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Land Rush: American Grand Strategy, NATO Enlargement, and European Consolidation and Fragmentation

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Land Rush: American Grand Strategy, NATO Enlargement, and European Consolidation and Fragmentation

This article argues that NATO enlargement, while stabilizing Central and Eastern Europe, undermined long-term European security in other ways. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s US administrations pursued three ambitious policies: they expanded NATO, but also its geographic scope, and they ensured that no alternative European security architectures could compete with NATO. Through interviews with US officials, the article shows a preoccupation with instability in Europe and elsewhere, an institutional predisposition to maintaining the centrality of NATO, and a lack of constraints on US policies by Russia or Europe. In the end, these contradictory policies diluted European strategic cohesion and overburdened European militaries, while expanding the commitments inherent to the Alliance.

Author accepted manuscript

What were the long-term consequences of NATO enlargement for European security? In recent years, the scholarly debate on the consequences of enlargement has largely framed the issue around whether including in the alliance former Warsaw Pact members in Central and Eastern Europe antagonized Russia (Shiffrinson 2018; Sarotte 2014, 2010; Horowitz 2018).¹ Yet, both the motives for enlargement and its consequences for Europe extend far beyond relations with Russia. As the Cold War came to an end, US officials saw an opportunity in Europe to consolidate the gains of stability, democracy, and free markets in the post–Cold War era; or, in the words of President George H.W. Bush, to achieve a ‘Europe whole, free, and at peace’ (Bush 1989). They believed that NATO had been proven to be a success. Offering NATO membership to the former Warsaw Pact states could therefore fill the security vacuum that had emerged in Central and Eastern Europe and help stabilize the region. Consequently, enlargement was not a question of ‘whether, but when’ (Goldgeier 2010; see also Sarotte 2019).

However, NATO enlargement also ended up undermining European security, for reasons related to *how* enlargement was implemented. Enlargement was one of several concurrent foreign policy initiatives that the United States pursued in order to capitalize on the advantageous position it found itself in. US officials were not only impatient to fill the security vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe; they also considered NATO the instrument to spread stability to adjacent regions. To accomplish these goals, the United States pushed its European allies to transform their militaries toward lighter, expeditionary forces for operations outside the treaty area. In turn, Europeans offered several alternative security architectures to improve their crisis response and

¹ When the issue of NATO enlargement was first raised publicly, commentators warned that expansion could needlessly undermine relations with Russia (Brown 1995; McGwire 1998; Russett and Stam 1998; Waltz 2000). As Kimberly Marten shows in her contribution to this issue, enlargement was arguably only one of several causes of Russian estrangement from the United States and Europe.

stabilization capabilities. The architectures included: the pre-existing but dormant Western European Union (WEU); the minilateral Eurocorps that began life as the Franco-German Brigade; the creation through the Treaty of Maastricht of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP); the development of the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) by the WEU after agreement within NATO; and the transformation of the ESDI into the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) that created an autonomous defense structure for the EU. That often bewildering collection of acronyms could have signaled a slow devolution of responsibility to Europeans for their own security in the post-Cold War era. Yet, though US officials considered the European Union to be a complementary tool for bringing stability to Central and Eastern Europe through economic and institutional means, they were adamant that NATO remained the central organization to provide security in Europe. In short, the United States simultaneously pursued (1) NATO enlargement and (2) the expansion of the geographic scope of NATO's missions, while it also (3) prevented the establishment of serious European institutional alternatives for any of NATO's missions, let alone NATO as an institution.

US policies were driven by a combination of factors. First, US officials had deeply held beliefs about the dangers of instability within Europe and outside of it, and the essential US role in handling that instability (Fettweis 2018; Walt 2018; Layne 2006; Dueck 2008).² Second, the institutionalization of these beliefs among the bureaucratic apparatus within which US officials made decisions allowed for few dissenting voices (Porter 2018; Hopf 2018; Walt 2018). Third, the near absence of restraints on US power following the Cold War ensured that there were few external obstacles to US policy preferences (Shiffrinson 2018; Trubowitz 2011; Wohlforth 1999;

² Commentators at the time argued that, whatever the future role of Russia, the United States should continue its role as the protector and pacifier of Europe (Krauthammer 1990; Nye 1990; Mearsheimer 1990; Glaser 1993; Mastanduno 1997).

Brooks and Wohlforth 2008). Driven by institutionalized beliefs, the United States rushed into the wide-open space that had been created in Europe and took on an expanded role both inside and outside Europe. The combination of these US policies created a set of contradictions that undermined the European stability and security that the United States intended NATO enlargement to achieve. Enlargement expanded the area covered by NATO obligations, while European militaries became less suited for the tasks of collective defense. The United States ensured that it remained the central player in Europe, and then diverted the focus of the alliance to a set of interests outside Europe, undermining strategic cohesion among European allies. The growing number of allies then further diluted this already weak cohesion and reinforced European dependency.

This article draws on dozens of interviews with US officials who served on the National Security Council and in the State Department, the Defense Department, and the intelligence community during the George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama administrations, and were particularly involved with European or NATO affairs. Using their own words, it shows their developing (but oddly consistent) pervasive sense of European weakness and instability and the consequent need for US leadership.³

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. The first section describes the period from the end of the Cold War until the middle of the 1990s, covering both the George H.W. Bush administration and the first years of the Clinton administration, when the different strands of US policy toward Europe began to come together. The second looks at the period during the Bill Clinton administration when the parallel policies gathered momentum, until the first round of enlargement in 1999, which added the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to the alliance. The

³ In 1995 Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke referred to the United States as a European power, not just a power in Europe. This view permeates throughout the crucial post-Cold War decades.

third section reviews the culmination of these policies during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, along with the second round of enlargement—the Big Bang of 2004 that incorporated Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the three Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Enlargement then interacted with the transatlantic clash over the Second Iraq War and underlined the fragmentation of Europe.

Consolidation (1989–1995)

No Exit

The three key US policies regarding post–Cold War European security were established early on: maintain NATO, expand its membership, and expand its scope. A series of decisions made in the George H.W. Bush administration, and expanded upon by the Bill Clinton administration, ensured that the United States remained deeply ensconced in Europe. While officials recognized the possibility of leaving Europe, they never seriously considered it. As Frank Miller, who served in Defense Department during the George HW Bush and Clinton administrations and in the George W Bush White House, remembers that there was ‘never a thought in the Defense Department about getting rid of NATO.... None whatsoever’ (2018). Although there were debates about the extent of the US commitment, Eric Edelman, an official in the State Department and Defense Department during the George HW Bush and Clinton administrations, notes that he could not think of ‘too many serious either policy folks or scholars who were arguing that the United States ought to get out of NATO’ (2019). These policymakers and scholars believed that Central and Eastern Europe would be deeply unstable following the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, especially if the new democracies were ‘left to their own devices, including in dealing with tensions with their neighbors over ethnic and territorial issues’ (Talbot 2019, 410; see also: Sayle 2019, 232–240; Vershbow 2019, 428; Horowitz 2018, 79).

The security vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe was therefore on the agenda as early as the NATO London Summit in July 1990 (NATO 1990), and by the November 1991 NATO summit in Rome, NATO had set up institutional cooperation with the new Central and Eastern European democracies through the creation of the North Atlantic Coordination Council. Events in the Balkans underlined fears about the security vacuum. ‘Revisionists might see no good reason for the United States not to withdraw or end NATO, but given that uncertainty [in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Balkans], there were good enough reasons’, according to Leo Michel, a Defense Department official from 1986 to 2002 (2016). That potential for instability in Europe, plus the simultaneous conflicts in Rwanda and Somalia, tempered the optimism of the post–Cold War era, as noted by Clinton Administration State Department official Esther Brimmer (2016). US officials therefore saw an opportunity to consolidate the gains of the Cold War, rather than an opportunity to leave Europe.

Instability

Concerns about instability were pervasive among US officials, and not only with regards to the former Warsaw Pact states. In this new Europe, the United States had a strong interest in close cooperative relations with Germany, as to Amb. Richard Burt puts it, because ‘an untethered Germany within a nationalist Europe would likely form a Berlin-Moscow axis’ (Burt 2016; see also Horovitz 2019, 75–76). A fragmented Europe would be detrimental to US interests, because ‘a Europe broken apart by its internal struggles would be less Atlanticist, and more anti-American’, according to Ian Lesser, an official in the Clinton administration’s State Department (2016). In such circumstances, officials believed, Europe would also be vulnerable to domination by an outside power. Dov Zakheim, who served in the Defense Department during the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations, articulates it as such: ‘It wasn’t that we were afraid of a rival.

We were afraid of no power... very different' (2016). Without the United States acting as an 'honest broker', as Ian Brzezinski, a Defense Department official during the George H.W. Bush administration, frames it, 'pretty violent tendencies would kick off a flow of dominoes that could lead to real tensions, if not conflict' (2018). Officials argued that NATO had been successful because 'Americans exercised leadership over a group of European states who were unwilling to follow the lead of any other European state, but were willing to work with the United States towards a common goal' (Miller 2018). Or, in the words of Jim Dobbins, the US Ambassador to the EU, 'German reunification had offered a window of opportunity', and 'NATO could prevent the renationalization of Europe, the reemergence of European competition' (Dobbins 2016). Officials believed that, while democracy was 'on the march' in the early 1990s, the United States had a mission to lead that march, which in turn required 'time and the commitment of...treasure and sometimes even blood' (Brzezinski 2018).

The increasing rate of decline of the Soviet Union—and then Russia—quickly removed the constraints on the US desire to provide leadership. It was 'a period of great optimism, when the United States felt that it was unmatched' (Brzezinski 2018). Within that window of opportunity, officials believed that they could build a European security architecture in a way that, as Stephen Hadley, the assistant secretary of Defense for International Security during the George HW Bush administration and George W Bush's National Security Advisor, framed it, 'was not adversarial to Russia, did not try to constrain Russia, but would actually be open for Russian participation' (2018). Having the new Central and Eastern European democracies join NATO was not the only option considered. The Partnership for Peace (PfP), established in 1994, was intended as an instrument for moderating potential conflict in the former Warsaw Pact states. PfP would ensure that their militaries became more like Western-style institutions, without expanding the

alliance itself. It would also have avoided expanding the alliance that had been formed to contain the Soviet Union. Yet the PfP never entirely played the role it was intended to play. As Mary Sarotte shows, each step taken by the Bush and Clinton administrations in the early 1990s further shrank the set of alternatives to NATO enlargement, making it the most feasible remaining option. By the end of 1994, there was already a sense that enlargement was inevitable (Sarotte 2019, 30–31).

Monopoly

It was no accident that NATO remained the sole instrument for crisis response and management. As the Western European states' concerns about Russia diminished, they recognized the opportunity to increase their security autonomy vis-à-vis the United States (Schake 1998; Sayle 2019, 234–235).⁴ Various arrangements were proposed that would give the Europeans a greater role in the security of the continent. France was the most active advocate of these alternatives, seeing a need to establish a relationship with a reunified Germany that was both stable and relatively equal (Haglund 1993). The WEU – a European military alliance established in the early Cold War that had remained largely dormant - seemed the most promising framework. This possibility was not far-fetched; as a European organization, the WEU was already dedicated to security and most EC/EU members belonged to it. Moreover, because the WEU already had a working relationship with NATO, the UK were reassured that the EU would not take on a military role that might undermine the transatlantic relationship (Howorth and Keeler 2003b, 7–8). At the WEU's 1992 Bonn meeting, members agreed to make military units available to the WEU. The WEU's missions were encapsulated in the Petersberg Tasks, which largely focused on low-

⁴ See, for example, European Commission president Jacques Delors's March 1991 speech on European security autonomy.

intensity missions (though peacemaking was included as a task). In parallel, the Eurocorps was established in 1992 (to become operational in 1995), as an avenue for the Europeans to address security issues that did not require US involvement.

However, the United States balked at the European attempts to create or strengthen alternatives structures. In the minds of US officials, even if efforts such as the WEU only focused on the least challenging kind of missions, they were a ‘self-defeating’ duplication that risked undermining NATO (see, e.g., Holbrooke 1995). In fact, US policy toward Europe was not simply focused on preserving NATO, but on ‘redefining American political influence on the continent’ (D’Aboville 2019, 528, 534; see also Horowitz 2019, 78). Besides NATO enlargement, preventing rivals to NATO was therefore central to US policy towards post-Cold War Europe.

Casting a Wider Net

Expanding the scope of NATO’s missions was another of the three components of US post–Cold War European security policy. As early as the July 1990 NATO summit in London, leaders had also discussed the need to de-emphasize the organization’s traditional mission of collective defense (NATO 1990; see also Jakobsen 2018, 4). In March 1991, an interagency group, the European Strategy Steering Group, defined NATO’s importance for the United States as not only an insurance policy against a possible reconstituted Soviet Union/Russia, but also a way to counter threats in the Middle East and North Africa (Sayle 2019, 233). For NATO to remain vital, it had to go ‘out-of-area’ or it would go ‘out-of-business’ (Lugar 1993). Enlargement of NATO’s size and scope were explicitly linked in the minds of officials, as new missions would give the US role in Europe new meaning and staying power (Hamilton 2019c, 32–33). Furthermore, NATO enlargement was only one example of ‘the enlargement of almost every institution at that time’ –

whether the EU, the WTO, or others, as noted by Dan Hamilton, who served in the Clinton Administration's State Department (2019a).

At the end of the Bush Administration in 1992, NATO's defense posture had already started moving away from reliance on heavy armored divisions toward lighter, more mobile expeditionary forces that could operate outside of the NATO treaty area (Gallis 1996; Department of State 1997). However, policymakers in Washington had doubts about whether Europe could in fact be a partner for 'global issues' (Brimmer 2016), and whether it had 'any role to play in the Far East and Middle East' (Dobbins 2016). Eliot Cohen (2016) notes that in retrospect it was 'a rather daft idea that NATO could be effective out of area'. Europeans were less enthusiastic than the United States about this reorientation away from the now easier and cheaper defense of NATO territory toward politically and operationally more difficult, as well as expensive, missions out-of-area (Foucher 2019). Hamilton acknowledges that allies saw this shift as 'another example of inconsistent US priorities' (2019b, 350–351), one which dispersed the emerging security priorities within post–Cold War Europe.

European Reflex

How could such ambitious beliefs about transforming Europe and NATO dominate the considerations of US officials? These beliefs were deeply embedded in the institutions of US policymaking, and the changes in the strategic environment were outpacing institutional adaptation. Many of the key decisionmakers had spent their careers focused on the military problems of the European theater and managing alliance relations with NATO. Europe had been 'the object of American policy' (Clinton administration State Department official #2 2016), and 'the principal prize of the Cold War and the bulwark against the Soviet Union' (Dobbins 2016). Consequently, 'the apparatus [of government] was Eurocentric' and the 'establishment was

fundamentally transatlantic', as noted by Charles Kupchan, who was a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff during the Clinton administration (2018). After all, from the 'end of World War Two', the US role had been 'solving remaining European problems' (Clinton administration State Department official #2 2016). Europe was still 'America's geopolitical center of gravity'. The mental framework that was handed off to the Clinton administration by the Bush team was 'status quo plus'... 'the way people thought about it was "We won, this works. Let's just continue"' (Kupchan 2018). The Clinton administration therefore carried on the policies initiated by the Bush administration and expanded upon them.

Supply and Demand

The United States pushed strongly to keep its levers of influence in Europe through NATO, but the continued centrality of NATO was hardly a one-sided US affair. It was also fed by European fears. The Western Europeans had been deeply unsettled by German reunification. Jim Townsend, a Defense Department official, remembers that, for the French and the British, 1991 was 'like Jurassic Park; you've studied these bones as a kid, and all of a sudden they come back to life. And that was a big T-Rex that was back' (Townsend 2018). The Europeans faced a dilemma. They, and specifically the French, wanted to ensure that Washington did not gain too much leverage over them. Yet, particularly the smaller states wanted assurances from the United States that it would continue to provide for European security (Horowitz 2019, 78). German officials were especially strong proponents of enlargement, seeing it as a way out of the apprehensions Germany's reconstituted power sparked among its neighbors. They recognized the opportunity to no longer be the eastern border of NATO, but instead to surround Germany with NATO and also the EU (NATO and EU defense official 2019; Hunter 2019, 326; Voigt 2019, 238, 240). German officials were also concerned about the potential aftershocks of the drastic political and economic changes

in Central and Eastern Europe, which could spill over into Western Europe through refugees, nationalist reactions, and political secession (see, e.g., Federal Ministry of Defence 1994, para. 202, 235). Consequently, in their 1991 Rome Declaration, NATO heads of state and government announced the adoption of a new Allied Strategic Concept, which stated that threats were more likely to result from instabilities in Central Europe than from major state aggression (NATO 1995, 235). The New Transatlantic Agenda, signed by President Clinton and EU leaders in December 1995, would reflect the shift in focus to non-traditional threats such as proliferation, crime, terrorism, and human rights promotion, and particularly to regional challenges in the Middle East and Mediterranean. For the Central and Eastern European states, however, the primary risk was still a resurgent Russia. Where the CSCE and the EU could only provide soft security, membership in NATO and a continued US role in Europe were the real solutions to their security problems (Rifkind 2019, 507; Zięba 2019, 197). The continued centrality of NATO was therefore also very much a case of transatlantic supply and demand, driven by fears of a reunified Germany and a potentially unstable Central and Eastern Europe.

Test Case

The conflict in the Balkans was both a justification for - and a test case of – NATO as ‘the foundation of the post–Cold War’ era, as a Clinton administration State Department official put it (2019). US officials saw the Balkans as a ‘source of potential turbulence’ (Dobbins 2016) that could trigger violence and create refugees and instability that would spill over into the rest of Central and Eastern Europe (Brimmer 2016). Although the Balkans were outside the NATO treaty area, the view within Washington, according to Hans Binnendijk, an official who served in the Clinton Administration’s State Department, was that a group of ‘well-armed, well-organized, like-minded nations, democracies’ should be able to deal with as problem like the conflict in the

Balkans (2013). The United States had initially hesitated to act, as its focus was shifting toward the Middle East. Moreover, European states, France specifically, believed that Europe should be able to ‘put out fires in its own backyard’ (Michel 2016; also Townsend 2018; Binnendijk 2013). Famously, in the summer of 1991, the foreign minister of Luxembourg, while representing the European Community (EC) on a diplomatic mission to Yugoslavia, proclaimed that ‘the hour of Europe has dawned’.

When the Western Europeans had difficulty responding to the Balkans conflict, however, US officials considered them to be ‘indecisive and ineffective’, according to Amb. Marc Grossman (2016), who served in the State Department of the Clinton, George W Bush, and Obama administrations. US officials believed that it would be a bad idea to let the conflict in the Balkans play out, and not only for humanitarian reasons. The Balkans genocide ‘could erode the US-European relationship from within’ and reflect poorly on “ability of the transatlantic community to address its most pressing security challenge” (Kupchan 2018). How could the grand architectural transformation that NATO was undergoing bring meaningful stability, if it could not manage the instability at the alliance’s doorstep? Dan Hamilton recalls that Secretary of State Warren Christopher wondered: ‘If NATO could not find a solution for Bosnia, then why think about enlarging it?’ (Hamilton 2019c, 33). In the end, US officials – and their European counterparts – were aware that it took US leadership to solve the problem of the Balkans (Binnendijk 2013; Donfried 2016; Brzezinski 2018). The experience in the Balkans therefore both reinforced the existing transatlantic distribution of roles and also led to a growing demand in European capitals to improve European capabilities.

Everything at Once (1996–2000)

Closing Windows

US policies inside and outside Europe gathered additional speed in the latter half of the 1990s, as it became clearer that the United States was increasingly less constrained by a declining Russia and an EU unable to act decisively. Given the earlier caution of the Bush administration, the increasing speed of US actions, and the growing scope of US ambitions, were remarkable. Indeed, Jim Townsend suggests that, had George H.W. Bush won the 1992 election, the United States would not have proceeded as fast with enlargement. There was still a great deal of apprehension in Washington at the time about antagonizing the Russians (2018).⁵ Hans Binnendijk (2013) believes that Bush and Clinton each shaped enlargement in their own way. George H.W. Bush was a ‘pragmatist, a realist’, who understood how far he could go to. Bill Clinton was ‘slightly more forward leaning’ and less ‘conservative’. Confidence had grown within the Clinton administration after the successes of the early 1990s that the US was on the right track, and there was a sense that building NATO’s ‘community of democracies’ was not going to be ‘a very costly opportunity’ to seize (2013). Officials within the Clinton administration believed that the collapse of the Soviet Union gave the United States the ‘opportunity to do more at a lower level of tension and risk’, because at the time, in the words of David Ochmanek, a Clinton Administration Defense Department official, the Russians had no capacity, ‘whether they liked it or not’ (2018). Yet, within the administration there was a sense of urgency, and officials feared that, if they waited too long, ‘the window would close’ (Townsend 2018). The then-ambassador to NATO, Robert Hunter

⁵ ‘[Secretary] Baker kept saying that there were no losers at the end of the Cold War, only winners. Everybody was a winner. The efforts George H.W. Bush went through to try and avoid humiliating Russia, to avoid suggesting this was a defeat of Russia, were considerable’ (Hadley 2018).

(2019), notes that there was a split within the administration about whether to give more weight to stabilizing Central Europe or to avoiding antagonizing Russia (317–318). As Charles Kupchan (2018) puts it, proponents of enlargement argued: ‘Russia is weak, let’s take Poland and these other countries off the table while we can’. After all, it was ‘clear that no matter what assurances one might give, Russia was never going to like NATO enlargement’ (Clinton administration State Department official 2019). As Kurt Volker, US ambassador to NATO during the George W Bush administration, describes the situation, ‘You now have a hundred million plus people who live in free societies, market economies, democracy, and under the rule of law as part of the EU and part of NATO.... Either we try to get along with Russia or we support human rights and freedom and democracy’ (Volker 2013). In any case, the opportunity to consolidate Cold War gains in Central and Eastern Europe ‘overrode concerns about Russian actions’ (Ochmanek 2018).

Monopoly II

Beyond driving changes to the size and scope of NATO, the United States also continued to work at undermining any potential European rivals to the organization. The European states had initially sought to Europeanize NATO, using the Eurocorps and the WEU for these purposes. The US channeled these European initiatives into the ESDI within NATO. The 1996 Berlin agreements established that the United States had the right of first refusal for any European mission that used NATO assets (Hunter 2002, 13–19). However, US officials remained suspicious of European initiatives (NATO and EU defense official 2019). The Europeans, specifically the French, had wanted to transfer NATO’s regional commands to themselves. In 1995–1996, France was on the cusp of reintegrating into NATO’s military structures – which they had left in 1966 - and looked to take on NATO’s Allied Forces Southern Europe (AFSOUTH) command. When these efforts failed because of resistance from within the Pentagon, French-US relations soured.

The Europeans initiated a more comprehensive attempt to address their dependency on the United States in the late 1990s, in response to the earlier setbacks to Europeanize the alliance. British prime minister Tony Blair and French president Jacques Chirac met in Saint-Malo, France in December 1998 and initiated what would become the ESDP. In anticipation of US concerns, they issued a joint declaration on 4 December framing the ESDP in relation to NATO. ESDP would create the ‘appropriate structures’ and ‘the capacity for autonomous action’, in order for the EU to contribute to ‘the vitality of a modernized Atlantic Alliance’. In theory, ESDP would allow the EU to act in crises where the interests of the US, and thus NATO as a whole, were not sufficiently engaged.

However, despite European efforts to ensure that the Saint-Malo text signaled the centrality of NATO, the Clinton administration was distinctly unenthusiastic about the British and French plans. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright encapsulated the administration’s concerns in the form of the ‘3Ds’ admonition to the Europeans: no duplication of NATO assets, no discrimination against non-EU members, and no decoupling from NATO (Albright 1998). Both at the time and in retrospect, US officials frequently emphasized that ESDP would increase the inefficiency in European defense spending (‘no duplication’). When the Europeans ‘didn’t actually produce’, ESDP seemed to be ‘all talk’, as Karen Donfried, special assistant to President Obama, encapsulated the US outlook. The Europeans were focused on ‘the architecture and the abstract building of a European defense architecture rather than actually putting capabilities in place’ (Donfried 2016). According to Frank Miller, most US officials considered the ESDP ‘charitably to be a sideshow’. They believed the EU would only carry out ‘little operations’ [i.e. the Petersberg Tasks] (2018). The problem, according to the United States, was ‘not European strength, but weakness’ (Hamilton 2019a). As Eliot Cohen bluntly put it: ‘It’s all bullshit. [ESDP] yields no

additional military capability and it is just an excuse for more budget cuts... [it just means] more meetings, more headquarters, and not one more guy with a rifle, not one more laser guided bomb, not one more frigate, not one more submarine, not one more long range cruise missile' (2016). However, that telling of the story understates that the United States, in effect, had pushed ESDP to become less effective to prevent it from replacing NATO. The Berlin Plus agreements (adopted in 2003) underlined NATO's right of first refusal for any ESDP military missions (for the road to Berlin Plus, see Hunter 2002, 53–58). The policy effectively neutered the possibility that the Europeans would act without explicit US support, as the United States could withhold key assets for actions it deemed unimportant, risky, or simply not in its interest.

What explains the US response to ESDP and earlier initiatives? In part, the centrality of NATO for European security was deeply institutionalized in the US national security bureaucracy. Europe had been the preeminent focus for security policies and military planning in the decades between the Vietnam War and the end of the Cold War, and NATO had been the organizational means through which the United States acted. Consequently, US officials at the National Security Council, Defense Department, and State Department—as well as Congress—had an engrained culture that revolved around NATO, and, when it came to European security, they were used to running the show (Michel 2016). As Jim Townsend remembers it, though he himself did not agree, the bureaucracy in Washington strongly disliked 'the idea that the Europeans will go it alone'. Saint-Malo was considered 'a slap at US leadership because...the US was here to tell [Europe] what to do' (2018). The United States did not have an issue with the EU itself, as long as it focused its efforts on political and economic integration within Europe. Officials considered European integration complementary to their goal of consolidating stability in Europe. The EU would offer the former Warsaw Pact countries 'a model and a magnet', toward which they could 'evolve'

(Clinton administration State Department official 2019; also Edelman 2019; Hamilton 2019a). Moreover, at this stage, US officials still believed that US leadership was needed to encourage the process of European integration (Donfried 2016).

The EU (and its previous incarnations) and NATO had never interacted, so the Defense Department had no familiarity with the former (Townsend 2018). The risk existed that two organizations in the same town (Brussels) would plan separately for the same operation (Hamilton 2019a). Officials within the Pentagon saw ESDP as ‘a threat in a zero-sum way’, believing that it would not ‘leave resources for what the US would want to do’ (Townsend 2018). Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott warned: ‘We would not want to see an ESDI that comes into being first within NATO but then grows out of NATO and finally grows away from NATO, because that would lead to an ESDI that initially duplicates NATO but that could eventually compete with NATO’ (1999) (ESDI and ESDP were often used interchangeably by US officials). Other officials within the State Department, however, considered ESDP ‘a sign of strength that the US did and does not need to be involved [in European governance and security]’ (Brimmer 2016). Charles Kupchan always found the objections to a European defense pillar ‘way off the mark’ (Kupchan 2018). Despite such dissenting views, the belief that European structures would undermine NATO dominated within the US bureaucracy.

Dilution

Again, NATO enlargement should not be considered in isolation: the ambitious scale of the policies that the United States pushed in parallel to enlargement diluted the already limited strategic cohesion and consensus within Europe. In addition to enlargement, the Clinton administration simultaneously pushed the Europeans to broaden the geographic scope of NATO missions and to bring their armed forces in line with the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)

shift toward more agile, networked, high-intensity warfighting capabilities. The Europeans were prodded to move away from the Cold War legacy model that focused on territorial defense and provide forces for deployments (Hamilton 2019a). In fact, the continued commitment of the United States to European security was explicitly linked to the Europeans improving their ability to commit forces to US goals outside of Europe (Drozdiak 1998; Lepgold 1998). Despite European skepticism about reconfiguring the alliance for the pursuit of US interests, the United States pushed ahead (Lepgold 1998). At the May 1998 meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Luxembourg, Secretary Albright argued that NATO should have defense capabilities for both Article V collective defense and crisis response, in and out of Europe. At the alliance's 50th anniversary summit in Washington in April 1999, Albright and Defense Secretary William Cohen together presented a package of proposals that led to a new Strategic Concept. The Strategic Concept enshrined the vision of NATO as representing a transatlantic community defending common values and interests (NATO 1999). The Defense Capabilities Initiative, launched at the Washington summit, was designed to improve the ability of NATO forces to deploy, along with their mobility, sustainability, survivability, and effectiveness, as well their interoperability (Hunter 2002, 43–51, 153; Ringsmose 2010). NATO transformation thus became an open-ended process.

NATO enlargement also directly weakened Europe's strategic cohesion. The 1999 entry of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland into NATO further complicated the development of the institutional and operational interface between the EU and NATO that ESDP needed to be effective. In retrospect, it would seem obvious that the concurrent developments of NATO enlargement and ESDP in the 1996–2000 period would have significant effects on European security. Yet, as Mark Webber presciently noted, very little attention was paid to the interaction between the two developments. Only one sentence in the joint statements after the 1996 Berlin

and Madrid summits linked the two processes (2003, 157–158). From the US perspective, the ‘no discrimination’ part of the 3Ds not only referred to the United States itself (or to Turkey, Norway, and the other states outside the EU), but also to the new and aspiring members of NATO. Secretary Cohen (2000) made clear that non-EU European NATO states should be ‘players not spectators’ in ESDP. Yet, though the Central and Eastern European states sought simultaneous entry into NATO and the EU, they showed little interest in ESDI or, later, ESDP. Especially after Bosnia, they perceived the Western Europeans to be less credible than the United States when it came to addressing their security concerns about Russia (Croft et al 1999, 103–104; Webber 2003, 160).

A final development added to the contradictions of the US policies towards NATO and Europe: as the 1990s proceeded, aside from the Balkans conflict, ‘Europe began to fade, to collapse in importance’ within the US foreign policy bureaucracy (Dobbins 2016). New threats outside of Europe loomed large; US thinking began moving away from the ‘old European centric system’ (Binnendijk 2013; Volker 2013), and ‘all of a sudden, for people who [worked on European security] it was sleepy time instead of being the war office we were previously’ (Townsend 2018).

Fragmentation (2001–2016)

Consolidation Complete

After the frenetic pace of the 1990s, the slump in US interest in Europe in the first decade of the 2000s was triggered most directly by the demands of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Grossman 2016; Binnendijk 2013). Like a black hole, these two conflicts absorbed the US government’s attention and resources. Subsequently, the George W. Bush administration had ‘very little interest and very little time for Europe’ (Donfried 2016). To be sure, in the first years of his administration, President Bush visited Central and Eastern Europe to promote his Freedom Agenda and to champion countries in the region. Yet, at this point, US officials considered the

work of consolidating a Europe ‘whole, free, and at peace’ as ‘self-sustaining’ (Dobbins 2016). Especially after the Big Bang of NATO and EU expansion was completed in 2004, the process towards further consolidation seemed ‘inexorable’, without a critical need for US engagement (Hadley 2018). Nor would Europe regain its importance in US strategic thinking during the Barack Obama administration. Despite conflicts and economic crises during the 2000s, with regards to Europe ‘there was a sense of optimism, it was strong and on course’ (Brimmer 2016). The view was that ‘Europe itself is not a source of problems, Europe is stable’, and that NATO institutions provided the member states with ‘a platform to work together and solve problems [of global governance] together’ (Wormuth 2018). To Julianne Smith, who served in the Obama administration White House and Defense Department, it felt ‘like our fundamental goal that we had pursued for so long—Europe whole, free and at peace—had been accomplished’ (2018). While European allies were unsettled by the Obama administration’s strategic rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific - the Pacific Pivot - US officials simply considered it a move away from the Middle East, not from Europe (Donfried 2016; Flournoy 2018; Kupchan 2018; Obama administration NSC, Defense Department official 2016).

The consequences of the ambitious and contradictory policies pursued by the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations during the 1990s became apparent in the 2000s. While the previous US administrations had pushed the Europeans to transform their militaries to go ‘out of area’, and ensured that NATO had no institutional rivals within Europe, the George W. Bush administration considered ‘big bloated NATO’ largely irrelevant (Townsend 2018). As Christine Wormuth, who served in the Obama administration White House and the Defense Department, remembers it, while she did not share their opinion, in the eyes of Bush administration officials, those ‘namby pamby Europeans’ were seen as ‘risk averse, not muscular’ and as slowing down

the United States (2018). Rumsfeld and others within the administration felt that ‘we should deal with whoever has the ability to help’ (Volker 2013). Jim Townsend partly ascribes the disdain of Donald Rumsfeld and other officials (which he disagreed with) to their having been out of government for eight years and then, when they came back into power, assuming that nothing had changed in Europe (Townsend 2018).

It was not just Europe that had declined in importance in the eyes of officials from the Bush and Obama administrations; they also barely took Russia into consideration. Eric Edelman (2019) notes that in the NATO enlargement debate, particularly during the second round of enlargement, there was ‘a kind of subconscious effort to downplay the potential costs if Russia were to turn.... I don’t think much thought was given to how [we would] really defend the Baltics’. Force planners ‘had a sense that we could go lower’ in terms of troop levels. The assumption was that Russia ‘would no longer be a hostile power’, and that if Russia did turn hostile, the United States would have ‘many years to rebuild’. Moreover, according to David Ochmanek, no serious analysis of the force posture needed for contingencies in Eastern Europe was ever done: ‘I’ve never seen it.... [The last assessment] would have been before the collapse of the Soviet Union’ (2018). Enlargement was undertaken with the assumption that Russia would not be able to ‘once again plausibly threaten to use military power against NATO’. Michele Flournoy, who served in the Defense Department during the Clinton and Obama administrations, notes that before 2014 there was a plan in case of Russian aggression in the Baltics, but ‘it was not a major plan. It was not a priority’. Remarkably, when US officials discussed ‘contingency planning against Russia as a potential future adversary’, it was ‘actually controversial’ (2018). Critics considered it provocative. This attitude was evident in the further removal of combat forces from Europe by the

Obama administration. There was a widespread sense within the policy community that Russia could not constrain US policies and interests.

Exploiting Divisions

As the 2000s wore on, the strategic fragmentation on the European continent continued to deepen. In part, this was shaped in part by the political fallout from the participation in the conflicts in Iraq and/or Afghanistan by European NATO member states. However, it was primarily driven by the increased Atlanticist caucus in both NATO and the EU that the dual enlargements of both organizations had created. As the Central and Eastern European states generally perceived the United States and NATO to be their best insurance against a possible resurgent Russia, the new member states sought to bind the United States to Europe and to maintain NATO as the central security architecture in Europe. Consequently, they pursued foreign policy agendas that accorded with US preferences. For example, in 2003, Poland was perceived by European commentators to be a future ‘Trojan horse’ for US interests in the EU (*Economist* 2003). Bulgaria and Romania sent forces to Afghanistan, to gain additional US support at the 2002 Prague Meeting for their accession to NATO (Webber 2003, 172).

The consequences of this structural shift in alignments in Europe became especially apparent during the 2002-2003 transatlantic crisis over the Second Iraq War, which took place concurrent to the preparations for the 2004 rounds of NATO and EU enlargement. In January 2003, in the face of French and German resistance to US plans to militarily intervene in Iraq, seven states that were candidates to join NATO in 2004— Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia— signed the Vilnius letter endorsing the US position on Iraq, as did two states that would join in the subsequent 2009 round of enlargement—Albania and Croatia. The NATO member states that had joined in the 1999 round. and were also aspiring EU members, the

Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland had already signaled their support for the US in the Letter of the Eight (alongside EU members Denmark, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom) (Gherghisan 2003). Bush administration officials celebrated and exploited this shift, both publically and privately (Webber 2003, 171; see also D'Aboville 2019, 541). In an often-cited interview, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld dismissed France and Germany as belonging to 'old Europe' and argued that the 'center of gravity is shifting to the East'. These new members were 'not with France and Germany [regarding Iraq], they're with the United States' (Baker 2003). Rumsfeld's assistant secretary of defense, Peter Rodman, wrote him a week later that 'our counterstrategy...is winning.... When Central and Eastern Europe get into not only NATO but also the EU, the French game is over' (Rodman 2003). Indeed, this potential outcome was one of the reasons that Chirac had been reluctant about further enlargement (Foucher 2019). Only a decade or two before, it would have been more difficult and costly for the United States to ignore the objections of major Western European allies as it did with regards to Iraq. In the future, the United States could achieve its interests in Europe by weaponizing Central and Eastern European fears and feelings of dependence on the United States.

In other ways, the effects of the Second Iraq War on the transatlantic relationship seemed short-lived. During his second term, President Bush signaled a desire for reconciliation with the Europeans (Dobbins 2016). Rumsfeld was out, and the Bush administration made sure that more internationalist officials were engaging European allies. After his reelection, Bush quickly met with the EU commission in Brussels. As Kupchan (2018) notes: '[President Bush] flew to Brussels...with a big bouquet of roses and said, "I love you after all and please come help us in Iraq, because we are in up to our eyeballs"'. He believes that although Bush came into office with no time or patience for Europe, he left office an Atlanticist. The reason was straightforward: 'How

many non-Atlantic powers are major contributors to public goods?'. The US Ambassador to NATO expressed a new-found willingness to work with the Europeans (Nuland 2008). On the other side of the Atlantic, European leaders had expected Bush to be voted out in 2004 because of the war in Iraq. When he was reelected, they needed to repair the relationship (Donfried 2016). After the 2008 election of Barack Obama, European policymakers expected that transatlantic relations would fully recover. Yet, despite the optimism in European capitals, Europe did not regain its erstwhile relevance in US strategic thinking during the Obama administration until its very end.

Burning Up the Bandwidth

The first decade of the 2000s ended up overburdening NATO as an organization, along with the defense organizations of its European members. The institutional complexity of the NATO and EU enlargements and their interaction used up a considerable amount of bandwidth in both organizations, as did the transformation from territorial defense toward expeditionary warfare. The remaining bandwidth was then swallowed up by European military contributions to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Starting in the mid-1990s, NATO militaries were engaged in what Theo Farrell and Sten Rynning have dubbed a triple transformation, as they sought to manage the dual demands of regional defense and extra-regional crisis management, to close the transatlantic capability gaps that emerged as the United States took the lead in the RMA, and to professionalize their armed forces (Farrell and Rynning 2010, 673–674). The November 2002 NATO meeting in Prague was crucial; not only did it lay the groundwork for the second and much larger round of NATO expansion, but it was also where the global ambitions of NATO were solidified and the need for further transformation of NATO militaries to match that ambition was established (Gallis 2005).

The NATO meetings in Istanbul (2004) and Riga (2006) reinforced the transformation agenda. For example, Riga established that 40% of each ally's land forces should be structured, prepared, and equipped for deployed operations, and that 8% must be undertaking or planned for sustained operations (later revised to 50% and 10%, respectively) (Ringmose 2010). NATO had declared itself 'committed to transformation in almost every respect... and its business was now global, beyond borders' (Farrell and Rynning 2010, 679).

The impact of those decisions was considerable. As Sara Bjerg Moller shows in her contribution in this issue, while the scale of the effort was impressive, the actual consequences for force postures of existing and new members were far from good. For the European armed forces—most of which were small—the dragging conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq threw another wrench into the machinery of transformation. As they were attempting to adopt the RMA model, European militaries were also requested to perform counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions in Afghanistan and (though not a NATO mission) Iraq (NATO 2006). It became exceedingly difficult for NATO's European member states to maintain readiness for deployment and simultaneously generate future capabilities (Schilde 2017). The combination did 'huge damage' to 'doctrine, training, [and] exercises', aggravated by 'the reduction of the armed forces and significant reduction of the defense budget', the 'so-called peace dividend' (NATO and EU defense official 2019). Consequently, a 'double transformation gap' emerged between the allies focused on missions in Europe and those focused on missions outside of it, and between those that adopted the military practices advocated by the United States and those that could or would not (Farrell and Rynning 2010). Many European militaries wound up with force postures that were neither fish nor flesh.

In the meantime, enlargement had extended the NATO treaty area far eastwards. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was itself not a NATO member, it became obvious how exposed the Baltic NATO member states were to potential Russian actions. It also became obvious how limited the ability had become of even the UK, France, and Germany to send and sustain combat brigades for the defense of the Baltic member states (Shurkin 2017). Kaija Schilde (2017), in her breakdown of European spending and capabilities decisions, shows the extent to which from 2000 to 2015 European force structures moved from territorial toward expeditionary postures. Major Western European states—the UK, France, Italy and Spain—reduced their tank inventories by half. Germany even reduced its inventory by 80%, and smaller states—Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands—essentially abolished their armor (Goure 2014, 37–38; IISS 2013, 2014). Julian Lindley-French was therefore arguably correct when he noted before the 2004 enlargement that the new members were ‘likely to be disappointed because the NATO they join is unlikely to be the NATO they want’ - namely the alliance as it was during the Cold War (Lindley-French 2003, 184, 190).

NATO’s collective action problems, inherent to any alliance (Sandler and Hartley 2001), were amplified by enlargement. As the area covered by NATO moved farther eastward, the security benefits of enlargement would largely accrue to the new members that most acutely felt the Russian threat, while not obviously adding security to the members farther west or south (Lepgold 1998). These effects were reflected in the burden sharing debates regarding out-of-area operations, influencing both the contributions of and public support within member states. Certain NATO members not only sent fewer forces to Afghanistan than others, but committed them only in the areas deemed to be safe, or where the rules of engagement were sufficiently constraining to protect them (Farrell and Rynning 2010, 691). States like Germany, Italy, and Spain neither shared

the US belief in the importance of the mission, nor felt the pressing need that the Central and Eastern European states did to keep the United States involved in providing security against Russia. Public support for NATO's territorial defense missions was clearly much higher than that for out-of-area operations, and the conflict in Afghanistan arguably decreased support for NATO in general (GMFUS 2014). The defense spending in real terms of NATO's European member states has increased substantially since the 2014 Ukraine crisis, but the increase has been unevenly distributed and heavily weighted toward the Central and Eastern European states (Chalmers 2019; NATO 2019).

Why did the Bush and Obama administrations not treat the decline of European military capabilities as an urgent problem? It is true that Defense Secretary Robert Gates publicly admonished European allies over insufficient defense spending in a speech at NATO (2011), and that Obama later referred to Europeans as 'free riders' (Goldberg 2016). However, the legitimacy that working collectively added to US operations was why the US put up with 'European antics', as one Obama administration NSC official put it (2016). Specifically, when it came to Germany, the United States had 'modified expectations' (Long 2016), as 'the political benefits outweigh[ed] the operational drawbacks' (Obama administration State Department official #2 2016). The attitude on the US side was that any contribution was welcome, as Amb. Samantha Power's 2015 remarks in Brussel encapsulated (also mentioned by Nick Witney (2016). The willingness to accept Europeans 'showing their flags' rather than contributing serious capabilities institutionalized made the uneven burden sharing.

European states responded to the 2014 Ukraine crisis and the worsening of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq with a series of initiatives, including the creation of an EU Military Planning and Conduct Capability within the EU military staff and a European Defense Fund, along with the

strengthening of the permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) mechanism (Biscop 2018). Yet, US officials again regarded these efforts with skepticism. They preferred the Europeans to spend ‘on something that NATO need[ed]’ (Wormuth 2018), or anything that added real capabilities, rather than just another European headquarters (Obama administration State Department official 2016; Long 2016). Doing otherwise ‘would be a waste of time, a waste of energy, and a waste of resources’ (Zakheim 2016). In the end, the United States continued to want ‘NATO to be the primary security alliance with the Europeans’, and NATO had ‘an enormous head start’ (Wormuth 2018). Jim Townsend felt sorry for the Europeans; when they promise to spend more on defense through ESDP or CSDP, or through the new initiatives, the Americans complained that this spending was not for NATO (Townsend 2018).

Conclusions

Motivated by a set of deeply institutionalized beliefs about instability inside and outside Europe and about the necessity for the United States to lead Europe via NATO, US officials pursued a set of ambitious policies after the Cold War. They could do so because the US was unconstrained by a weak Russia or a fragmented Europe. The argument here is not that continuing NATO after the Cold War or enlarging it were, in themselves, bad ideas. As per Alexander Lanoszka’s contribution to this issue, enlargement arguably accomplished its goals of stabilization and insurance for the Central and Eastern European states. The problems that NATO enlargement created for Europe were consequences of the scale of the enlargement, combined with the expanded geographic scope of NATO missions. The latter necessitated the transformation of European militaries, even as the United States undermined alternative European frameworks for crisis response.

Complaints about European weaknesses and uneven burden sharing across the Atlantic have become more overt during the Donald Trump administration, but they were already present

during the Obama administration (Goldberg 2016; Gates 2011; *New York Times* 2018; Barnes and Cooper 2019), and have been a constant feature of scholarly debates (Posen 2019; Mearsheimer and Walt 2016, 70; Posen 2014, 129–130). Yet, European weaknesses were also a function of the contradictory policies that successive post–Cold War US administrations pursued. If the goal was taking advantage of the window of opportunity provided by Russian weaknesses, why reconstitute NATO for out-of-area missions? If the goal was creating greater stability in the European periphery, why undermine European attempts to build crisis-response capabilities that could operate alongside NATO? If the goal was equitable burden sharing, why accept that European allies in many cases merely showed up for military missions without contributing much to them? It would have always proved difficult to achieve strategic cohesion within Europe after the dual enlargements of NATO and the EU, yet the United States deliberately exploited divisions between traditional allies and the newer member states that relied on the United States for their protection. In the end, the resulting ‘strategic cacophony’ within Europe (De France and Witney 2013; Meijer and Wyss 2019) helps neither side of the Atlantic. Emmanuel Macron’s 2019 comments to the *Economist* about NATO’s ‘braindeath’ can be understood as a critique of the alliance’s contradictions and lack of strategic cohesion.

The central argument offered here is that it is difficult to separate the effects of NATO enlargement from larger issues at play in US grand strategy toward Europe and NATO. One avenue to consider is what European security would have looked like had the United States not simultaneously pursued its three key policies— maintaining NATO, expanding its membership, and expanding its scope. A NATO that expanded but had been restricted to fewer members in Central and Eastern Europe would likely have been more strategically cohesive. Such a NATO could have still dampened the risks of renationalization of conflicts between Germany and its

neighbors, or within Central and Eastern Europe more generally. A more limited NATO would have suffered fewer collective action problems and would likely have had higher public support. The Partnership for Peace architecture might have been able to transform the former Warsaw Pact militaries into more democratically accountable Western-style institutions. PfP members would have also taken part in military exercises, which would in turn have meant that additional forces were available for support in crisis-response missions. Although the effect of enlargement on Russian behavior is more difficult to assess, it might have avoided creating security commitments that were difficult to fulfill, specifically in the Baltic states. Additionally, even with NATO enlargement, a more advanced European framework for crisis response that was supported by the United States might have encouraged Europeans to take on more responsibilities, and this in turn could have led to a true division of labor. Even NATO enlargement on the current scale could have been successful—expressed as effective collective defense and engagement with Russia—had it not been linked to the simultaneous extensive transformation of European forces and the decision to use NATO as an instrument of US policy far outside the NATO treaty area.

As it actually happened, NATO enlargement fundamentally reordered European security. 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 own resources and left itself with few opportunities to share costs.

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