

US Foreign Policy in Europe between the end of the Cold War and 9/11

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JAMES SLOAN, APR 17 2011

The 1990s is often regarded as the long decade in international affairs, since in theory it began with the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War in late 1989, and did not end until the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11th, 2001. Throughout this period, United States foreign policy had to undergo some fundamental changes as the bi-polar world order became a more uncertain, multi-polar order. The biggest change was the end of the once mighty Soviet Union, and thus the US relationship with the Russian Federation and the surrounding region had to alter to something entirely different, with new states springing up as independent entities in Eastern Europe, and the relationship with Russia as an emerging democracy. This essay shall look at how the foreign policy of the US changed in Europe regarding NATO, the fallout from the newly democratic Russia, and how the failure of Europe led to the US involvement in the Balkans during the 1990s.

Security of Europe had been a key foreign policy priority of the US prior to the collapse of Cold War certainties. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was the single most important piece of foreign policy apparatus the US had in the region, remaining virtually unchanged in its composition and objectives for 40 years. NATO was forged from the ruins of post-Second World War Europe, an era in which the European continent was deprived of financial and military wherewithal. Alongside the economic development of the region (which would finally formulate as the European Union), NATO was essential in the redevelopment of the European continent, and the United States was the key actor. NATO was designed to ensure that Western Europe was fully defended against a potential Soviet surge from the East; whilst also ensuring American interests were kept in the region, and Europe was not tempted by, nor invaded by the Soviet regime. Once the Soviet Union had collapsed, American foreign policy regarding NATO would begin to fall into a flux, one that it would remain in throughout the entire 1990s as the alliance struggled to find a new identity. Its *raison d'être* had all but vanished – that of opposing the Soviet Union. Yet the organisation did not fold, as throughout the Cold War, Europe had taken a back seat in regards to security matters and “...fell into a state of strategic dependence on the United States.”[1] For the Americans to even contemplate winding up the organisation was not on the agenda, as Europe not only lacked the apparatus to act as a single entity – the Maastricht Treaty which saw the implementation of a Foreign and Security Policy pillar, would only come into operation fully in 1993 – it also failed significantly when its first major attempt to act unilaterally did not produce the desired results in Bosnia. Throughout the Cold War and beyond, America had wanted a more independent Europe “...strong enough to hold its own against the Soviet Union and allow the United States to pull back from Europe.”[2] As was the case, this did not happen. Thus when chair of the European Council of Ministers stated in the early part of the decade that “This is the hour of Europe, not the hour of Americans”[3] a high expectation was placed on European actions in the Balkans. They failed, and American support had to be called for and the utilization of NATO deployed.

American involvement in the region had caused certain anxieties between themselves and the Russian government. The use of air attacks in Bosnia, through the auspices of NATO not only highlighted the severe lack of European clout in regards to defence, furthermore, to the disdain of Boris Yeltsin, the Russian President had himself not been updated on what would turn out to be the largest air strike in the history of the transatlantic organisation.[4] Russia was however, able to extrapolate a guarantee that NATO would not “...deploy nuclear weapons on the territories of new members.”[5] Whilst this move countered Russian fears that the US would want to place warheads even closer to the Russian border, the United States went on to pursue a slightly different tactic in foreign policy, by inviting states

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in 1997, previously under Soviet influence to join the NATO alliance.[6]

In spite of the fact that the foundation in which NATO was obliterated by the early 1990s, new members still strived to join the organisation, and America actively supported this. However it took two years between a report on NATO enlargement and President Clinton deciding to allow the expansion of the group to include the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, who were finally admitted in 1999 – the first states of the Warsaw Pact to be included in the transatlantic group.[7]

“For Russians...the main issue was the expansion of NATO towards the frontiers of Russia and its use in the action in south-east Europe – all of which amounted in Russian eyes to an American policy of threatening and humiliating Russia in Cold War mode.”[8] The moves which included the inclusion of the above mentioned former Warsaw Pact nations highlighted Russian fears that America was trying to muscle in, and tempt nations, formally under the Russian sphere of influence, to join the Western alliance. Russia also proved to be an unhappy actor when it came to US involvement in the Balkans. Indeed, in an outward show of their displeasing attitude, a Russian military contingency was in place at Pristina prior to the arrival of NATO troops.[9] This move occurred perhaps down to the earlier failure of the Americans to forewarn President Yeltsin over the NATO air strike in Bosnia. The basic premise remained however; Russia was opposed to any interventions in the former Yugoslavia.[10]

The Balkans crisis, which raged throughout the decade, was an issue in which Europe wanted to act unilaterally as a continent minus American input. However, this proved to be a whimsical dream, as US intervention was required, albeit through NATO. The earlier Bosnian crisis was seen by some, particularly the Europeans as having come too early in the post-Cold War era, for Europe to properly contend with on its own.[11] Thus, whilst the ideals of US foreign policy would have been to see Europe develop as an independent, but wholly reliable co-actor in the international arena, earlier American foreign policy of cocooning European security under NATO essentially rendered this impossible. Throughout the 1990s, NATO was used as a vehicle of American influence in the Balkans to try and end the bouts of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo, part of the former Yugoslavia. Whilst the threat of Russia had all but vanished in the traditional Cold War sense, “The...alliance appeared to have found a new, post-Cold War mission in bringing peace to that part of the continent...”[12]

Financially, the United States government was particularly keen to open up new trading and aid deals with former Soviet states. This coincided with a strategy that supported democratization in Eastern Europe. “Extending aid to former Soviet states would not only occur in a new political environment; it would also be a fairly novel enterprise for American policy makers. It would require them to change their view of these states – from adversaries to be kept down, to potential new partners in need of lifting up.”[13] Perhaps the greatest surprise in dealing with former Soviet states is that “...Congress repeatedly zeroed out requests for...categories of foreign aid...yet...provided over 90 percent of what the Clinton administration requested in aid for the former Soviet states.”[14] This could be seen to be a far sighted strategy, in which it would allow, in time, the former Warsaw Pact nations to join the NATO grouping, thus bringing said states firmly into the Western political fold. Essentially this would move such states from being in the sphere of influence of Russia, to become a part of American grand strategy.

The altering of nuclear balance which had defined the Cold War between the USA and USSR was one issue which would alter the foreign policy of the US. The disarming of nuclear weapons would “...restore [sic] the US-Russia relationship [to] the single nuclear dyad...”[15] In just the final three years of the Bush Senior Presidency, 1990-1993 “...five major nuclear arms control initiatives had been accomplished...a 66% reduction on 1990 levels...”[16] The assistance that America provided in the removal of nuclear warheads from Russia was as much as ensuring that the nuclear arms race was over, as it was to ensure the safe removal of the weapons, consequentially ensued that there was no dangerous chemical spillage. By the decade’s end, nuclear weapons may not have been of considerable worry, the “...57% increase in [Russian] defence spending...” perhaps was.[17] However, this understandable move by the Russians was done in counteracting the fact that United States had apparently reneged on a promise not to include former Communist states in the NATO alliance.[18] What United States foreign policy did achieve in the 1990s was a move away from the concept of a Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, through the inclusion of the likes of Poland in NATO. The commitment to remove nuclear weapons completely from Ukraine, was completed at a time of lack of clear cohesion between the US and Russia, claimed to be lacking in strategy

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completely.[19]

“...Europe is very much the product of American foreign policy stretching back over the better part of nine decades.”[20] And to this extent, it remained so throughout the 1990s. The lack of an independent defence strategy during the Cold War allowed Europe to focus on the economic side of recovery, which meant, by time the Soviet Union collapsed, Europe was simply not ready to respond to the altering dynamics on the continent. Between 1989 and 2001, American foreign policy saw the expansion of aid towards the former Soviet Union, including Russia and successor states. Alongside the joining of former Soviet satellites to the NATO alliance, American involvement in the European continent was essentially little different in 2001 as it was in 1989. Whilst the European Union project now included greater foreign policy apparatus, much of it relied on the use of NATO architecture to implement its Berlin Plus arrangements.[21] The American desire of a more independent Europe in defence regards quickly unraveled ideas on both sides of the Atlantic following the failure of Europe to act decisively in Bosnia. America ensured greater input with NATO airstrikes in the following Balkan crisis in Kosovo in 1999. The expansion of NATO came as a consequence of the failure of Europe to adequately provide for its own defence, whilst coinciding in managing to antagonize Russia with the inclusion of former Soviet allies in the alliance. The American-Russian relationship is best described as going from Cold War to Cold Peace, as articulated by the then Russian President Yeltsin.[22] However, this overlooks one major issue – nuclear disarmament in the early part of the decade worked particularly well, with considerable American co-operation to ensure the safe removal of warheads from Russia and Ukraine. The relationship between Russia and the US would again alter after 9/11; whilst the American relationship with Europe in regards to the NATO alliance would continue to muddle along, without any decisiveness over the future of the group. It would be fair to suggest that the 1990s essentially brought about a period in which the US sought to manage the uncertainties that the new world order was presenting.

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