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Reflections on America's, NATO's and Russia's approach to European Security since the 1990s

This ABS Policy Paper is written by Ambassador ret. Robert Hunter.

Of all the crises now besetting the world – particularly the West – most consequential is the war between Russia and Ukraine and thus also the NATO Alliance. China may be most problematic in the long term and Gaza now most preoccupies the United States and the global media. But arrangements devised for Ukrainian, Russian, and overall European security following the war in Ukraine will have the most critical impact on global geopolitics for at least the next several years.

Where we are now and how we need to look at the future in order to try moving it in positive directions need to be based in major part on historical analysis of the evolution of European security over the last century.

As early as May 1989, US President George H. W. Bush looked beyond the end of a Cold War that was fast approaching and set forth a grand strategy, which could be summarized in a few words: to try building a "Europe whole and free" and at peace. That has many elements and motivations; most important, at least in retrospect, was to try building a "Europe" that would include Russia.

Historical background

This objective was built at least in part on the desire not to repeat with a soon-to-be defeated Soviet Union what was done to Germany in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, with its so-called War-Guilt Clause (231) – which required Germany to assume the total blame for causing the Great War. That demand rankled with the German people, and Hitler made good use of this central grievance in his rise to power. Bush and then President Bill Clinton determined that Russia must not be so stigmatized, thus fostering revanchism.

They also understood that Russia could not be neutered internationally and remade domestically as had been done in both Germany and Japan after the Second World War:

Russia was not occupied. It had to be dealt with as a sovereign nation, without outsiders imposing new forms of government and society, although there were outside efforts to help Russia reform its economy and integrate into the outside world.

In the aftermath of the post-Cold War, most reconstruction of European security was done through NATO, and most (but not all) through the inspiration and leadership of the United States. It was composed of several blocks, beginning with America's decision to remain a European power (as opposed to 1919 and 1945-1947). The NATO allies decided to preserve the historically-unique integrated military command structure. The German problem that had begun in the 1860s was ended with 1990 unification. And major efforts were made to take the Central European countries off the geopolitical chess board – where, through little or no fault of their own, they had been proximate causes of both world wars and the Cold War. A further element was to build close relations between NATO and the EC/EU, which, unfortunately, is still just a work in progress.

The 1990s

That left Russia and Ukraine to be dealt with as part of the evolution of security. Thus, as the two Germanies were brought together in the 1990 Two-Plus-Four Agreement, Russia accepted that unified Germany would be in NATO. This recognized historical Russian concerns about Germany's future behavior and the value in having NATO and especially America exercise oversight. Later, following the 1995 end of the Bosnia War and creation of the NATO Implementation Force (IFOR), Russia remarkably asked to join, but with the proviso that its forces would not be commanded by NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe but by the Commander of US Forces Europe – the same person! For Russia, that sleight-of-hand let it claim psychological equality with the Western superpower, not subservience to the former enemy Alliance.

But tensions developed. Central European states wanted to be secure against possible Russian revanchism and to be fully part of the West; while Russia opposed these countries becoming part of the Alliance. Indeed, there is still debate whether in 1989-1991 US leaders promised Russia that NATO would not expand to include former members of the Warsaw Pact, much less any part of the defunct Soviet Union (e.g. the Baltic states).

NATO sought, at least in part, to resolve this tension by creating a half-way house to (possible) NATO membership: the Partnership for Peace (PFP). It was designed to help former communist Central European states (plus interested post-Soviet republics) transition to democratic societies and gain some practical cooperation with NATO, though without a promise of membership. Notably, membership in PFP and the parallel Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council was also extended to Russia (I helped negotiate the arrangement in Moscow), as well as to Ukraine.

Further, when NATO did decide to take in its first new full members, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, the first two also served a purpose similar to a united Germany in NATO: to surround Germany with the Alliance (the basic idea was German Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl's). Russia was not pleased by NATO enlargement; but it recognized the value of the limited enlargement for its long-term sense of security.

Notably, before NATO issued its first invitations to join in July 1997, it concluded with Moscow a NATO-Russia Founding Act, a collection of basic principles for peaceful relations and a comprehensive list of 19 areas of practical cooperation. Russia was thus embraced as an equal in some significant areas, including aspects of security, with both the United States and NATO as a whole.

But what of Ukraine? The West understood that the Russians would see its inclusion in NATO as too much to bear; but the West also stoutly opposed Ukraine's being consigned to a Russian sphere of influence. The device decided upon to try squaring the circle was a NATO-Ukraine Charter (which I helped negotiate for the Alliance.)

In sum, there were serious prospects for building security cooperation and structures in Europe that would meet basic requirements, more-or-less, of all regional countries, including Russia and Ukraine. But then matters began to fall apart, as those officials in the United States government who understood the geopolitics of "Europe whole and free" were replaced by people who judged that Russian weakness would permit NATO to encroach farther into Central Europe, beginning with a new tranche of members. First, in 1999 NATO acted militarily against Serbia over Kosovo without a UN Security Council Resolution, unlike the UNSCRs, supported by Russia, that had earlier legitimated NATO's military actions in Bosnia.

The 2000s

In the early 2000s, the United States took two steps which struck directly at Russia's interests, as it saw them, including its desire to be taken seriously, not as a defeated power, but to be included in larger geopolitical arrangements. In June 2002, the United States unilaterally abrogated the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with the Soviet Union. This seemed logical in Washington, since there was no longer a superpower nuclear balance, at least in perceptions, that might call for ballistic missile defenses. But this also undercut Russia's sense of its importance. Then, in early 2007, the United States decided to deploy anti-ballistic missiles in Central Europe, ostensibly against a possible attack on the US homeland from North Korea or Iran. This was in Russia's backyard and was again a US demonstration that its interests didn't count.

The US and NATO took the most damaging step at the Alliance's 2008 summit in Bucharest. Officials in the Bush administration wanted to include both Ukraine and Georgia in a process that would rapidly lead to NATO membership.

Wiser heads in the Alliance, notably in France and Germany, understood that this would clearly cross a red line for Russia by, in effect, declaring null-and-void the tacit 1997 understanding that Ukraine would be strategic neutral territory, although Moscow could accept its progressive orientation to the West in other areas. While refusing to agree to Bush's fast-track formula, NATO leaders at the summit did devise what they thought was an innocuous and meaningless wording: that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members of NATO." For most allies, that in effect meant "never."

But for virtually all NATO experts, this was immediately understood to be in fact the *actual moment of commitment to membership* and all its stands for, and that was also so perceived in Moscow, Tbilisi and Kyiv.

Errors – sometimes even critical ones – can be corrected. This one was not.

Russia also began playing a negative role, especially after Vladimir Putin came to power. Notably, it cheated on the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and suspended cooperation within the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty. And Putin later asserted that Ukraine has no independent identify but was always and naturally part of Russia. Perhaps, therefore, Putin always intended to try seizing Ukraine. Yet from early in the G. W. Bush administration, the United States either ignored or fell short in providing incentives for Putin and Russia to value geopolitical possibilities that could benefit everyone.

All states concerned with Europe's future need to understand realities, beginning with a proper assessment of one another's histories, politics, and cultures, plus their views of the world, their places in it, and what matters to them in different spheres: security, economics, and their own-self perceptions and self-worth. All sides have so far fallen short.

What next?

A key underlying issue since the early 2000s, which will continue to be critical, is whether the United States and Russia can mutually agree on the importance of security and stability in the region, especially between NATO and Russia; or whether Washington and Moscow will instead each pursue prominence (if not dominance) – with Ukraine now center of their respective aspirations. For many years during the Cold War, the two superpowers faced a similar choice; but they gradually reset their priorities and produced both *détente* and eventually the collapse of confrontation. So far, the two great European powers have not reached that understanding, and Ukraine is paying the price.

Whatever the geopolitics, however, nothing can justify Russian aggression against Ukraine. But this summary of background to the 2014 and 2022 invasions must be taken into account in any analysis and discussion about "What next?" when hostilities cease.

Regrettably, in all its recent meetings NATO has said that Ukraine's membership is only a matter of timing: needing to be put off until the war is over. That is a worse-than-useless commitment: It plays into Putin's hands with Russian nationalists while doing nothing for Ukraine. Further, it has no validity. Membership in NATO requires unanimity among its 32 members; and it is inconceivable that all of them would at any point give Ukraine the NATO Treaty's Article 5 commitment that "an armed attack against one or more of them… shall be considered an attack against them all."

It is also regrettable that the United States (and NATO) have said that they will do nothing diplomatically with Russia to which the Ukrainian government objects – even if Putin were so inclined, which he is not, today. The Western position recognizes the price paid by Ukraine's people and the fact that fighting is taking place almost entirely on its soil. But this restriction limits flexibility for the United States, in particular, to explore some means of ending the conflict and also to try placing it in a broader geopolitical context. Indeed, the undeniable fact – which Washington passed over beginning about 2000 – is that Russia cannot be ignored. Like it or not, in time it will return to the ranks of great powers, although unlikely of the stature and capacities (notably in economics) of the Soviet Union.

Thus, what is done now must take account of the interests of all significant parties, with an eye to the potential for creating some form of stability and predictability. Further, basic responsibility to conduct negotiations must be exercised by the two preeminent powers: the United States and Russia. Only they can lead in seeking a new settlement on the Continent. That demands, beginning now, direct communication between Washington and Moscow. While others must be involved, especially Kyiv, the two major powers are key. Without their undertaking this shared responsibility, nothing positive can come out of the current conflict. This is an inescapable conclusion of both sides' efforts and errors – especially by Washington and Moscow – in the post-Cold War period.

About the author

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