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“Back Pre-Putin to the post-Putin Future.”

I'm teaching a seminar this semester on time travel and have assigned the 1985 film *Back to the Future*, made well before any of my students were born. So it seemed somehow appropriate to get an e-mail, on the day after Russia invaded Ukraine, referencing a 1998 article of mine that, as my correspondent put it, “rings true today.”² I'd long since forgotten it and had to ask for a copy, which he kindly provided.

Two days later Diane Labrosse asked me to contribute to an H-Diplo symposium on the Russia-Ukraine war. I didn't have time to write anything new, I replied – teaching obligations are always a good excuse – but might she be interested in something old yet possibly relevant? She said yes, hence what follows.

Prepared originally for a 1997 National Defense University conference, my article preceded, by two years, the surprise elevation of Vladimir V. Putin to the Russian presidency: Boris Yeltsin, however precariously, still held that position. It appeared in *Survival* shortly before the first stage of NATO expansion brought Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic into the alliance. It benefited from James M. Goldgeier's preliminary research on that subject, but came out too early to draw on his 1999 book, *Not Whether But When*. Nor of course could it have anticipated the now definitive scholarship of Mary Sarotte, reflected in her timely new book *Not One Inch*.³ What I'd written in 1997/98 was for these reasons, like Yeltsin himself, precariously positioned.

I saw, upon reacquaintance with it, that I'd accepted the need for a post-Cold War security structure in central and eastern Europe, but that I'd questioned using NATO for that purpose in such a way as to exclude Russia. That in no way justifies Putin's invasion of Ukraine: it's more like criticizing the post-World War I settlement's exclusion of Weimar Germany and

¹ The essay that follows was originally prepared for the National Defense University symposium, “Strategy and the Formulation of National Security Policy,” Washington, D. C., October 7, 1997. It was previously published in *Survival* as John Gaddis, “History, Grand Strategy and NATO Enlargement,” *Survival* 40:1 (1998): 145-151, DOI: 10.1093/survival/40.1.145. © 1998 The International Institute for Strategic Studies, reproduced with permission. It has been slightly revised for publication on H-Diplo and includes a new preface by the author.

² Philip Hardy to John Gaddis February 25, 2022.

³ James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington: Brookings, 1999); Mary E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

Soviet Russia without in so doing defending Hitler's subsequent annexations and aggressions. Short-sightedness may prepare the way for atrocities, but that's not the same thing as committing them.

There is, however, no good reason for clinging to short-sightedness, as if it's some stuffed security teddy bear, as new opportunities arise. We're on the verge of one now, I believe, for as Winston Churchill might have put it, rarely has such ruin been inflicted with such speed upon so many with such incompetence by one little man sitting at the end of a long table. With luck we'll have a chance soon, with the help of our allies, of Russia's victims, and of a post-Putin Russia itself, to frame a new future. It's not too soon to begin thinking about what it might look like, and a good place to start might usefully be a reacquaintance with past paths not taken.

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Some principles of strategy are so basic that when stated they sound like platitudes: treat former enemies magnanimously; do not take on unnecessary new ones; keep the big picture in view; balance ends and means; avoid emotion and isolation in making decisions; be willing to acknowledge error. All fairly straightforward, one might think. Who could object to them?

And yet -- consider the Clinton administration's single most important foreign policy initiative: the decision to expand NATO to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. I would not want to be thought disrespectful toward a president whose policies I have generally supported. But it does seem to me that the NATO enlargement decision manages to violate *every one* of the strategic principles I have just mentioned. That really takes some doing.

Perhaps that is why my normally contentious colleagues in the historical profession are in uncharacteristic agreement: with remarkably few exceptions, they see the NATO expansion as ill-conceived, ill-timed, and above all ill-suited to the realities of the post-Cold War world. Indeed I can recall *no* other moment, in my own experience as a practicing historian, at which there was less support, within our community, for an announced policy position.

A significant gap has opened up between those who make grand strategy and those who reflect upon it: on this issue at least, official and accumulated wisdom are pointing in very different directions. I would like to focus here on how this has happened, and that brings me back to my list of basic principles for grand strategy.

First, *the magnanimous treatment of defeated adversaries*. There are three great points of reference here – 1815-18, 1918-19, and 1945-48 – and historians are in general accord as to the lessons to be drawn from each of them. They applaud the settlements of the Napoleonic Wars and of World War II because the victorious allies moved as quickly as possible to bring their vanquished adversaries – France in the first case, Germany and Japan in the second – back into the international system as full participants in postwar security structures.

Historians tend to criticize (if not condemn) the World War I settlement precisely because it failed to do that for two of the most powerful states in Europe – Germany and Soviet Russia. The resulting instability, they argue, paved the way for World War II. It was not for nothing that Churchill, having personally witnessed two of these instances and having studied the third, chose as one of the “morals” of his great history of the Second World War: “In Victory: Magnanimity.”

That approach would seem all the more relevant to the fourth great case that now confronts us – the post-Cold War settlement. The Soviet Union was never an actual military opponent, and the ‘victory’ of the United States finally came, not on the battlefield but as the result of the Kremlin leadership's change of heart, and then of character, and then ultimately of system. The use of force, very fortunately for all of us, was not even necessary.

The process of rehabilitating this adversary – of transforming it from a revisionist or even revolutionary state to one prepared to accept the existing international order – began, thus, even before the Cold War ended. It was as if the Germans

and the Japanese, say at some point in 1943 or 1944, had suddenly laid down their arms, announced that they had seen the light, and begun for themselves the processes of disarmament, democratization, and economic reorganization for which their enemies had been fighting.

It is all the stranger, therefore, that the Clinton administration has chosen to respond to this most fortunate outcome of the Cold War, not by following the successful examples of 1815-18 or 1945-48, but by *appearing*, at least, to emulate the unfortunate precedent of 1918-19: one that preserves, and even expands, a security structure left over from a conflict that has now ended, while excluding the former adversary from it. If the United States could afford to be inclusive in dealing with its actual enemies Germany and Japan after World War II -- just as Napoleon's conquerors were in dealing with France after 1815 -- then why is it now excluding a country that, throughout the Cold War, remained only a potential adversary?

The answer I have most often heard is that the Russians have no choice but to accept what the US has decided to do -- that having swallowed the loss of their sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany, and the eventual breakup of the former Soviet Union itself, their only alternative with respect to the expansion of NATO is to gulp and swallow yet again. The US, the victor, is free to impose upon them whatever settlement it chooses.

Not only is that view arrogant; it is also short-sighted, for it assumes that defeated adversaries have no choices. And yet, even the Germans in 1945, as thoroughly vanquished an enemy as there has ever been, had alternatives: they could have tilted toward either their Eastern or their Western occupiers. The fact that they chose the West had a lot to do with American and British efforts to make their occupation policies as conciliatory as possible. The Soviet Union's failure to understand that need -- its inability to see that wholesale reparations removals and mass rapes were not likely to win it friends among the Germans -- did a good deal to determine the robustness of one postwar Germany, and the brittleness of the other. The Germans had a choice, and they made it decisively.

If the US could be that accommodating, in the post-World War II years, to the wishes of a country that had given rise to one of the most loathsome regimes in history but now lacked any further capacity to inflict damage, I find it difficult to understand why the Clinton administration has elected not to accommodate a country that has chosen to democratize itself, but still retains a considerable capacity to do harm. By insisting on NATO expansion, it seems, the US is violating a second great principle of strategy, which is *that one should never take on more enemies than necessary at any given moment*.

For Russia does indeed have a choice: it is in the interesting position of being able to tilt one way or another in a strategic triangle that is likely to define the geopolitics of the early twenty-first century. It can continue to align itself, as it has patiently done so far, with the United States and Western Europe. Or it can do what the United States did a quarter century ago under the guidance of President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger: it can tilt toward China.

Given the complementarity that exists between Russia's capacity to export military technology and China's ability to produce marketable consumer goods, there is nothing inherently implausible in this scenario -- indeed there is a good deal of logic in it. It would not be the first time Russia and China had linked up out of concern, even if misguided, over American aggressiveness: we know from Soviet and Chinese documents that this was precisely the reason behind the 1950 Sino-Soviet alliance.⁴ And of course classical balance of power theory tells us that this is what we should expect to happen: that if country A feels itself threatened by country B, it is apt to align itself with country C. Which in this case is a country less likely even than Russia to see its interests as compatible with those of the United States.

That brings me to a third strategic principle that's being violated here, which is *the need to take a global and not just a regional perspective*. General George C. Marshall coined the term "theateritis," during World War II, to refer to the tendency, among some of his military commanders, to see only the requirements of their own campaigns, not those of the

⁴ See John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 68-70.

war as a whole. I am hardly alone in the view that the Clinton administration has succumbed to a kind of geopolitical theateritis: as Richard Haass has pointed out, “in his second term, the first post-Cold War president has focused most of his foreign policy efforts on NATO, a child of the Cold War.”⁵

The temptation to do is certainly understandable. NATO was the most impressive institutional success of the US during the Cold War, and it's only natural to want to find some purpose for it in the post-Cold War era. But does it fit its current needs? Will US leaders really be able to say in years to come -- can they say now -- that military insecurity in the middle of Europe, the problem NATO was created to solve, was (is) the greatest one that now confronts the United States?

The sources of insecurity in Europe these days seem, to me, to lie much more in the economic than the military realm: disparities in living standards divide the continent now, not armies or ideologies. But the European Union, the obvious instrument for dealing with these difficulties, has come down with its own form of theateritis, the single-minded push to achieve a common currency among its existing members by the end of this decade. So it's been left to NATO to try to reintegrate and stabilize Europe as a whole. This is roughly comparable, I think, to using a monkey wrench to repair a computer. The results will no doubt be striking, but perhaps not in ways we intend.

I am fully aware that containing the Russians has never been NATO's only role. Its members quickly found it a useful instrument, as well, for restraining the growth of German power (by *including* the Germans, note, not *excluding* them); and for ensuring that the Americans themselves remained in Europe and did not revert to their old habits of isolationism. “Mission creep” was not invented in Mogadishu.

But the likelihood of German aggression today seems about as remote as does that of an American withdrawal from the continent: neither of these old fears from the late 1940s and early 1950s is even remotely credible now. If in the effort to ward off these phantoms we should revive another specter from those years that *is* a real possibility -- a Sino-Russian alignment -- then future generations would have a good case for alleging “theateritis” on the part of our own.

Even if we should grant, though, for the sake of argument, that NATO expansion is, or should be, an urgent priority, there is yet another strategic principle that has been bypassed here, which has to do with *providing the means to accomplish selected ends*. We all know the dangers of letting interests outstrip capabilities. One would surely expect, therefore, that on as important a matter as this -- the designation of three additional countries in the center of Europe as vital to the defense of the United States -- those charged with organizing those defenses would have been consulted, and carefully listened to.

Perhaps I have missed something, but it is hard to find evidence that the Department of Defense, or the Joint Chiefs of Staff, played any significant role in making this decision. The fact that US interests have been expanded but their budget has not been suggests that quite clearly.⁶ It is true that the military were very much involved in the now-eclipsed Partnership for Peace. But that initiative was to have *included* the Russians in a relationship with NATO as originally constituted. It did not involve enlarging the alliance in such a way as to advertise the Russians' *exclusion*.⁷

One might conclude, from the administration's failure to match military means with political ends, one of two things. Either the countries the US is proposing to include within NATO are not in danger, in which case one wonders why it is

⁵ Richard N. Haass, “Fatal Distraction: Bill Clinton's Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, #108 (Fall, 1997), 119.

⁶ See Paul Kennedy, “Let's See the Pentagon's Plan for Defending Poland,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1977.

⁷ Vojtech Mastny, *Reassuring NATO: Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Western Alliance* (Oslo: Institutt for Forsvarsstudier, 1997), 61.

then necessary to include them. Or they are in danger, in which case it has yet to prepare adequately to protect them. Either way, ends and means are misaligned.

So where did the decision to enlarge NATO come from anyway? The most authoritative study so far, that of Professor James Goldgeier, of George Washington University, singles out three individuals as having played key roles: President Clinton himself, who got interested in the issue as the result of an impromptu conversation with Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa at the April, 1993, dedication of the Holocaust Museum in Washington; former National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, who kept the idea alive within the administration through the next year and a half; and the redoubtable Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, who intervened at several critical moments in the fall of 1994 to inform others within the bureaucracy that NATO expansion was indeed official policy – thereby, or so it appears, making it so.⁸

With almost no public or Congressional debate – and with remarkably little inter-agency consultation – a momentum built up behind something that seemed a good idea at the time to a few critically-placed individuals. *Why*, though, did it seem a good idea? This is where things get murky, for although we can more or less trace the process by which the decision was made, the reasoning of the principal decision-makers – since they chose not to articulate it – remains obscure.

To be sure, the Poles, Czechs and Hungarians badly wanted their role within the “new” Europe recognized, both symbolically and institutionally. How did it happen, though, that the Americans responded so much more favorably and rapidly than the members of the European Union did? The most frequent explanation I have heard is that the Clinton administration, recalling the West’s abandonment of these countries, first to German and then Soviet domination during the 1930s and 1940s, felt an emotional obligation to them.⁹

If so, the history behind that sentiment is pretty shaky. The United States, after all, had no hand at all in the 1938 Munich agreement, and it could have challenged Soviet control of Eastern Europe after World War II only at the risk of World War III, which would hardly have liberated anybody.¹⁰ Nor is it clear that the Czechs, the Poles, and the Hungarians suffered more during the past half century than did the people the US proposes to leave out -- the Slovaks, Rumanians, Bulgarians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Ukrainians, and even the Russians themselves -- all of whom were, in one way or another, victims of German and/or Soviet oppression.

What we are seeing, then, is a kind of selective sentimentalism. The historic plight of some peoples moves American leaders more than does that of others, despite the fact that they all have compelling claims as victims. Emotionalism, but of a surprisingly elitist character, appears to be at work here.

One of the strongest lessons that has emerged from the new Soviet documentation on Cold War history has to do with *the dangers of making emotionally-based decisions in isolation*. Joseph Stalin’s authorization to North Korean leader Kim Il-sung to invade South Korea, Nikita Khrushchev’s placement of missiles in Cuba, and Leonid Brezhnev’s decision to invade Afghanistan all took place because leaders at the top responded to events emotionally, and then acted without consulting

⁸ James M. Goldgeier, “U.S. Security Policy Toward the New Europe: How the Decision to Expand NATO Was Made,” paper delivered at the annual convention of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., August, 1997.

⁹ See, for example, Sherle R. Schwenninger, “The Case against NATO Enlargement: Clinton’s Fateful Gamble,” *The Nation*, CCLXV (October 20, 1997), 26.

¹⁰ Michael Mandelbaum, *The Dawn of Peace in Europe* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996), 55-56.

their own subordinate experts.¹¹ Those who raised doubts were simply told that the decision had been made, and that it was too late to reconsider.

I do not want to be misunderstood here. I am *not* claiming that decision-making in the Clinton administration replicates that within the former Soviet Union. I *am* suggesting, though, that on NATO expansion emotions at the top appear to have combined with a disregard for advice coming up from below -- and that given what happened in the Soviet Union when decisions were made in this way, that pattern ought to set off alarm bells in our minds.

Well, you may be right, people will say, in questioning the *way* the NATO enlargement decision was made. Maybe it was not the best model of thoughtful, consultative, strategically-informed decision making. But the decision's been made, for better or for worse, and going back on it now -- especially having the Senate refuse to approve it -- would be a disaster far greater in its scope and consequences than any disasters NATO enlargement itself will bring.

This sounds to me rather like the refusal of the *Titanic's* captain to cut his ship's speed when he was informed there were icebergs ahead. And that brings up a final principle of strategy, which is that *consistency is a fine idea most of the time, but there are moments when it's just plain irresponsible*.

Only the historians will be able to say with any assurance whether this is one of them. Their current mood, though, ought not to give the administration much comfort. So is there anything that might yet be done to avoid the damage so many of us see lying ahead if the United States holds to its present course?

It is not unknown for great nations -- even the United States -- to acknowledge mistakes publicly and change their policies. President Ronald Reagan did it in Lebanon: in 1983 that country's security was one of the United States' vital interests; in 1984 (after over 200 Marines had been killed there) it was no longer so. The US certainly reversed course in Vietnam, although only after years of resisting that possibility. Surely the Nixon-Kissinger opening to China was an acknowledgement that the long-time policy of isolating that country had been misguided. John Foster Dulles once threatened an "agonizing reappraisal" of the United States' whole policy toward Europe if the French did not approve the European Defense Community; they did not approve, Dulles did not reappraise, and the skies did not fall. And, lest we forget, America's entire containment strategy after World War II constituted an implicit acknowledgement of error in having believed, as US leaders had during the war, that the Soviet Union under Stalin could be a lasting peacetime ally. Mistakes happen all the time, and governments usually find ways to survive them.

In the case of NATO enlargement, though, an acknowledgement of error -- a reversal of course -- is not really necessary: US leaders could resolve most of the problems their policy of selective enlargement has caused by acting upon the implied premises of their own argument, and *enlarging the enlargement process*. They could say that NATO expansion is such a good idea that they think it unfair just to apply the benefits to the Czechs, Poles and Hungarians -- that it will open the alliance to the other East Europeans, and ultimately to the Russians themselves.

But that would totally change NATO's character, its defenders will protest. Precisely so -- NATO *ought* to change to meet the conditions of the new world in which it exists, otherwise it will wind up looking like the British royal family. But there is no precedent for such a dramatic move, NATO's advocates will insist. Precisely not. Including Russia now could hardly be as dramatic a step as it was to bring France back into the Concert of Europe as early as 1818, or to include Germany as a recipient of Marshall Plan aid as early as 1947. But Russia is not yet a predictable, democratic state, NATO's supporters will

¹¹ Gaddis, *We Now Know*, 290-91; also, for Afghanistan, Odd Arne Westad, "The Road to Kabul: Soviet Policy on Afghanistan, 1978-1979," in Westad, ed., *The Fall of Détente: Soviet-American Relations during the Carter Years* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 132-33.

complain. Precisely beside the point -- for neither were Greece and Turkey when they were admitted as NATO members, quite uncontroversially, way back in 1952.

There is here illustrated one more lesson from the past, which is that what people think of as radical innovations often actually exist as historical precedents. People tend to be shocked in rough proportion to the amount of history they have managed to forget.

George F. Kennan, a man who remembers a great deal of history, was one of the earliest and most vocal opponents of NATO expansion, just as he was of the Vietnam War. In 1966, commenting on the Johnson administration's claim that any reversal of course in Southeast Asia would fatally compromise American credibility, Kennan reminded the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "there is more respect to be won in the opinion of this world by a resolute and courageous liquidation of unsound positions than by the most stubborn pursuit of extravagant and unpromising objectives."¹²

Perhaps, as Kennan's biographer, I am slightly biased. But he was obviously right then. I think he is right now.

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¹² Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Hearings. *Supplemental Foreign Assistance Fiscal Year 1966 -- Vietnam* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966), 335-36.