

Undermining Security? The Post Cold War Enlargement of NATO

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KATHARINA REMSHARDT, APR 29 2012

Since its foundation in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has grown from originally twelve to twenty-eight member states, including numerous countries from the former Warsaw pact. NATO's post-Cold War eastward enlargement started off in 1999 with the admission of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, followed by Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and the Baltic states in 2004 and most recently by Croatia and Albania, who joined the Alliance in 2009. Prospective members include Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, as well as Ukraine and Georgia. The official justification for this continued "open door policy", as laid out in the *Study on NATO Enlargement* from 1995, has been the desire to enhance political and social stability on the continent and build a Europe "whole and free, united in peace, democracy and common values" (NATO, 2011a, online). This has been largely re-affirmed in the 2010 New Strategic Concept agreed upon at the Lisbon summit (NATO, 2011a, online).

However, the process of enlargement has been accompanied by a vigorous debate, both within academic and executive circles, especially during the 1990s (Kay, 1998, p. 103). Various arguments have been put forward against the rationale of enlargement, but this essay shall focus on two recurring notions that can be identified within this context. The first one is the idea that the accession of new members with vastly different historical pathways, interests and capacities is fundamentally undermining NATO's homogeneity, manageability and effectiveness (Kay, 1998, p. 113; Sperling, 1999a, p. 14) and thereby ultimately damaging to European security as a whole. The second notion is the risk of estranging the Russian Federation, which has regarded the widening of NATO's sphere of influence since the fall of the 'Iron Curtain' with unconcealed suspicion (Kay, 1998, p. 89; Perlmutter, 2001, p. 143). The extension of NATO membership to countries of the former Eastern bloc was conceived by many scholars as an over-hasty act of self-legitimization (Clemens, 1999, p. 140) and inappropriate answer to the systemic changes in Europe after the end of the bipolar order (Kay, 1998, p. 103).

The time has come to reassess the accounts of both critics and proponents of the post-Cold War enlargement process and its implications. This essay shall argue that NATO enlargement by and large has not undermined European security. It will refute the claim of membership extension having diluted NATO both on empirical and theoretical grounds as it is arguably based on flawed assumptions about the nature and role of NATO in the European security system. Furthermore, the official discourse of NATO as an agent of democratic change in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) will be pegged against factual evidence and supported by the suggestion that NATO, along with other institutional actors and the European Union in particular (Sperling, 1999a, p. 7), has in fact assisted the establishment of a European 'security community'. Finally, NATO's relation with Russia will be conceptualized, disproving the allegation that expansion has substantially damaged the possibility of cooperation. The aim will be to put NATO's enlargement policy into the broader context of the post-Cold War transformations and to demonstrate that it indeed has been the only viable response to a shifting European security situation.

Theoretical Framework

Given the flexibility riddling the very notions of both 'Europe' and 'security', it is an essential first step to clarify their meanings and further illuminate the theoretical framework within which these concepts are going to be used. In the

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pages that follow, 'Europe' shall be defined in mostly geographical terms, including all established and aspiring members of the European Union (EU) and their direct neighbours. In accordance with this definition, Russia has to be seen as a crucial player within the European security environment, given the arguably disruptive potential that has repeatedly been demonstrated during various gas disputes and the 2008 Georgia crisis. However, this is not to say that the Russian Federation has simply assumed the past antagonistic role of the Soviet Union as security relations and the relation with NATO have certainly grown more multifaceted since 1991.

Put very simply, Europe is 'secure' if conflict within the region and its periphery is absent and a comparatively stable socio-political order with a set of common and broadly adhered-to rules is in place. Arguably, European security today has been fundamentally shaped by the past experience of two world wars and therefore is less focused on a hostile 'other' than on preventing history from repeating itself (Wæver, 1988, p. 90). Although the contemporary European security system is not upheld by NATO alone, but a range of interacting institutions such as the EU and the OSCE (Webber et al., 2004, p. 10), the alliance still functions as a significant provider of security in Europe (Sperling, 1999b, p. 195) and therefore needs to be operational. Its concrete institutional value arguably lies within its capacity to organize widely accepted military operations in crisis situations (Webber et al., 2004, p. 10).

On a more abstract note, the concept of 'European security' will be closely linked to the idea of successfully balancing the fears of states and other relevant security actors against each other. Hereby it does not matter whether a threat is *imminent* in its nature and possible outcomes, or merely *perceived*. This already hints at a central ontological commitment. This essay will take a constructivist approach to security studies, thus acknowledging the constitutive salience of norms, values and ideas in shaping perceptions, objectives and behaviour of actors, who are operating in a world that itself is shaping as well as shaped by them (Farell, 2002, p. 50). As Farell aptly points out, it is *shared* rather than *individual* norms and values that matter most when it comes to the creation of what Karl Deutsch has termed 'security communities' (2002, p. 60/61; Deutsch cited in Adler and Barnett, 1998, p. 3). Ole Wæver however takes the Deutschian concept of a community based on the collective identification with a certain set of normative commitments even further, by highlighting that the very *idea* or *perception* of a community is sufficient to turn it into a 'social fact' (1998, p. 77). The latter can be described as a 'reality' established by the consensus of key agents within the international structure, similar to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Frederking, 2003, p. 364). In short, a security community is 'made' by its members' very identification with it.

Whilst Wæver's approach of "reconstructed, constructivist Deutschianism" (1998, p. 105) will be the theoretical point of departure for assessing the portrayal of NATO enlargement as a way of spreading stability in CEE, some of its limitations shall be revealed when conceptualizing NATO's relationship with Russia. Whilst Russia has not yet become a part of the 'security community' developing under the auspices of the transatlantic alliance and the EU, it has been integrated and consulted to an extent that the possibility of direct conflict has been minimized. This supports the conclusion drawn by Pouliot that common identification is an important basis, but not an indispensable precondition for inter-state pacification (2007, p. 606). The final goal of this essay is to illustrate the European security order as a system with NATO as one of the pivotal arbitrators of diverging threat perceptions and security interests.

NATO Enlargement: Diluting the Alliance?

As mentioned before, critics of NATO's post-Cold War enlargement have frequently claimed that opening up the alliance to new members will eventually render it inefficient by unduly complicating internal decision making and consensus-building (Kay, 1998, p. 147 and p. 154). Two important points have to be made in this respect. Firstly, empirical evidence from the past decades suggests that NATO has in fact been able to take major decisions regardless of the diversity of views held by the decision-makers and if problems occurred, they were not necessarily a result of enlargement, but of disagreement amongst senior members (Croft, 2002, p. 106). As Kay points out, NATO found itself at breaking point in 1995, paralyzed by disunity and slow to respond to the Balkan crisis (1998, p. 155). At that time, none of the post-Cold War rounds of enlargement had taken place yet. Consequently, instances of institutional ineffectiveness should be viewed as an inherent structural dilemma, rather than as a direct consequence of the number of agents involved in the decision-making process (Kamp, 2003, p. 190).

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Moreover, Kamp argues that NATO has agreed on a range of critical issues since the first eastward expansion (2003, p. 190). It has managed to outline and redefine NATO's general direction on a regular basis, the latest example being the 2010 Strategic Concept (NATO, 2011, online). In addition to long-term consensus over the underlying principles, NATO members have been capable of acting in unison in crucial moments. On 12 September 2001, within 24 hours after the twin towers of the World Trade Centre had collapsed, NATO established that terrorism would henceforth be considered an attack on a member state (Gordon, 2001, p. 89). The alliance had thereby invoked the mutual defence guarantee for the very first time in the over 50 years of its existence—a largely symbolic, but nevertheless meaningful gesture (Gordon, 2001, p. 90).

An even more recent example of the enlarged NATO living up to its traditional core tasks of crisis management has arguably been its 2011 involvement in Libya. Thomas Valasek, in an article written for the Centre for European Reform (CER), has expressed cautious optimism with regards to the way in which especially European member states have responded to the conflict in Northern Africa. He claims that despite obvious internal divisions, NATO has shown its institutional capability to take “decisive military action” (Valasek, 2011, online). This view is certainly debatable. Nevertheless, taken together, these findings indicate that even with 28 voices joining into the choir of decision making debates, NATO is still able to be a significant agent of international (and thereby European) security.

From Alliance to ‘Security Community’: Spreading Stability in CEE

In addition to the fact that enlargement doesn't seem to have degenerated NATO into an useless toy of particular interests, there is a second and more important objection to be made to the argument of enlargement ‘watering down’ NATO, for it is based on a fundamental misconception of the organization's actual role and purpose within European security today. Various scholars have drawn the attention to the fact that the role of NATO has undergone fundamental changes (Mattox and Rachwald, 2001; Morgan, 2003 et al.). Since the end of the Cold War, the former anti-Soviet alliance has embarked upon a transformation from a primarily military pact aimed at collective defence into a more political institution for collective security (Sperling, 1999a, p. 7; Morgan, 2003, p. 60 et al.) NATO's main *raison d'être* today is not so much defending its members against an external enemy or threat, but rather guaranteeing security within the framework of the alliance and its partners. Against this background, enlargement can indeed be seen as the “continuing utilization of advanced multilateralism” (Morgan, 2003, p. 62), the key dynamic at the heart of the shift (Foster, 2001, p. 117).

The re-conceptualization of NATO in terms of an evolving collective security association is mirrored in the elite discourse of ‘exporting stability’ in order to assist peaceful post-communist transition to democracy in CEE, the stated rationale behind the enlargement drive (Kay, 1998, p. 112). A case could be made for the factual stabilizing effect of NATO extension when looking at the impact of prospective and actual membership on policy making in a number of Central and Eastern European countries. Accession was only granted upon willingness to comply with a range of fundamental principles and standards, promoted by NATO on both a normative and a practical level, such as the democratization of governance, the prevention of national chauvinism and militarism and the multilateralization of defence strategies (Epstein, 2005, p. 65). Sharp argues that the promise of becoming part of the only viable security arrangement left in post-Cold War Europe has encouraged states to accelerate civilian control over the armed forces, improve mutual relationships and mollify their domestic security rhetoric (1999, p. 27).

Poland for example decided to halt its extensive national defence programme (Oborona Terytorialna) in 1998 and to instead seek military integration within NATO structures (Epstein, 2005, p. 89). Hungary and Romania managed to settle their longstanding differences over Transylvania's considerable Hungarian minority in 1996, as failure to reach an agreement would have been a major setback on both countries' route to NATO accession (Kay, 1998, p. 112). Similar attempts to normalize mutual relations were made by Romania and Ukraine, as well as Hungary and Slovakia (Sharp, 1999, p. 27). The conclusion can be drawn that NATO has in fact made a palpable contribution to the spread of democratic governance and political stability in the former Eastern bloc by gradually including countries in CEE into its political and military structures, thereby limiting their scope for aggressive foreign policy actions which could otherwise have damaged European security architecture as a whole (Sperling, 1999b, p. 183).

However, the socializing and stabilizing effects described above would almost certainly not have been that sustained

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if accession had not been accompanied by a sense of identification with NATO as one of the guarantors of European security. As Epstein has highlighted, the impact any multilateral body can have on political conduct and discourse is substantially increased if it is successful in building up a notion of community amongst its members, thereby uniting them by more than just a set of institutional rules and norms to which countries are expected to conform (2005, p. 68). This is tying in neatly with the Wæverian concept of a 'security community', suggesting that a community is essentially created by its members' identification with it (1998, p. 77). Identification or willingness to identify with a certain institution and its core values will naturally be spurred by the organization's perceived political, economic or normative attractiveness to outsiders (Epstein, 2005, p.71). NATO certainly appealed to the countries of the former Soviet sphere of influence as a most feasible pathway into the Western community which had emerged triumphant from the Cold war period.

This was especially true with regards to the first round of enlargement in 1997, when Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary were invited to join NATO. Throughout the 1990s the Cold War dichotomy was still permeating public discourse and heavily influencing policy makers' thinking in CEE (Longhurst, 2004, p. 388). Large parts of the populations still tended to be rather anxious about the durability of the peaceful changes taking place in their countries (Mattox, 2001, p. 9); in 1991, two thirds of Poles feared that state sovereignty and independence was under threat (Piotrowski and Rachwald, 2001, p. 113). The end of the bipolar system brought about a power vacuum in Europe that was largely perceived as a source of potential instability and renewed conflict (Mattox, 2001, p. 1).

Against this background, inclusion in NATO structures was framed by many policy makers in CEE as a "return to Europe" (Croft, 2002, p.104) and consequently the prospect of accession gained a highly symbolic significance (Epstein, 2005, p. 79). In this context it is important to acknowledge the fact that the parallel enlargement of NATO and the EU was crucial to buttress the central principles underpinning the European security order, such as democratic rule, international solidarity and a commitment to the establishment of free markets (Sperling, 1999a, p. 7). NATO itself was not only associated with the route of peaceful transition to democracy that had led its Western European members to relative political and economic stability, but also with the protective authority of the United States (Mattox, 2001, p. 10). In short, NATO (and EU) membership for most countries in CEE was tantamount to their "liberation" from decades of Soviet hegemony (Perlmutter, 2001, p. 135), the attainment of a highly desirable "civilizational standard" as one Polish commentator put it (Epstein, 2005, p. 79).

Although the immediate fear of political collapse and Russian neo-imperialism might have waned in the course of the next decade, the desirability of NATO membership did not as the successive rounds of enlargement have shown. As demonstrated above, the countries joining the alliance during the 1990s and even 2000s were at least to some extent eager to do so because of the meaning they themselves bestowed on the organization, implying a sense of 'we-ness' and shared purpose and thereby reciprocating NATO's official post-Cold war self-representation as an "alliance of states joined together by common values" (Webber et al., 2004, p. 13). In other words, an argument could be made that the enlarged NATO by and large could be labelled a European 'security community' as defined by Ole Wæver in 1998 (p. 77). Sperling, writing in the year of the first eastward expansion, predicted that the development of a "positive identity" between old and new NATO members would advance European security on the whole, as the establishment of a common framework of reference would help broaden and deepen the security ties between states (1999a, p. 8). To a certain extent, NATO enlargement has indeed had this beneficial effect on the European security environment, generating an atmosphere of inclusion and reassurance not least of all because of aspiring countries' belief in NATO's ability to do so.

NATO-Russia Relations

As mentioned already, the relationship between the Russian Federation and NATO can hardly be conceptualized in terms of 'security community' in the Wæverian sense of collective identification with certain norms and values. However, relations with Russia since the end of the Cold War do not seem to have entirely devolved into a realist scenario of hard-power struggle of balancing and counterbalancing. This is hinting at the limitations of the classic constructivist assumption that a degree of shared identity perception is the ultimate explanation for international reconciliation (Pouliot, 2007, p. 605). Pouliot points out that despite the lack of profound Russian political identification and military integration with the West, cooperation has been possible. Thus, the existence of a

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collective identity amongst group states, albeit the basis for the foundation of a security community as outlined above, is not a necessary precondition for the pacification of mutual relations between them (2007, p. 606). Whilst Pouliot goes as far as picturing a “nascent Russian-transatlantic security community” (2007, p. 609), the following section shall briefly describe and contextualize NATO-Russian relations since the fall of the Soviet Union in order to demonstrate that the process of enlargement has neither led to a significant rift, nor has it undermined European security.

The concern of many scholars and practitioners with regards to the impact of NATO eastward expansion on relations with Russia are understandable when taking into account the initial reaction of Russian officials to the enlargement process. Boris Yeltsin, at the time president of the Russian Federation, publicly spoke of a “Cold Peace”, criticizing that new division lines were being created in Europe (Kay, 1998, p. 93). In 1998, one year prior to the first post-Cold War enlargement round, the Russian Duma agreed on a resolution stating that NATO enlargement was indeed the most significant threat to Russian security after the Second World War (Clemens, 1999, p. 142).

Security experts were anxious about the effects NATO’s decision to enlarge might have on the still unconsolidated Russian democratic system giving rise to revisionist political forces and leading once more to geopolitical and isolationist thinking amongst the elites (Clemens, 1999, p. 142/3; Van Eekelen, 1998, p. 276). However, the creation of a new division line in Europe was certainly not what Western leaders had envisaged when agreeing on the expansion of the alliance.

Yet, the experts’ fears were never to materialize as Russia in practice accepted what it rejected in theory (Plekhanov, 1999, p. 169). Although rhetoric was confrontational at times, a compromise could be reached whenever the situation grew critical (Croft, 2002, p. 110) and during the course of the last two decades attempts to improve relationships translated into various bodies and forums of mutual consultation and cooperation. The latest stage of this process of institutionalization was the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2002 (NATO, 2011b, online). All formal meetings of the Council were frozen in the aftermath of the 2008 Georgian crisis, the repercussions of which are still inhibiting negotiations on core issues such as the establishment of a new conventional arms control regime in Europe (Antonenko and Yurgens, 2011, p. 7). However, the NRC resumed its activity a few months after the conflict and has recently launched a joint review of the common security challenges facing both the transatlantic alliance and Russia in the 21st century (NATO, 2011b, online). Antonenko and Yurgens have termed the ‘reset’ of relations with both NATO and the United States an exceptional opportunity to overcome the “legacy of mistrust” and work towards the establishment of a “patient, pragmatic partnership” (2011, p. 5).

Notwithstanding all differences and setbacks, both sides have by and large upheld their commitment to normalize relationships and continue to cooperate in the future (Rachwald, 2011, p. 124). Russia today has accepted NATO accession of states in its direct neighbourhood, a concession which arguably would have been unthinkable a mere twenty years ago. In short, NATO enlargement has not seriously destabilized relationships and the possibility of Russia joining the alliance in the future has at least cautiously been introduced into political discourse.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that NATO eastward enlargement after the end of the Cold War has not undermined European security. NATO has not only remained an essentially functional organization which still contributes to the maintenance of European security alongside the European Union, the OECD and others. In this respect, the coinciding enlargement of the European Union is of particular significance, as the inclusion of countries across the continent in both institutions doubtlessly helped foster economic, political and military stability and solidarity in Europe (Sperling, 1999a, p. 5). The Alliance has also managed to strike a balance between the security concerns of states in CEE on the one side and Russian reservations on the other. By pursuing a policy of political, military and normative inclusion, NATO has been regarded by Central and East European leaders as frame of reference and a viable locus of identification with what is commonly perceived as ‘Western values’. Therefore, the alliance today has adopted certain elements of a security community as defined by Ole Wæver.

The perception of a shared identity has to some degree facilitated applicants’ compliance to NATO standards and

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thereby helped the spread of democratic governance and stability in CEE. At the same time, a *modus vivendi* with Russia has been found by successfully counterbalancing Russia's fears of exclusion. Formal relations have been maintained and even gradually improved regardless of frequent setbacks. So far, NATO has proven as a relatively suitable platform to mitigate diverging security concerns in Europe. This would hardly have been possible had NATO retained its rather exclusionary collective defence approach of the Cold War period.

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