

H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 1043

17 June 2021

James Goldgeier. "NATO Enlargement and the Problem of Value Complexity." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22:4 (Fall 2020): 146-174. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_00968.

<https://hdiplo.org/to/AR1043>

Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY LINDE DESMAELE, VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL

The scholarly literature about the U.S.-led efforts to enlarge NATO into Central and Eastern Europe in the post-Cold War period is rich and ever growing. Scholars have looked at the role of individual policy entrepreneurs,¹ electoral considerations,² democracy promotion,³ economic interests,⁴ and the desire to pre-empt the rise of future peer competitors⁵ in driving U.S. behavior in this regard. Notwithstanding some important exceptions, one core question underlies much of the interest in this topic: To what degree – if at all – has NATO enlargement caused the deterioration of Russia's relations with the West, and the United States in particular? ⁶ Here, however, James Goldgeier focuses on a related, yet understudied issue in this debate. Rather than wondering whether or not NATO enlargement was a good idea, Goldgeier argues that U.S. policymakers in fact thought they could circumvent the very question of policy tradeoffs in this context. To be sure, Russian leader Boris Yeltsin repeatedly complained between 1993-1997 that the United States privileged the integration of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe into NATO over developing a constructive relationship with Moscow. Based on an analysis of newly available documents from this period, Goldgeier now suggests that President Bill Clinton genuinely did not view those two policies as incompatible. In the words of one senior U.S. official, the policies adopted between 1993 and

¹ James Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010); Kimberly Marten, "Reconsidering NATO Expansion: A Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s," *European Journal of International Security* 3:2 (2018): 135-161.

² Marie Elise Sarotte, "How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993-1995," *International Security* 44:1 (2019): 7-41.

³ Nicolas Bouchet, *Democracy Promotion as US Foreign Policy: Bill Clinton and Democratic Enlargement* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁴ Liviu Hovoritz and Elias Götz, "The overlooked importance of economics: why the Bush administration wanted NATO enlargement," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43:6-7 (2020): 847-868.

⁵ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "Eastbound and Down: The United States, NATO Enlargement, and Suppressing the Soviet and Western European Alternatives, 1990-1992," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43:6-7 (2020) 816-846.

⁶ Joshua Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion," *International Security* 40:4 (Spring 2016): 7-44; Mark Kramer, "The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia," *The Washington Quarterly* 32:2 (2009): 39-61; Marc Trachtenberg, "The United States and the NATO Non-extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?" *International Security* 45:3 (Winter 2020/21): 162-203.

1997 were meant to demonstrate that the United States could “walk and chew gum at the same time.”⁷ In light of these newly available materials, Goldgeier raises the following thought-provoking question: Why did U.S. officials think they had successfully reconciled this difficult tradeoff, when in fact they had not? Stated differently, why was the Clinton administration so convinced that balance of power considerations had become obsolete in Europe, and that the United States could simply “have it all (146)”?

To answer this question, Goldgeier draws on the insights of cognitive psychology and what Alexander George has labeled “value complexity” or “the presence of multiple, competing values and interests that are imbedded in a single issue.”⁸ Indeed, in developing a strategy for American engagement in post-Cold War Europe, Clinton was confronted with a choice between improving relations with either Central and Eastern Europeans or the Russians. Insofar as the former would complicate the latter and vice versa, Clinton was faced with a tradeoff. According to George, it is impossible to employ “the standard textbook” model of rationality in situations of value complexity, for “the multiple values embedded in the policy problems cannot be reduced to a single utility function that can then be used as criterion for choosing among options.”⁹ Instead, policymakers can resort to one of three strategies. First, they can seek to “satisfy all of the competing values, either genuinely or in a spurious and illusionary way.”¹⁰ Second, they can accept the incompatibility of the different values involved and prioritize one over others. Third, they can “avoid recognizing the value conflict by denying its existence or playing down its importance.”¹¹ In his analysis of the U.S. decision-making process on NATO enlargement between 1993-1997, Goldgeier argues that Clinton opted for a combination of the first and the third strategy. Fundamentally, by postponing the enlargement process past Yeltsin’s reelection in 1996 and by producing the NATO-Russia Founding Act before inviting new NATO members, Clinton allegedly thought he “had avoided or at least postponed the value tradeoffs inherent in the enlargement decision (150).” While Clinton knew that enlargement was a tough pill to swallow for Yeltsin, he believed that over time Moscow would accede to America’s preferences because NATO was “not directed against Russia (151).” By stretching out the timing and focusing on other more positive aspects of the U.S.-Russia relationship, Goldgeier concludes, Clinton convinced himself that he had found a creative solution to eliminate any tradeoffs in his European strategy.

Goldgeier’s push to re-engage with the concept of value complexity is important for IR scholars across theoretical schools and paradigms today. Just like Clinton, leaders in the United States and elsewhere repeatedly find themselves in situations of value complexity. Think of George W. Bush’s awkward efforts to reconcile a belief in universal human rights with his detainee operations in Guantanamo. Present-day debates in the United States and in Asia about the need for cooperation with ‘like minded’ countries in the Indo-Pacific appear difficult to square with some of these countries’ emphasis on an inclusive regional order, for the latter is per definition open to all (like-minded or not).¹² French President Emmanuel Macron’s emphasis on the French state and sovereignty is at times hard to reconcile with his enthusiasm about European integration.¹³ And how is one to bring together Chinese leader Xi Jinping’s commitment to a peaceful rise with Beijing’s

⁷ Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When*, 160.

⁸ Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980), 26.

⁹ Alexander George as quoted in Narottam Gaam, *Relevance of Environment: A Critique on International Relations Theories* (Delhi: Gyan Books, 2005), 179.

¹⁰ Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*, 17-18.

¹¹ George, *Presidential Decisionmaking*, 29.

¹² Eva Pesjova, “The Indo-Pacific: A Passage to Europe,” *EUISS Issue Brief*, 2018.

¹³ Bruno Tertrais, “The Making of Macron’s Worldview,” *World Politics Review* (2021), <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29362/how-france-s-jean-pierre-chevenement-shaped-the-macron-agenda>.

increasing instances of coercive behavior toward its neighbors?¹⁴ Indeed, even if policymakers are often eager to convince public opinion that the opposite holds true, value complexity is a fact of life. Robert Jervis moreover tells us that in the mind of policymakers, the importance of a policy goal and the expected cost of reaching it often display an inverse relationship.¹⁵ For example, during the Chinese civil war, U.S. policymakers who were in favor of providing aid to the Nationalists thought that a Nationalist victory was possible as well as important. In contrast, those who did not think that U.S. aid would help the Nationalists also thought that a Communist China would not be willing nor able to menace the United States.¹⁶ The fact that policy preferences may precede supporting views suggests that policymakers may be especially prone to neglecting the existence of value complexity in situations that touch upon core foreign policy interests.¹⁷ Liberal countries may be particularly prone to adopting George's first or third strategy in situations of value complexity, since "liberalism's emphasis on harmony of interests is not conducive to the examination of trade-offs among important values."¹⁸ All these arguments underline how relevant it is for scholars to engage with the issue of value complexity. More broadly speaking, Goldgeier's piece confirms once again the usefulness of bridging disciplines – in this case, history, international relations and cognitive psychology – in continuously seeking to illuminate all aspects of one single policy issue.

Goldgeier's question of how decision-makers manage tradeoffs is thus an important one and value complexity is a useful concept in this regard. For one thing, by recognizing the fact that Clinton could make different choices among George's three strategies when facing his problem of value complexity, Goldgeier reaffirms the relevance of individual agency in international relations. When mapping the different values and interests involved in a single issue, it furthermore becomes possible to better delineate the causal role or *degree* of agency of individual actors – like Clinton in this case – in shaping state behavior. When thinking in terms of value complexity, it also becomes clear that seemingly incoherent patterns of state behavior may not (necessarily) be to the result of the incompetence or untrustworthiness of individual policymakers. When decision-making authority is shared among several actors and those cannot agree on the necessary choice, for instance, they may well adopt a series of policies which will meet, alternately through time, as many values and interests as possible among which they cannot prioritize as a group.¹⁹ While more research is needed on the issue, this dynamic seems to dovetail well with what one observer called President Donald Trump's "two Russia policies."²⁰ Recognizing the existence of value complexity can also be useful in the context of cooperative relationships between two or more states. Indeed, conducting an assessment of the multiple values one's counterpart is confronted with may lead to more tenable expectations about his or her room of maneuver on a particular issue of international concern. Think here of President Barack Obama's simultaneous efforts to reassure America's European allies who felt threatened by Moscow, all the while pursuing a Russia 'reset' policy. The failure to recognize potential contradictions, in contrast, is likely to lead to counterproductive policies that are unlikely

¹⁴ Maximilian Ernst, "Costs of Coercion: Predicaments of Chinese Statecraft in the Asia-Pacific," *Global Politics Review* 7:1 (2021): 6–17.

¹⁵ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 131

¹⁶ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 139

¹⁷ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 28–143.

¹⁸ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 136.

¹⁹ André Lecours, "La complexité de valeurs dans la politique étrangère de l'administration Reagan face à l'Iran," *Etudes internationales* 27:3 (1993): 553–551.

²⁰ Amy Mackinnon, "Trump May Like Putin. His Administration Doesn't," *Foreign Policy* (2019), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/29/trump-may-like-putin-his-administration-does-not-russia-policy-approachment/>.

to be corrected in the short term.²¹ Clearly, therefore, Goldgeier's re-engagement with value complexity has the potential to inform a broad research agenda, also beyond the immediate question addressed here.

Even if Goldgeier does not directly engage with the alleged link between NATO expansion and the state of U.S.-Russia relations today, his argument still touches upon this debate. Goldgeier does not question the predominant view in the scholarly literature that the United States pursued a grand strategy of "primacy" in the post-Cold War period.²² He argues that Clinton was determined to remain engaged in Europe through NATO, irrespective of potential Russian protestations. By zooming in on the specific role of Clinton, moreover, his argument provides further ammunition to those who underline the importance of Clinton's personal diplomacy with Yeltsin.²³ But Goldgeier counters the assertion that Clinton was untrustworthy in his interactions with Moscow in this context. Instead, as mentioned, Goldgeier suggests that Clinton believed he could placate both the Central and Eastern Europeans and the Russians at the same time. The image that appears, then, is one of a much more benign superpower than what is proposed by the critics of American primacy.

Following Goldgeier's argument, the U.S. push for NATO enlargement no longer appears as an opportunistic way to cash in on the power differential between Washington and Moscow in the aftermath of the Cold War. Instead, Clinton's decisions seem to derive from a more optimistic assessment of the malleability of Russian preferences over the long term, and hence the U.S.-Russia relationship. Goldgeier's argument therefore links back to the more fundamental question of U.S. intentions in its engagement with other powers. While the problem of ascertaining intentions has been widely discussed in scholarly literature, there is no consensus on how to address this issue.²⁴ Insofar as one considers intentions a relevant factor in shaping international interactions, value complexity may therefore offer a useful lens to approach this issue. This is especially important at a time when the relationships between the United States and several other major powers – Russia, but also China – have become increasingly tense (again).

The key question when assessing Goldgeier's argument, however, is how one can authoritatively trace the causal mechanism between the different values at stake and the eventual policy decisions adopted. In other words: How can we really know which one of George's three strategies for addressing value complexity was adopted? Goldgeier cites several instances in which Yeltsin and other Russian policymakers expressed their discontent with the different modalities of a potential NATO enlargement process. In their responses or communications about Russia's position, U.S. officials presented Moscow's skepticism as deriving from simple misunderstandings about the pace and organization of any enlargement process, and not of enlargement as such. Once those issues would be clarified, Russians would surely refrain from any more criticism. Clinton moreover appeared keen to emphasize the Partnership for Peace as being front and center in America's European strategy. He also repeatedly mentioned the U.S. role in providing financial assistance to Russia. Goldgeier takes these statements at face value and therefore suggests that Clinton genuinely believed he would be able to placate both Central and Eastern European countries and Russia by tinkering at the margins – by adopting a mix of George's first and third strategy for dealing with value complexity. Goldgeier's use of these newly declassified documents indeed demonstrate that the U.S. tried to have its cake and eat it too.

It is less clear, however, based on this analysis, whether Clinton actually *believed* that this was possible. In fact, Goldgeier also quotes a 1994 meeting between Clinton and Czech President Václav Havel where the former explicitly confirmed that the Partnership for Peace was the first step toward full NATO membership. In conversations with the Russians, in contrast,

²¹ Jervis, 128-143.

²² Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "Eastbound and Down," Hal Brands, "Choosing Primacy: US Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post-Cold War Era," *Texas National Security Review* 1:2 (2018): 8-33.

²³ Marie Elise Sarotte, "How to Enlarge NATO."

²⁴ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; Charles Glaser, "A Flawed Framework: Why the Liberal International Order Concept is Misguided," *International Security* 43:4 (2019): 51-87.

U.S. officials remained more ambiguous about the connection between the two. Moreover, Clinton at no point appears to have made any concessions to Yeltsin, for instance, on the status of Ukraine in any future NATO enlargement rounds. Perhaps Clinton in reality adopted George's second strategy, and prioritized NATO enlargement over the U.S.-Russia relationship. If that were to be the case, the different interactions with Yeltsin would simply reflect a high-quality piece of diplomacy on the part of the Clinton administration. In fact, based on the evidence presented by Goldgeier, both interpretations appear plausible.

In essence, this once again links back to the problem of assessing intentionality. While Goldgeier's own methodology does not allow for any unambiguous conclusions in this regard,²⁵ his piece is important in raising awareness about this very important issue. Rather than fast-forwarding to premature conclusions about other states' intentions, scholars and policymakers would do well to pay more attention to the human agents involved, as well as the cognitive limitations and biases from which they suffer.²⁶ To be sure, even if Clinton truly was as benign as is portrayed in this piece, this is unlikely to have been sufficient to change Russian behavior fundamentally, for the latter was about more than just reacting to U.S. policy. Nonetheless, by engaging with the concept of value complexity, it at least becomes possible to elucidate important tradeoffs that may otherwise remain unknown.

Linde Desmaele is a doctoral fellow at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy of the Brussels School of Governance at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She holds an M.A. from Seoul National University and from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven). Her research has appeared in *International Studies Review* and in *Strategic Studies Quarterly*.

²⁵ Or at least the information provided in this regard to the reader.

²⁶ Keren Yarhi-Milo, "In the Eye of the Beholder: How Leaders and Intelligence Communities Assess the Intentions of Adversaries," *International Security* 38:1 (2013): 7-51.