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Revisiting NATO Enlargement: Is There Anything New Under the Sun?

Do we really need another analysis of NATO enlargement? Hasn't the topic been done to death? According to M. E. Sarotte's article, "How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95," there are some compelling reasons to reopen the debate on one of the most pivotal decisions of the post-Cold War era. Investigating the decision to enlarge NATO, Sarotte zooms in on a critical period of the history of the alliance between 1993–1995, when many of the key decisions were made within the Bill Clinton administration. She argues that another investigation of this period is essential, not just because of what was at stake in Europe—in Clinton's own words "the first chance ever since the rise of the nation state to have the entire continent live in peace" (9) - but also due to the release of newly declassified sources including records of conversations between Presidents Clinton and Russia President Boris Yeltsin about the timing and process of the enlargement policy. The article thus largely avoids the more studied historical debate about whether NATO should have been expanded, and the implications of that decision for relations with Russia, and focuses on the important questions of when and how.

Sarotte's central argument is that the decision to enlarge was influenced by an internal domestic political process within the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations, and by electoral politics, including the Republican Party's victory in the 1994 congressional elections. This tilted the balance towards a more robust enlargement process involving the immediate extension of Article 5 (NATO's collective defence clause) to new states when they joined NATO. According to Sarotte, "supporters of a relatively swift conferral of full membership to a narrow range of countries outmanoeuvred proponents of a slower, wider, and looser process of enlargement, embodied in a program known as the Partnership for Peace (PfP)" (9). In developing the argument, Sarotte focuses on three decision-making 'ratchets' in the 1990s that created a path dependency that shut down other options and narrowed the focus of the Bush senior and Clinton administrations. The first was President Bush's decision to block alternatives to NATO's continued dominance in Europe and to expand the alliance to a reunified Germany. This set a historical precedent for enlargement that was difficult to ignore. The second was the Clinton administration's creation of the PfP in 1994, which provided a steppingstone to full NATO membership for Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, among others. The third was the decision in 1994 to move beyond the PfP to a full-guarantee expansion.

In taking this approach Sarotte rightly highlights that NATO enlargement was a gradual and incremental process that emerged out of domestic political dynamics which crossed multiple U.S. administrations and was a result of historical inertia. The recognition in the article of the myriad influences on enlargement—domestic, structural, historical—is one

of its strengths. Sarotte also notes the influence of strong lobbying by prospective members of the alliance. Interestingly, the declassified sources reveal that the justifications put forward by these leaders were framed in terms of Russia continuing to be a strategic threat. As Polish President Lech Walesa said in a 1993 diplomatic cable to Clinton, “We are all afraid of Russia... If Russia again adopts an aggressive foreign policy, that aggression will be directed toward Ukraine and Poland.” He added, “Poland cannot be left defenceless,” it “need(s) to have the protection of US muscle” (14). This was also a view that prevailed in Washington, with more hawkish/realist elements of the Clinton administration arguing behind closed doors that NATO expansion would be a way to expand the Cold War policy of containment to a new era and guard against a revanchist Russia (25). In this sense the article provides new evidence of a realist narrative around NATO enlargement that combined with more liberal public-facing arguments (a Europe ‘whole and free’) to justify and implement the policy.

Another intriguing facet of the article is the account of Lech Walesa’s drinking sessions with Yeltsin, in which the Russian leader indicated a willingness for Poland to join NATO, only to regret the statement and, hungover, try to walk it back the next morning. The influence of vodka in the NATO enlargement process is certainly underexamined in the scholarly canon. How many other historical decisions have been fuelled in this way? In highlighting these personal interactions the article brings to our attention the influence of individual leaders in the key decisions. This was not just a process determined by structural changes in the international system, but one driven by elite agency. Sarotte’s account of the views of the principle protagonists in the Clinton administration is also fascinating and adds a new layer of depth to our understanding of the enlargement process. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott’s view of Russia was particularly colourful. In a 1995 memo to Secretary of State Warren Christopher, he argued that U.S. strategy should “be intended to make sure the rickety, leaky, oversized, cannon-laden Good Ship Russia, with its stinking bilge, its erratic, autocratic captain, and its semi-mutinous crew... has a clearly visible point on the horizon to steer by” (37).

Sarotte’s analysis also explores the influence of Ukraine in the enlargement decision. On the basis of this article, Ukraine should assume an elevated role in our historical understanding of NATO enlargement. This is the article’s most important contribution and highlights the long history behind the more recent controversies in Washington regarding Donald Trump’s attempted/alleged ‘quid pro quo’ with Ukraine over military aid. According to Sarotte, there may also have been a quid pro quo in the enlargement process entailing a commitment by Poland not to intervene in any conflict in Ukraine that involved Russia. This claim is a controversial one, especially as such a conflict could have involved another NATO member. While efforts to avoid entrapment in conflicts involving other members of the alliance have been a historical constant within NATO (in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, for example), a precondition such as this would not have been well-received had it been widely known at the time. The article also reveals how Clinton was wary of pushing states that remained outside of NATO into Russia’s orbit and how the gradual establishment of the PfP in 1994 and then accession to NATO risked creating a new dividing line between NATO and Ukraine. As he said, “Ukraine especially does not want to be pushed back into Russia’s orbit” (22). The need to deal with Ukraine’s nuclear arsenal was also an issue dealt with in tandem to the enlargement process, and the deal that was reached (the Budapest Memorandum, 1994) included a guarantee of Ukraine’s territorial integrity. As West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl said to Clinton, “If Ukraine collapses, because of Russian influence or because of militant nationalists within Ukraine or any other reason, it would undermine the whole theory of NATO’s Partnership for Peace. Ukraine is the linchpin of the whole idea” (24).

Ultimately, the article is a useful and important addition to the NATO enlargement literature, containing some insights and evidence that complement and extend the range of existing work on this topic. However, as with much of the NATO literature that considers a brief window of history, some of the broader dynamics and influences are missing from the analysis. During the first ‘ratchet,’ for example, Bush administration officials also discouraged French and German proposals for a more independent European military capability. This was the start of a post-Cold war debate in Europe that continues today in the guise of ‘strategic autonomy’ and proposals for a ‘European army.’ Second, the influence of the Gulf War is framed in Sarotte’s analysis as a distraction from European issues (13), when in fact it may have confirmed for the Bush administration the essential utility of NATO, whose bases and infrastructure were used in the campaign. According to William Taft, the U.S. Ambassador to NATO, had NATO not been in place in 1991 it may

have had to have been invented.¹ While the influence of the conflict in Bosnia is mentioned, the role of the conflict in sending a strong message about NATO's utility is also side-lined in the analysis. Ultimately, it was NATO airstrikes that led to the Dayton accords in 1995, and the negotiations that were sponsored by the European Union and the United Nations (UN) ended in failure, with UN peacekeepers ill-equipped to deal with the unfolding violence.

This was a pivotal moment for Clinton, who realized that NATO was to be the preferred security institution through which the U.S. would work in managing intra-state conflicts. In fact the conflict set a precedent for the wars in Kosovo and then in Afghanistan. The U.S. intervention in Somali in 1993 had a similar effect, marginalising and discrediting the UN (at least in the eyes of the Clinton administration) and shifting emphasis further towards regional security organisations. In this respect NATO enlargement emerged from a broader strategic competition with other security providers than the article suggests. While the author recognises both the influence of Russian domestic politics and the 1994 Congressional elections in the U.S., the timing of the enlargement decision was also related to the U.S. presidential elections in 1996, including the Clinton administration's desire to influence the votes of Hungarian, Polish, and Czech Americans in key battleground states. There is also evidence of strong lobbying by the U.S. defence industry for the creation of lucrative defence contracts in the new NATO states.

It is never entirely wise or fair to critique an article for what it does not cover. But if we want a holistic view of NATO's durability in the post-Cold War world, a broader horizon is important. This is a rigorous and intriguing new account of NATO's history, but it does not provide the whole picture.

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¹ William H. Taft, "European Security: Lessons Learned from the Gulf War," *NATO Review* 39:3 (1991): 16-21, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/1991/9103-2.htm>.