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Review Essay 79

James Goldgeier and Joshua Shiffrin, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory to the Russia-Ukraine War*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-23364-7>

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When James Goldgeier and Joshua Shiffrin first organized a symposium on the legacy of NATO enlargement in 2019, which led to the publication of a special issue of *International Politics* in 2020, the alliance's purpose and future were being questioned on both sides of the Atlantic.¹ Former US President Donald Trump notoriously kept on deriding the “free-riding” allies, bringing into question the credibility of the US commitment to collective defense, while French President Emmanuel Macron declared the alliance “braindead.”² Even the most well-meaning transatlanticists penned reports pointing to an organizational crisis.³ Given this context, reconsidering enlargement was an intriguing scholarly endeavor. Fast forward to present day, when Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has compelled the alliance to revert to its fundamental principles of defense and deterrence, and when (somewhat surprisingly) NATO has demonstrated remarkable unity in imposing sanctions on Russia, assisting Ukraine, and continuing its enlargement agenda. Against this backdrop, Goldgeier and Shiffrin's edited volume stands out as an essential reading for anyone seeking to comprehend the impact of NATO enlargement on our present situation, with sixteen chapters that span historical and contemporary debates on enlargement, great power politics and perspectives, regional and subregional security issues, as well as organizational politics.

Having closely followed the development of their joint endeavor and now having read the edited volume, what stands out in the overall conclusions is that perspectives of the contributors remain largely unchanged despite Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine. Those who viewed enlargement as the root cause of the deterioration of NATO-Russia relations in 2019 find the events of 24 February 2022 as a validation of their stance.⁴ On the other hand, those who argued that there was no substitute to full membership when it came to security guarantees now view Russia's invasion of Ukraine as evidence that the special partnership between

¹ James Goldgeier and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Evaluating NATO Enlargement: Scholarly Debates, Policy Implications, and Roads Not Taken,” *International Politics* vol. 57, no. 3 (2020): 291–321.

² “Emmanuel Macron Warns Europe: NATO Is Becoming Brain Dead,” *The Economist*, 7 November 2019. Available at <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>

³ Douglas Lute and Nicholas Burns, *NATO at Seventy: An Alliance in Crisis*. (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2019).

⁴ Rajan Menon and William Ruger, “NATO Enlargement and US Grand Strategy: A Net Assessment,” *International Politics* vol. 57, no. 3 (2020): 371–400.

NATO and Ukraine was insufficient to deter Russia.⁵ Therefore, in the context of the enlargement debate, it becomes apparent that the ongoing war in Ukraine primarily reinforced pre-existing positions rather than significantly altering them.

From the very beginning the editors make it clear that their primary objective is not to adjudicate in the enlargement debate and provide a definitive answer either way. Goldgeier and Shiffrinson recognize that this debate is complex and multifaceted, offering a multitude of perspectives to consider (12-13). They rightly assert that it is challenging to construct a concise and universally convincing narrative, given the numerous actors and stakeholders involved, as well as the nearly three decades that have passed since NATO's decision to expand to the East. Rather than attempting to present a simplistic narrative, the volume takes readers on a journey where scholars from diverse disciplinary and geographical perspectives offer insights into how NATO enlargement can be interpreted from their own unique vantage points. This approach, which marries history, international relations, and diplomacy in analyses from scholars from North America, Europe, and Russia, allows for a comprehensive exploration of the topic, enabling readers to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the enlargement and its consequences.

What makes the topic even more intriguing is that different scholars, even when they focus on the same states or groups of states, do not necessarily reach a unanimous verdict regarding the winners and losers of NATO enlargement. Let us consider the supposed winners first. The least controversial point is arguably to that the former Communist states that joined NATO following the end of Cold War benefitted the most, as they are now covered by the Article 5 commitment and enjoy the advantages of security cooperation with their erstwhile adversaries. This aligns with Alexander Lanoszka's argument, which highlights how NATO's expansion into Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) played a crucial role in reducing instability within and between states in the region.⁶ It effectively deterred Russia and created a secure external environment for the growth of liberal democracy. The implication is clear: if NATO had not expanded eastward, the politics of CEE might have taken a more negative turn. However, Paul Poast and Alexandra Chinchilla present differing conclusions regarding the growth and establishment of democracy in CEE.⁷ They argue that attributing the consolidation of democracy solely to NATO enlargement is unfounded, as the European Union played a more significant role. Through their analysis of the timing of democratization in relation to the expansion of both NATO and the EU, they suggest that EU enlargement tended to be the primary driver of domestic reforms. This raises questions about the effectiveness of NATO enlargement in achieving its intended goals on both political and military fronts. These days, it is also clear that Euro-Atlantic integration of the "new Europe" failed to prevent worrying democratic backsliding across the region.⁸

Prima facie, the United States also emerges as a winner, as it has managed to sustain a military alliance that has been crucial for maintaining its hegemonic status, even in the absence of a near-peer military competitor. However, Rajan Menon and William Ruger argue that NATO enlargement has in fact been a disastrous outcome for the United States.⁹ They assert that it not only strained US-Russian relations, but also led to allied free-riding and excessive American involvement in Europe. These challenges arose at a time when the United States wielded significant influence and had the opportunity to pursue an alternative approach. This

⁵ Alexander Lanoszka, "Thank Goodness for NATO Enlargement," *International Politics* vol. 57, no. 3 (2020): 451–470.

⁶ Lanoszka, "Thank Goodness for NATO Enlargement," in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 307–339.

⁷ Paul Poast and Alexandra Chinchilla, "Good for Democracy? Evidence from the 2004 NATO Expansion," in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 341–372.

⁸ Amanda Coakley, "Putin's Trojan Horse Inside the European Union," *Foreign Policy*, 3 August 2022, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/03/hungary-orban-russia-conservative-politics/>; Jaroslaw Kuisz and Karolina Wigura, "Will the Ukraine War Return Poland to Europe's Democratic Fold?," *Foreign Policy*, 11 August 2022, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/11/poland-democracy-illiberalism-europe-ukraine-russia-war-eu-nato/>

⁹ Rajan Menon and William Ruger, "NATO Enlargement and US Grand Strategy: A Net Assessment," Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 165–208.

presents a complex and nuanced perspective on the impact of NATO enlargement from a US standpoint. While the United States may have benefited from the continuation of the alliance, valid concerns remain about the negative consequences associated with enlargement and US commitment to Europe which go far beyond the “America First” populist rhetoric we so often heard espoused during the Trump presidency.¹⁰

As for those on the losing side, according to the critics of enlargement, Russia stands out as a prominent loser since NATO’s eastward expansion set off a profound sense of insecurity, as argued by Vladislav Zubok.¹¹ The enlargement also triggered a downward spiral in US-Russia relations, as Andrey Sushentsov and William Wohlforth also persuasively depict.¹² However, Kimberly Marten brings valuable nuance to this viewpoint.¹³ She argues that, at most, NATO enlargement provided a convenient justification for Moscow’s likely pursuit of a revisionist foreign policy. In other words, the effect of enlargement on Russia’s recent bellicosity is a rather indirect and much less pronounced one, as it was only one of the data points in the collapsing East-West relations. Marten astutely highlights that other factors linked to Russia’s diminishing global influence likely had a far greater influence on its threat perceptions. For instance, the US-led military interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya had a detrimental effect on Russia’s perception of its international standing, as did the gradual breakdown of arms control agreements.¹⁴

According to Paul van Hooft, Western European NATO members and the EU could also be qualified as losers.¹⁵ Van Hooft’s analysis reveals that a significant number of these members held conflicting views regarding NATO enlargement. They were concerned that this expansion could undermine their efforts to establish the EU as a security provider in post-Cold War Europe. This viewpoint is echoed by other contributors in the volume, such as Menon and Ruger. These concerns turned out to be valid, as the expansion of NATO indeed hindered support for and progress toward an effective EU security and defense system—most famously condensed in the Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s message about the “3Ds.”¹⁶ Moreover, enlargement resulted in a diluted mission for the Alliance precisely when declining defense budgets left Western European militaries with limited resources to fulfill an expanding set of security obligations, leading to overtaxed forces. This situation created a Western Europe that gradually lost its ability to challenge NATO’s dominance after the Cold War. As a result, even if Western European NATO members able to spend less on military given the continuing US defense commitments, they found themselves increasingly reliant on American preferences.

From the perspective of the ongoing war, it becomes evident that Ukraine has suffered the most significant losses because of the unfulfilled promise of enlargement. The infamous declaration made during the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008 stated, “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.”¹⁷ This declaration, as Rebecca Moore argues, represented a significant milestone in the context of NATO

¹⁰ Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021); Elbridge A. Colby and Oriana Skylar Mastro, “Ukraine is a Distraction from Taiwan.” *Wall Street Journal* (13 February 2022).

¹¹ Vladislav M. Zubok, “Myths and Realities of Putinism and NATO Expansion,” in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 145-159.

¹² Andrey A. Sushentsov and William C. Wohlforth. “The Tragedy of US–Russian Relations: NATO Centrality and the Revisionists’ Spiral,” in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 251-282.

¹³ Kimberly Marten, “NATO Enlargement: Evaluating its Consequences in Russia,” in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 209-249.

¹⁴ Kimberly Marten, “Reconsidering NATO Expansion: A Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s,” *European Journal of International Security* vol. 3, no. 2 (2018): 135-161.

¹⁵ Paul van Hooft, “Every Which Way but Loose: The United States, NATO Enlargement, European Strategic Autonomy and Fragmentation,” in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 415-453.

¹⁶ Madeleine Albright, “The Right Balance Will Secure NATO’s Future,” *Financial Times*, 7 December 1998.

¹⁷ NATO 2008. *Bucharest Summit Declaration*, April 3. Available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm.

enlargement.¹⁸ The Bucharest Summit declaration raised hopes and expectations for Ukraine's future membership in NATO, creating a sense of promise and aspiration. However, the subsequent lack of concrete progress towards accession placed Ukraine in a state of limbo, with limited pathways to realizing its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The unfulfilled promise of enlargement has left Ukraine grappling with the repercussions of geopolitical uncertainty and seeking alternative means of security and stability, as Moore shows throughout her chapter.

Lastly, and perhaps least obviously, a line of argument suggests that NATO as a military alliance lost out as it grew weaker for both political and geographical reasons as enlargement continued. Opponents of enlargement cautioned that the inclusion of new members from CEE would weaken the alliance's fundamental security capabilities, complicate internal decisionmaking processes, and burden allies with unviable military obligations amid declining defense budgets. Sara Bjerg Moller argues that NATO enlargement created an inherent tension within the organization.¹⁹ While member states desired expansion, they also sought to reap the benefits of a "peace dividend" in the post-Cold War era. To facilitate enlargement, it needed to be achieved cost-effectively, without imposing significant new military, security, or financial burdens on member states. However, as NATO extended its reach eastward, this situation resulted in noticeable alliance overstretch. Member states struggled to allocate resources to defend NATO's expanded eastern flank, leading to disparities in military readiness among different allies due to funding shortfalls. Moreover, the resurgence of tensions with Russia has raised concerns within the organization that NATO's commitments may surpass its capabilities.

Furthermore, James Townsend, Stéfanie von Hlatky, and Michael Fortmann demonstrate that the political and military parts of NATO enlargement progressively drifted apart.²⁰ Planners had initially given careful thought to the military aspects of expanding the Alliance eastward. However, their assessments were colored by post-Cold War optimism, assuming that favorable security conditions would continue and that any tensions with Russia or others could be resolved diplomatically. Regrettably, senior policymakers failed to address the security implications of an increasingly fragmented European security landscape since the mid-2000s. As a result, NATO took on more security obligations, but its capacity to fulfill them became uncertain.²¹ At the same time, publicly, the alliance endeavored to redefine itself as a collective security organization aimed at overcoming geopolitical divisions in Europe. Conversely, the states aspiring to join NATO since the 1990s primarily sought membership due to the traditional military and security advantages offered by it rather than its newly acquired affordances as a collective security apparatus.

The latter points bring out another thread that weaves throughout the volume—one about signaling and perceptions, which are closely linked to the motivations and intentions of the main protagonists.²² Through this lens, US commitment to enlarging NATO was a signal that it would remain engaged in Europe and underscored the fact that US policymakers recognized the United States' role as the victor in the Cold War and world's only superpower. Joshua Shiffrinson reveals that shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, US policymakers debated whether they should signal NATO's openness to the democracies of Eastern Europe

¹⁸ Rebecca R. Moore, "Ukraine's Bid to Join NATO: Re-evaluating Enlargement in a New Strategic Context," in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 373-414.

¹⁹ Sara Bjerg Moller, "Assessing the Consequences of Enlargement for the NATO Military Alliance," in James Goldgeier and Joshua Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 459-493.

²⁰ James J. Townsend Jr., "In Peace and War: The Military Implications of NATO Enlargement," in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 495-530; Stéfanie von Hlatky and Michel Fortmann, "NATO enlargement and the failure of the cooperative security mindset," in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 531-561.

²¹ Seth A. Johnston, *How NATO Adapts: Strategy and Organization in the Atlantic Alliance since 1950*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

²² Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics: New Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

regarding future membership. By mid-1992, a consensus emerged in the George H.W. Bush administration to open the alliance to new members.²³ This account countervails the usual assessments of the Bush Sr. administration as having been overly cautious and careful in its approach to foreign policy.²⁴ Yet, signaling also went the other way, as demonstrated by the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act.²⁵ From the US perspective, this was thought to be a way of appeasing Russia and signaling that enlargement was not meant to redivide Europe, as the editors of the volume argue.

Sushentsov and Wohlforth take a more dynamic approach by analyzing the downward security spiral between United States and Russia. The spiral cycle exhibits characteristics of a security dilemma, as both sides genuinely believed that their own security concerns did not pose a threat to the other's reasonable definition of security. Each party engaged in bargaining and signaling in the hopes of persuading the other to adopt a more restrained view of security. In this vein, the 2008 Bucharest Summit Declaration stands out as a particularly problematic signal to Russia, as the US strategy of NATO enlargement clashed directly with Kremlin priorities. Paradoxically and tragically, the repeated reminders that Ukraine was not a part of the alliance may have inadvertently conveyed a message to Putin that he could act without consequences if he confined his actions to Ukrainian territory.

In the present context, signaling is also relevant given NATO's increasing interest in the Indo-Pacific region and the consequent deepening of partnerships with countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the Republic of Korea.²⁶ On its own, the alliance does not pose a significant security threat to China. However, as Liselotte Odgaard shows, it is the coordinated response to China's challenges by entities aligned with the United States, including the EU, NATO, and key allies in the Indo-Pacific and Europe that is perceived as a substantial security challenge by China.²⁷ China's primary concern is that this collective response signifies the success of US efforts to persuade Europe to engage in comprehensive deterrence against China, alongside US partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific region.

Ultimately, one cannot but wonder about the future of NATO enlargement in the wake of the war in Ukraine, as well as the growing Russia-China entente. The editors themselves wonder if a credible pledge to end further enlargement into former Soviet spaces would meaningfully improve East–West dynamics given current attitudes in Washington, Moscow, and beyond. The preponderance of evidence from the past three decades suggests there are still plenty of grievances that Russian president Vladimir Putin, or for that matter any Russian neo-imperialist leader, could tap into and use to justify their militarism. Regardless of the shape and speed of actual enlargement, however, future NATO enlargement scholarship will be building on extremely sound foundations in perusing this compendium. Until such time, the volume is perfectly timed to provide much needed intellectual ballast to the contemporary scholarly, policy, and public debates.

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²³ Shiffrinson, "The NATO Enlargement Consensus and US Foreign Policy: Origins and Consequences," in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 97-144.

²⁴ Jeffrey A. Engel, "A Better World... but Don't Get Carried Away: The Foreign Policy of George H.W. Bush Twenty Years On," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 1 (2010): 25-46.

²⁵ Fergus Carr and Paul Flenley. "NATO and the Russian Federation in the new Europe: The Founding Act on Mutual Relations," *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 15, no. 2 (1999): 88-110.

²⁶ NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, Madrid, June 29–30, 2022. Available at <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/>

²⁷ Liselotte Odgaard, "China Views NATO: Beijing's Concerns about Transatlantic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 283-302.

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