakers to craft narratives surrounding the course and conduct of NATO expansion thus far in support of the alliance's ongoing (and potentially growing) role throughout Europe.

Finally, it is worth considering how to weigh the salience of the successes and failures wrought by enlargement. The decision may stem from individual analysts' preferences. For instance, two individuals could agree that US–Russian relations would have been more stable while Central and Eastern European states would have been worse off economically and politically absent enlargement, yet still disagree over the merits of this outcome. Those who prioritize relations between major powers, believe the absence of NATO's expansion could have led to better US–Russian relations, and/or believe that other routes might have contributed to a stable Eastern Europe may be inclined to oppose enlargement; in contrast, those who emphasize the spread of liberal democracy, believe NATO was the only option for stability



across Eastern Europe, and question whether the US–Russian relationship would have been markedly different without enlargement may favor expansion. We ourselves, for example, agree on how to go about evaluating the costs and benefits of enlargement but somewhat disagree on the merits of the policy because we place different weights and assign different probabilities to those different factors.

In the final analysis, our purpose here is not to decide once and for all whether NATO enlargement was the right policy, but rather to improve the quality of the discussion surrounding the policy. Accordingly, additional research that tracks how individual analysts weigh the merits of particular outcomes, and/or identifies outcomes that individuals holding different preferences would still accept as salient, may help move the NATO enlargement debate forward. Likewise, by engaging research in IR theory, additional work may be able to link the outcomes associated with enlargement to broader insights about the factors and conditions that—*ceteris paribus*—contribute to peace, economic growth, political influence, and other broadly positive results. Needless to say, this provides another path toward weighing the salience of enlargement while connecting NATO expansion to more general IR theory discussions.

NATO enlargement remains one of the most controversial and significant developments in foreign and security affairs since the end of the Cold War. Having begun at a time when European security and defense never seemed more propitious, the enlarged alliance now confronts a redivided Europe, a resurgent Russia, and renewed Western defense challenges. As noted, scholars, policymakers, and analysts disagree over enlargement’s role in contributing to this state of affairs. It is thus long overdue to directly engage the drivers, course, and consequences—for better and for worse—of NATO expansion, across the range of issues and countries it affected. Nearly three decades on, scholars and policymakers alike need to understand exactly where and how NATO expansion met its objectives or faltered in its aspirations, and what analysts in the USA, Europe, and beyond can learn from the experience.

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Compliance with ethical standards

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