

# H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

## Review Essay 82

James Goldgeier and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory To The Russia-Ukraine War*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.

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This interesting and important collection of essays on the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its consequences appeared at a historic moment, in the immediate aftermath of Russia's full-scale attack of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.<sup>1</sup> It is a development—and to some extent an adjustment—of the papers that were published as a special issue of *International Politics* in 2020 on “Legacies of NATO Enlargement.”<sup>2</sup> It contains multiple and contrasting perspectives, but the volume intelligently tries to bring some consensus to the discussion. Is such a consensus really possible or likely on a topic that generates highly emotional and polarized responses?

On the one hand, the paper by Alexander Lanoszka focuses on east-central Europe and has the title “Thank Goodness for NATO Enlargement.”<sup>3</sup> It makes the case that the 2022 Ukraine conflict would have become a generalized conflict in the absence of NATO. On the other hand, one of the editors, Joshua Shiffrin, is among the scholars who emphasized that the United States in the 1990s broke a promise not to expand NATO to the east. In the aftermath of the first phase of Russia's war, he wrote,

The West has vigorously protested that no such deal was ever struck. However, hundreds of memos, meeting minutes and transcripts from US archives indicate otherwise. Although what the documents reveal isn't enough to make Putin a saint, it suggests that the diagnosis of Russian predation isn't entirely fair. Europe's stability may depend just as much on the West's willingness to reassure Russia about NATO's limits as on deterring Moscow's adventurism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Shear, Richard Pérez-Peña, Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Anton Troianovski, “US and Allies Impose Sanctions on Russia as Biden Condemns ‘Invasion’ of Ukraine,” *New York Times*, February 23, 2022, 1.

<sup>2</sup> James Goldgeier and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, eds., “Special Issue: Legacies of NATO Enlargement: International Relations, Domestic Politics, and Alliance Management,” *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (June 2020): 291-572.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Lanoszka, “Thank Goodness for NATO Enlargement,” in Goldgeier and Shiffrin, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory To The Russia-Ukraine War* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 307-339. Hereafter Goldgeier and Shiffrin, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*.

<sup>4</sup> Shiffrin, “Op-Ed: Russia's Got a Point: The US Broke a NATO Promise,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 2016.

In the 2020 *International Politics* issue, he concluded that “enlargement yielded a mixed bag for the United States, helping it dominate Europe but also imposing large direct and indirect costs. Before recommending either more enlargement or a new course, further research is needed on the range of merits and drawbacks of such moves and how these effects compare with the status quo.”<sup>5</sup>

The editors begin by emphasizing that the issue remains open, “as up for debate as ever,” with critics seeing NATO as “a core impediment” to better East-West relations and “superfluous” to European stability, while advocates see the move as a part of the logic of defending liberal international order and “countering an increasingly aggressive Russia.”<sup>6</sup> And they rightly say that it is important to examine more or less explicit causal and counterfactual claims. The problem is that history is not exactly a laboratory, and that it is impossible with real accuracy to lay out a scenario in which there was no agreement on NATO enlargement (beyond including the former German Democratic Republic as it merged with the Federal Republic). It is possible that the expansion of the European Union might alone have given greater stability to central and eastern Europe, but it is also possible that west Europeans might have felt that without the security offered by NATO this would have been too much of a gamble. It is possible that Russia might have felt slightly less irritated or threatened, but this was a country that had to live with the legacy of the collapse of the Soviet Union and a perception of humiliation in any case. There are many interwoven strands of causation, and this makes precision in putting up bold theses (in the style of John Mearsheimer) problematic.<sup>7</sup> What is left? Rajan Menon and William Ruger write in their paper that “One can disagree in whole or part with the argument that the West is to blame and still conclude that the shadow of NATO expansion loomed over the 2014 Ukraine crisis and shaped its course and outcome” (181).<sup>8</sup>

Looming over all of this is a loose concept when it comes to thinking about causation. In their introduction, the editors lay out a road map for future work, including thinking about “military, political, and economic trends” (27). Most of the analysis presented in the book is concerned with classic security questions, and with the reasons for strategic shifts. Some more analysis of changes in military technology (“hybrid war”), and also on economic trends, in particular the linkages between energy dependence, communications systems, and military capacity, would have been welcome.

The cumulation of analyses in the new volume suggests a new conclusion, as Kimberly Marten lays out: “There is no question that NATO’s geographic enlargement was a major irritant to Russian leaders and contributed to the decline of the overall relationship between Russia and the West—but there is little evidence that enlargement actually threatened Russia. Instead, NATO enlargement was a marker for Russia’s declining status.”<sup>9</sup> That rather relegates the NATO issue as a fundamental driver of any change in Russia’s position. She also tellingly cites Levada Center polling data on Russian public opinion, which apparently reveals that when Russians were asked to list Russia’s enemies, Russians did not select NATO (235).

Here a more precise chronology would have been helpful. The editors repeatedly refer to the mid-2000s as a turning point, but do not fully explain what it was that changed at that moment. Menon and Ruger’s

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<sup>5</sup> Shiffrinson, “NATO Enlargement and US Foreign Policy: The Origins, Durability, and Impact of an Idea,” *International Politics*, 57, no. 3: 342-370, here 364.

<sup>6</sup> Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, “Evaluating NATO Enlargement: Scholarly Debates, Policy Implications, and Roads not Taken,” in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 1-42, here 2

<sup>7</sup> For example, John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Rajan Menon and William Ruger, “NATO Enlargement and US Grand Strategy: A Net Assessment,” in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 165-208, here 181.

<sup>9</sup> Kimberly Marten, “NATO Enlargement: Evaluating Its Consequences in Russia,” in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 209-249, here 212.

contribution notes that in 2002 everything looked happy, with Putin accepting the NATO membership of the Baltic states (165-208). The first sign of a change in the Russian position was Putin's Munich Security Conference speech of February 10, 2007,<sup>10</sup> and the new systemic challenge to the US position came with and after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, the moment that suggested to Putin that US unipolarity was fragile and crumbling.<sup>11</sup> Vladislav Zubok's important contribution highlights the creation in 2007 of the Russkiy Mir institute, an organization designed to reach out to Russians abroad (145-159).<sup>12</sup> It might well be that it was US weakness—as instanced by the problematical Iraq war in 2003, the tension with European allies, but also by the financial crisis—rather than the NATO framework that drove a change in Russian political language.

There is another issue hanging in the air that is touched on only by some of the contributions in the volume. Was the decision of 2008 at the NATO Bucharest summit to offer a possibility of eventual membership for Georgia and Ukraine, but without any timetable,<sup>13</sup> a catastrophic error that left those countries in what Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky now repeatedly refers to as a “gray zone?”<sup>14</sup> There was, in the absence of membership, no security guarantee, no Article V obligations to defend Ukraine if it was attacked.<sup>15</sup> And that was the result of a bad compromise, as US President George W. Bush pushed further for NATO enlargement and German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron pushed back. The issue is well treated in Rebecca Moore's excellent contribution,<sup>16</sup> but it might have been more centrally presented as an answer to the major question of the volume: did NATO expansion change Russian politics? The more likely answer is that the failure to pursue security guarantees for the Russian neighborhood was more destabilizing than the actions of the 1990s. Zubok calls for an explanation of why Ukraine was “left exposed to Putin's fury” (158). This is surely the most pressing issue in terms of the question posed by the editors at the end of their introduction, when they think of using history to assess the possibilities and the implications of further enlargement. They mean above all the issue of Ukrainian membership, and it would have been good for them to have addressed that very pressing issue for world order quite directly.

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<sup>10</sup> Thom Shanker and Mark Landler, “Putin Says US is Undermining Global Stability,” *New York Times*, February 11, 2007, 1.

<sup>11</sup> A. G. Malliaris, Leslie Shaw, and Hersh Shefrin, *The Global Financial Crisis and Its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Vladislav M. Zubok, “Myths and Realities of Putinism and NATO Expansion,” in Goldgeier and Shiffrinson, eds., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement*, 145-159.

<sup>13</sup> North American Treaty Organization, “Bucharest Summit Declaration,” April 3, 2008, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm).

<sup>14</sup> David Brennan, “Zelensky Urges West To Pull Ukraine From 'Grey Zone,’” *Newsweek*, June 10, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Article 5 provides that if a NATO Ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of the Alliance will consider this act of violence as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the Ally attacked.

<sup>16</sup> 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.