

The Eastern Perspective: Russia Towards NATO Enlargement. A Case Study of 1999 and 2004 NATO Enlargements

*“[Russia] cannot agree with attempts
to move the center of gravity
in questions of providing for security on the continent.”*
Russia’s Policy for National Security (1996)

*“The perspective of NATO enlargement to the East
is unacceptable to Russia,
because it represents a threat to its security.”*
Russia’s Concept of National Security (1997)

At the end of 1980s and early 1990s, the Soviet Union and later Russia, faced very inconvenient international and domestic situation. A shameful withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, an outbreak of democracies among Central and Eastern countries and reorientation of their policies towards NATO and the U.S., unification of Germany, the Warsaw Pact dissolution, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first Gulf War, the Balkan crisis, and the Chechen War. All these critical for international community events, had happened almost simultaneously shaping political situation of the 1990s.

The Soviet economic burden inherited by Russia produced dramatic decline, which finally led to collapse of the ruble in 1998.¹ The cause of that situation was mainly “war of attrition” in 1980s, when Reagan’s administration introduced very aggressive policy (arm’s race) towards the Soviet Union in order to break it economically.²

Although these factors were important to Russian leadership, the biggest security concern imposed possibility of NATO enlargement. Russians did not perceived enlargement as ordinary and peaceful evolution of an international institution. They preferred to use the term expansion rather than enlargement, which has pejorative connotation, and could be used to warm up discussion inside Russia.

Russia opposed fiercely NATO enlargement, which included Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary. They feared that such step from the former foe could endanger Russia’s

¹ Padma Desai, *Why Did the Ruble Collapse in August 1998?* American Economic Review, American Economic Association, vol. 90(2), May 2000, pp. 48-52.

² Erik Beukel, *The Reagan Administration, the Soviet Union and Nuclear Arms: Hopes and Fears*. Cooperation and Conflict, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1984), pp. 15-38; Lawrence S. Kaplan, *NATO Divided, NATO United: The Evolution of an Alliance*. Praeger, Westport 2004, pp. 87-89.

security. The main security concern was that NATO would achieve first strike capability, not only nuclear but primarily conventional, by launching air strike against Russian command and control structures before they achieve sufficient operational readiness level. These air strikes would be launched from the new member countries' airfields.

However heavy opposition against 1999 NATO enlargement, 2004 one, which included former Soviet republics, did meet no more opposition than rhetoric from military and communist-type hardliners. This paper's goal is to show and explain why that happened, and what were the factors that shaped Russian leadership decision before the first and the second NATO enlargement.

The prospects of NATO expansion to include Central and Eastern Europe has become the most important and potentially most dangerous issue for Russia's foreign policy. It should also be seen as the crucial test of Russia's relationship with the Western World. No other issues, not even disagreements between Moscow and Washington over the sales of a nuclear reactor or conventional weapons to Iran, the lifting of the UN embargo against Iraq, differences over the crisis in the Balkans, nor Russia's military actions in Caucasus would distract this relationship so much, should have been accomplished without consideration for Russia's deepest concerns and frustrations. Moscow's opinion was, the outcomes of NATO enlargement to the East have shaped the relationship between Russia and the West.³

This is not to say that NATO enlargement would generate a second Cold War. There were at least five factors, which prevented Russia from engaging in another confrontation with a western coalition, thus the advantages of the NATO over Russia. Firstly, Russia's economic weakness and the problems with handling Soviet economic heritage. Secondly, Russia's dependence on Western financial resources and investments. Thirdly, the necessity for Russia to integrate into the world economy and international economic and financial institutions. Fourthly, the desire of Russian leaders to be part of the global decision-making process. Finally, the relative weakness of the Russian military and the general absence of belligerent attitudes in Russian society.

Although true, it would be a huge mistake to underestimate the consequences of NATO enlargement for Russia's social development, nationalist mentality, foreign policy, and strategic attitude.

Both sides perceived the first NATO enlargement as possible threat to European, international, and Russian security, and had seen this step as premature, if not erroneous – especially Russian side.⁴

New division of and drawing the new lines in Europe would widen the gap between Russian and Western civilizations.⁵ Historically, this gap is the most important concern. As NATO enlargement reflects a consolidation of the Western world as a civilization, Russia's reaction could not help but mirror the consolidation of Russian civilization as separate from the Western. Any eastward expansion of NATO that would leave Russia outside the alliance would strike a dramatic, if not fatal, blow to Russian pro-western politicians and significantly encourage their opponents. It could also cause the West to lose a unique

³ James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When. The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington 1999, p. 36.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁵ *Eastern Europe: Dividing Lines*. OxResearch, Oxford, Jul 08, 1994, p. 1.

opportunity to bring Russia closer to itself as a civilization, which is the only way to solve the West's historical task of turning Russia into an ally, rather than an adversary.⁶

Of course, this civilization gap is partly bridged by Russia's progress on the road to economic reforms and creation of a working market economy. As Boris Yeltsin described, during the meeting in Corfu that "Russia really enters Europe, becomes a[n] European country"⁷, where he signed Russia's new partnership and co-operation agreement with the European Union, praising it as "a truly great step towards the reunion of our continent."⁸

In addition, signing treaties with the Western European structures helped bringing Russia closer to the rest of Europe. However, the decision of NATO to spread over the whole of Europe would have left Russia little choice but to assert itself as a force, not necessarily aggressive but certainly different from the Western community. As Mr. Kozyrev said that "Russia was committed to seeking cooperation rather than confrontation with the NATO allies."⁹

Russia would consider its international role and national interests with less, not more, respect for the interests of Western countries, which could have led to Russia's inward re-orientation. Although Russia has recently played by rules established by the West trying to find a role for itself within the international framework created by the West after the end of the Cold War, NATO enlargement would force her to become more independent player, less constrained by a real or illusionary partnership with the West. "Russia is looking inward and feeling abused. You won the Cold War, why must you now kick us in the face?" accused Yeltsin's principal foreign policy aide – Dmitriy Ryurikov.¹⁰

The effect of such reorientation in the fragile post-Cold War international system could be very serious.

Eastward NATO enlargement could have caused a strengthening of the Russian influence on the former states of the Soviet Union. If Russia considers itself geopolitically separated from Europe and the Euro-Atlantic community, it would have no choice but to strengthen its traditional sphere of influence.¹¹ This would certainly mean closer economic and military cooperation with Belarus and Kazakhstan, cooperation that has already started.¹² Although Ukraine would be more of a problem, here, too, Russia has three powerful levers: close ties between Russian and Ukrainian enterprises, Ukrainian dependence on Russian natural resources such as oil and natural gas, and the presence of 11 million native Russians on Ukrainian soil (more than 20 percent of the population of Ukraine).¹³ One might even argue that NATO enlargement would seriously constrain Ukraine's freedom of

⁶ James M. Goldgeier, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁷ *Russia in Europe*. The Times, London (UK), Jun 25, 1994, p. 1.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Robert J. Wielaard, *Russia, NATO peace partners Pact joins military, political efforts; [Rockies Edition]*. Denver Post, Denver, Jun 23, 1994, pp. 3-5.

¹⁰ Dean E. Murphy, *Post-election Russia reaffirms objection to NATO expansion*. The Ottawa Citizen, Ottawa, Jul 9, 1996, p. A.7.

¹¹ Charles Goldsmith. *NATO and the Russian Challenge – Speaking of Europe: Ukraine Favors NATO Plan but Keeps an Eye on Russia*. Wall Street Journal (Europe), Brussels, Jan 7, 1994, p. 10.

¹² *RUSSIA: NATO Shift*. OxResearch, Oxford, Sep 03, 1996, p.1.

¹³ *CIA – The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/up.html#People>, accessed on 05 Nov 2008.

maneuver in foreign policy. Therefore, it would adversely affect the geopolitical pluralism among the territories of the former USSR.¹⁴

Although, after Yushchenko's victory in last presidential elections Russia have lost some influence in Ukraine, we could not forget that as long as Ukraine depend on Russian resources, Ukraine remain within Russia's sphere of influence.

Even if the West considers it as a way of strengthening Western security and of providing effective security guarantees for Central and Eastern Europe, enlargement could deliver a dramatic impact to European security as a whole. Russia recognized that NATO eventually would have to consider the entry of the Baltic States, and perhaps even Ukraine into the alliance. Russia's negative reaction, including attempts to exert pressure on Ukraine to discourage it from joining NATO, would certainly strain relations between Kiev and Moscow, thus creating conditions for new tensions between Russia and the West, as we saw during last presidential elections in Ukraine. Before the first enlargement, it was perceived that any attempt to include Ukraine and the Baltic republics in a larger NATO would result in a major crisis between Russia and the West.¹⁵

Decision-makers admitted that NATO expansion would pose a threat to the security structure already established after the end of the Cold War. As Vladimir Lukin, then head of the State Duma Committee on Foreign Affairs, described the decision to enlarge NATO eastward as killing a prospect for the ratification of the START II treaty in the Russian parliament, and bringing into question the future of the Treaty on Conventional Armaments in Europe, and the Convention on Chemical Weapons as well. In his words, "NATO enlargement is the worst idea of all those that are connected with European security."¹⁶

NATO enlargement would have posed significant impact on the political balance inside Russia on the eve of the parliamentary elections (scheduled for December) and presidential elections (scheduled for June 1996) in favor of anti-Western circles. If enlargement would have been agreed, those Russians who had tried to cooperate with NATO would be attacked in both electoral campaigns by anti-Western and nationalist forces within Russia. The West could find itself in very difficult position of having to back those forces in Russia, which favor the postponement of elections and even the establishment of a dictatorial regime out of fear that elections might bring highly undesirable results for the West.¹⁷

NATO enlargement could result in the promotion of Russian military officers who favor a stronger military stance to key issues. They would position troops on the western border of Russia and in Belarus and the Kaliningrad area. The so-called flank restrictions of CFE would be disregarded.¹⁸ NATO's eastern borders would emerge as a new dividing line of distrust on the European continent.

The last, but for sure not least, factor is so-called "China Factor". It was perceived by western analysts that isolation of Russia from military and economic structures of western

¹⁴ *RUSSIA: NATO Shift*. OxResearch, Oxford, Sep 03, 1996, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Carol J. Williams, *NEWS ANALYSIS; Yeltsin Leaves a Winner Despite NATO Impasse; Politics: He gains say in future alliance decisions, which should help silence his critics in the Kremlin*. Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles, Mar 22, 1997, p. 18.

¹⁷ *Partnership for Peace Already Needs Overhaul West should focus on Russia's integration, Europe to NATO*. Christian Science Monitor, Boston, Jan 12, 1994, p. 6.

¹⁸ *INTERNATIONAL: NATO Enlargement*. OxResearch, Oxford, Mar 22, 1995, p. 1.

world could reorient Russia to look for alliances somewhere else. The greatest fear was that Russia would seek close relations with China and/or India, which could increase possibility of nuclear confrontation.¹⁹

Having in mind these factors, Russian politicians tried to satisfy domestic demands and maintain Russia's superpower image. By constantly saying no for inevitable, they realized that they could lose more than gain. Therefore, their initial stubbornness had changed to the attitude ready for negotiations.

The main conditions for agreement on NATO enlargement from the Russian side was that, new NATO members would not permanently host nuclear weapon, or any other NATO troops, hence no permanent NATO bases.²⁰ Russia also demanded a veto²¹ and "free hand" to deal with Baltic States.²²

There were also attempts from Russian side to uplift role of Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and subordinate to that organization all NATO efforts for establishing security system in Europe. Therefore, decrease the NATO and US influence, *ergo* creating for itself opportunity to be the key player in European security issues. During CSCE meeting Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev proposed the following: the creation a Russia-WEU Consultative Council; Russian satellite intelligence will be available to the WEU; establishing expert groups from Russia and the WEU to study a range of security issues; conducting joint Russian-WEU naval exercises to improve coordination of peacekeeping operations; and Russian involvement in the creation of a Europe-wide satellite surveillance system and possibly, also in WEU, anti-missile defense efforts.²³

Whatever objections Russians had, Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary had joined North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1999. Russians perceived this step as "a stab in the back" from the NATO side, because they still remember the promise given to Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO will not expand to the east.²⁴

Experiencing strong opposition to the 1999 NATO enlargement, decision-makers carefully weighted decision about next enlargement. However, they realized that the first step put "foot in the door" of Russia, so according to Aronson theory of social psychology, next enlargement will be much easier. Moreover, Russia's behavior showed that despite the all rhetoric and demands, she did nothing to stop or seriously threatened the process.

To be entirely honest, we must also indicate the situation of discussed period of 1999-2004. The three most important events shaped NATO-Russia relations and Russia's attitude

¹⁹ Sherman Garnett, *Russia, China Bury the Hatchet – but How Far? Normalization doesn't mean they'll put together a strategic relationship aimed at counterbalancing NATO*. Christian Science Monitor, Boston, May 7, 1997, p. 19. Good insight into the possibility of reorientation of Russian policy towards China provides Sergei Trosh in *FINAL REPORT: Russia's Response to the NATO Expansion: China Factor*. NATO Democratic Institutions Fellowships 1997-1999, Moscow, 1999.

²⁰ *RUSSIA: NATO Shift*. OxResearch, Oxford, Sep 03, 1996, p. 1

²¹ Charles Goldsmith, *Russia Joins Partnership, Signals Shift in NATO Stance – Moscow Drops Opposition To Future Full Status For East European Nations*. Wall Street Journal (Europe), Brussels, Jun 23, 1994, p. 3.

²² Jim Hoagland, *RUSSIA WANTS FREE HAND ON BALTIC NATIONS*. The Oregonian, Portland, Aug 05, 1996, p. B.06

²³ *INTERNATIONAL: CSCE Summit*. OxResearch, Oxford, Dec 02, 1994, p. 1.

²⁴ *RUSSIA: NATO Shift*. OxResearch, Oxford, Sep 03, 1996, p. 1.

towards enlargement. They were Kosovo conflict, terrorist attack on World Trade Center (9/11), and second Chechen War.

After 1999 NATO enlargement, Russia tried to regain its military respect among the European community by involvement in Kosovo conflict (especially quick seizure of Pristina airport) and by trying to humiliate Baltic States.²⁵

Year 2001 was very important for NATO-Russia relations. The terrorists attack on World Trade Center on September 9, 2001, was a turning point for Russian attitudes toward NATO enlargement, even if it included former Soviet republics: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Why irrelevant event for Russia changed her attitude such dramatically? The reason is simple. Russia's leadership reconsidered its stance calculating possible gains and costs using "prisoner's dilemma."²⁶ They understood that by joining the Global War on Terrorism and the coalition of righteous countries, they could earn for example the support in the Chechen war.

The analysts of Russian and Soviet policy such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, warns that Russia wants to use the war on terrorism to settle its own problems and regain the superpower status.²⁷ Russia is demanding a free hand in dealing with its own "terrorists" in Chechnya. Russia would like the US and international organizations to allow her to get rid of "terrorism" from Chechnya. The US and some other countries involved in GWOT have already begun to change their position regarding Chechnya.²⁸

Russia demands the US to recognize the territory of the former Soviet Union as a Russian sphere of influence, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus. An important element of this reassertion of power is to keep off the US and NATO from gaining a foothold in countries that are suspicious of Russia, such as Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine, which, together with Moldova, are united in a regional organization.²⁹

Russia wanted to take the three Baltic states off the list of potential members of the second NATO enlargement. In a foreign-policy speech in Warsaw, President Bush announced his support for continued NATO enlargement, and – unlike his predecessor – he was more eager to disregard Russian sensibilities over NATO membership for the former Soviet republics. Russia was hoping that, in return for its "cooperation against terrorism," the US will agree to respect the Soviet 'red line' as a NATO no-go area.³⁰

The purpose of this paper was to answer the question, why did Russia oppose the first enlargement (1999) and did not say anything against the second (2004)? If we want to explain the two similar events, we need to examine these events according to global situation.

²⁵ *Russian president warns against NATO expansion*. BBC Monitoring European – Political, London, Jun 11, 2000, p. 1; H. Plater-Zyberg, *NATO Enlargement: Benefits, Costs, and Consequences*. Conflict Studies Research Centre, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Camberley, Surrey, England, 1996, p. 8; The Daily Telegraph, London, 19 July 1996, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Western Europe, (henceforth FBIS WEU)-96-140, 19 July 1996, p. 1; Thomas L. Friedman, *The Big Bang*. New York Times, 27 November 1996, p. A25.

²⁶ Denis Staunton, *Putin sees Russia taking political role in NATO*. Irish Times, Dublin, Oct 4, 2001, p. 10

²⁷ Janusz Bugajski. *Beware of Putin bearing gifts; The Kremlin will try to exploit war on terror*. Washington Times, Washington, Oct 10, 2001, p. A.15

²⁸ Taras Kuzio, *Beware Russia's motives*. Christian Science Monitor, Boston, Oct 4, 2001, p. 11.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

Therefore, the first enlargement was critical and more important than the second was. Why? The answer is: because it was the traditional Soviet sphere of influence defiled by NATO. It were not Baltic States that most bothered Russian nationalists and communists, it was the matter of loosing grip on the sphere of influence and decreasing position among world powers. Russia does not want to be perceived as merely one of European nuclear powers.³¹

Russia saw opportunity that she could use their still existing image of superpower to cut the deal with the Western powers. And indeed, she won the support in war with “Chechen terrorism;” special relations with NATO (NATO-Russia Council 2002) and EU; the place among most powerful countries – G7 (now called G8); and finally, she received economic aid and western investments.

The bottom line is that Russia would be opposing any enlargement, either NATO or EU, as long as she will not see any benefit for itself in it.

³¹ Charles Goldsmith, *Russia Joins Partnership, Signals Shift in NATO Stance – Moscow Drops Opposition To Future Full Status For East European Nations*. Wall Street Journal (Europe), Brussels, Jun 23, 1994, p. 3.