

Research Article

## The NATO Expansion Debate: Security Enhancement or Provocation?

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### ABSTRACT



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The growth of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has become one of the most debatable processes in the post-Cold War international politics that raise basic questions of the security, sovereignty, and geopolitical stability. The critical paper will analyze the aspect of whether NATO expansion is a valid security expansion or a provocation given the view of Russia and other non-NATO participants. The paper examination is based on realist, liberal and constructivist theoretical viewpoints of the study on the effects of the expansion on the balance of power, politics of the alliance and international norms. It gives detailed accounts of three major case studies Ukraine (2014-2022), Georgia (2008) and the accession of Finland and Sweden (2022-2023) to evaluate the real impacts of the eastern push of NATO. There exists evidence that, although the NATO membership is being considered by some states in East Europe as an essential assurance against outside aggression, others have claimed that the expansion of this alliance has provoked region insecurities, worsened the East-West relations, and weakened the systems to control the arms. The article also identifies perception and misperception as contributing factors in the behavior of states, and it is through the strategic culture and historical events that Russia adopted towards the activities of NATO. In addition, it reveals the recurring gaps in the literature on the non-Western concept of security and long-term strategic implications of expansionism. In the end, the paper suggests that NATO should have its outreach policy recalibrated to achieve a balance between deterrence and diplomacy, thus avoiding the further development of the situation and creating a more inclusive European security architecture. The results add to the academic and policy-level discussions on the validity, danger and prospective paths of the NATO expansion.

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### Introduction

After the Cold war, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has experienced several waves of expansion, spreading its membership eastwards to former states of the Warsaw pact and the Soviet Union. Described as a way of the establishment of stability, democracy and shared defense in post-communist Europe, this process has also sparked long term discussions regarding its strategic consequences. The main argument in this discussion is this: does the NATO expansion contribute to the increased safety of Europe, or is it the cause of instability as it is threatening other major powers, mostly Russia?

Advocates of expansion believe that the eastward expansion of NATO has served as a source of much-needed security assurance to insecure states, a democratic transition, and the prevention of the recurrence of past regional conflicts (Asmus, 2002). In this respect, expansion is mutually acceptable both morally and strategically, particularly in a post-Soviet

environment that is characterized by unpredictability and instability. Nevertheless, critics argue that NATO expansion has played a role in a worsening security situation by destroying perceived geopolitical dealings with Russia and contributing to its encroachment and encircling fantasies (Mearsheimer, 2014; Charap and Colton, 2017). Such contradictory opinions have been all the more topical in recent years in the context of confrontations in Ukraine and Georgia, where the right and intentions of NATO have been hotly debated.

This essay will discuss the dualism of NATO expansion, as a means of regional security and as a possible trigger of a geopolitical challenge. It will examine using an interdisciplinary method based on the international relations theory, and empirical cases, whether the post-Cold War path of the NATO has been successful in meeting its intended security goals or not and unwittingly it has contributed to its failure.

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## Theoretical Framework

The question of expansion of NATO is a multidimensional theoretical prism as the scholars of international relations have viewed the prospects of NATO expansion using various paradigms. The three most powerful theoretical frameworks realism, liberal institutionalism and constructivism provide different explanations on the drivers and effects of the NATO enlargement.

In the realist theory, especially the offensive and structural versions, international politics is seen as power struggle in an anarchical system. In this light, the growth of the NATO is seen as a menace to the Russian sphere of influence and destabilization of the balance of power in the region. According to realists, as much as these moves might be aimed at escalating a military alliance towards the borders of Russia, it is predictable that such moves will meet countermeasures and defensive aggression (Waltz, 2000; Mearsheimer, 2014). This security dilemma of one state to secure and this process results in the other states feeling insecure is the key to the understanding why the tensions between NATO and Russia escalated.

On the contrary, liberal institutionalism focuses on the contribution of international organizations, democratic governance and cooperation based on rules in fostering peace. Proponents of this opinion hold that expansion of NATO will bring stability in the region as it incorporates long time rivals into a unified security apparatus and through democratic consolidation (Risse-Kappen, 1996; Asmus, 2002). To liberals, NATO is not so much a military bloc but rather a stabilizing institution which limits the uncertainty and encourages members to collaborate.

Constructivism brings about a sociological aspect by emphasizing the role of ideas, identities and norms in state behavior. Constructivists also argue that meanings of NATO as both a protective group and aggressive military are not predetermined, but are socially constructed. The historic experiences and narratives of Russia, combined with the national identity contribute to the reason why Russia views the growth of NATO as a threat such as the example of its historical experiences, national identity and experience of the West (Hopf, 2002). Likewise, the wish of the Eastern European states to become a part of NATO can be interpreted as the manifestation of their identity change to the West and denial of the former subordination.

### NATO Expansion Arguments as a Security Strengthening.

The proponents of the NATO expansion believe that the expansion of the alliance has played a major role in the security and stability of Central and Eastern Europe since the end of the Cold War. In this sense, enlargement has played various strategic, political as well as normative roles which congruent with the interests of the alliance and the acceding states. To start with, the expansion of NATO is perceived to act as a deterrent to the possible external aggression especially the revisionist powers. The expansion of the Article 5 security assurances to new members will enhance collective security and increase the potential costs of coercion or invasion by potential aggressors. To nations such as Poland, Baltic states and Romania, membership has offered a viable security buffer that is used to compensate the gap left by the departure of the Soviets (Reiter, 2001; Asmus, 2002). This has subsequently led to the increased feeling of security in the Euro-Atlantic region.

Second, the expansion of NATO is attributed to democratic reform and civilian domination of military in post-communist countries. The members were to satisfy political and military standards by means of the Membership Action Plan (MAP), which resulted in the institutional modernization, the rise in transparency, and the restructuring of the defense. Such democratizing impact is consistent with liberal theories on

international relations that relate stable democracies to peaceful international behaviors (Reynolds, 2006).

Third, growth has contributed to the institutionalization of cooperation and interoperability in army forces across Europe. The addition of new members into the command structures and exercises of NATO has enhanced the ability of the alliance in responding to crises in the region and the establishment of a common culture in the strategy. Enlargement process has also made members of NATO and EU so much closer together which strengthens the transatlantic unity and sharing the burden (Smith, 2010).

Although the opponents of expansion declare that this act weakens the trust relationship with Russia, the supporters declare that the alliance is essentially defensive in nature and has severally reiterated that it is open to dialogue and partnership with even Moscow. To this perception, NATO is reactive and not provocative in its posture and its expansion is an expression of sovereign decisions of states that require safe security assurances in a volatile geopolitical environment.

### Justification of NATO Expansion as Provocation.

In as much as its advocates present NATO enlargement as a stabilizer, opponents argue that the expansion has elicited feelings of insecurity and counterstrategies to the expansion especially to Russia. In this sense, the eastward expansion of NATO is not considered to be a non-hostile or defensive action but a geopolitical invasion into the traditional zone of influence of Russia, which creates doubts, weapons competition, and political unrest in the region.

Among the most notable criticisms is the view of Russians that they are threatened and encircled. Russian policy-makers have over and over again represented NATO expansion as trying to contain or isolate the Russian Federation. In reference to the 1990s, Moscow has seen the progress of the alliance towards its borders with particular focus on the incorporation of the Baltic states and the fact that Georgia and Ukraine are being considered as a breach of the informal guarantees supposedly given by the alliance during the German reunification process (Sarotte, 2014). This encirclement story is the core of the Russian security education and the reason why its military stance should be reinforced along its western border (Trenin, 2011).

NATO expansion has played the most prominent role in increasing the level of Russia-West tensions as highlighted by the case of Ukraine and Georgia. The 2008 invasion of Georgia by Russia and its annexation of Crimea in 2014 were partially a reaction to the pro-western stances and goals of both countries to join NATO. Russia saw the Bucharest Summit of 2008 that declared Ukraine and Georgia as soon-to-be members of NATO as a threat to its regional hegemony (Charap & Colton, 2017). These developments indicate that the expansionary rhetoric of NATO can have major effects regarding geopolitical outcomes without the need to join the organization formally.

Also, opponents claim that growth has compromised the system of arms control and the practice of trust. The erosion or suspension of such fundamental treaties as Intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) Treaty and Conventional armed forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty demonstrate the decay of mutual confidence and checking regimes. The developments have frequently been associated by Moscow with what it considers to have been the lack of a willingness of NATO to accommodate the Russian security interests (Kroenig, 2017). Absence of solid dialogue and strategic self-control has also led to the destruction of post-Cold War cooperative security systems.

Lastly, such dynamics increase the chances of escalation and a new Cold War-style conflict. Militarization of the eastern flank of the NATO, along with the growing aggressive stance of Russia, has resulted in a dangerous sequence of actions and counteractions. NATO and Russian troops are engaged in the forward operations

and military exercises that make it highly probable to misjudge and trigger unintentional conflict (Krickovic, 2017). Crisis escalation is likely in this environment and the benefits of the immediate post-cold war are mostly gone.

Overall, it is critical to note that NATO expansion instead of securing Europe has contributed to the reintroduction of the logic of bloc confrontation and destabilization of the overall European security order.

### Case Study Analysis

In order to grasp the practical consequences of NATO expansion better, this section will consider three important case studies, including Ukraine (2014-2022), Georgia (2008), and the recent accession of Finland and Sweden (2022-2023). The two of them describe how the expansion or desire to expand NATO has impacted the regional security affairs by either strengthening defense postures or instigating a standoff.

#### Ukraine (2014-2022): NATO Dreams and Russian Nightmare.

The desire of Ukraine to become a member of NATO has been a key factor in the degradation of the Russian-West relations. Even though Ukraine was not a member of the NATO, its growing alignment with the alliance in particular due to the Bucharest Summit declaration of 2008 which stated that Ukraine will become a member of NATO was considered by Moscow a major strategic threat (Charap & Colton, 2017). After the Euromaidan protests of 2014, and the pro-Western shift in the Ukrainian government, Russia occupied Crimea and financed separatism in Donbas. In part, these actions were reasonable as the defensive actions in response to the perceived encroachment by NATO (Mearsheimer, 2014).

To the Western mindset, Ukraine actions towards NATO were a measure of its independence of choice over security alliances. However, Russia took these actions as the red line. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 continued to highlight how far the perceived expansionism of NATO was tactical to the Russian calculus. With the military support and political assistance, NATO has not yet become a member of Ukraine, but this is where the contradiction of the alliance lies: how to offer protection without inciting the increase.

#### NATO Ambitions and the War with Russia (2008): Georgia.

The desire by Georgia to join NATO came to its climax during the Bucharest Summit that included Ukraine. The unspecified future membership declaration as well as lack of a definite timeframe and absence of guarantee to security suggested what some researchers have termed as a security vacuum (Krickovic, 2017). A war between Russia and Georgia shook over the breakaway states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in August 2008. The military action by Russia prevented the efforts by Georgia to regain control of these regions as well as effectively halted its integration into NATO.

In the eyes of Russia, the war was a retaliation of the overextensions of NATO in the post-Soviet territory. The Kremlin indicated that any additional encroachment would not be without consequences particularly in areas that it thought of as part of its near abroad (Allison, 2008). Georgian example demonstrates how dangerous the status of the countries that found themselves between the open-door policy of NATO and the lack of the protection of Article 5 can be.

Finland and Sweden (2022-2023): Effect of New Accession in the Face of new Security Concerns.

Finland and Sweden, the Nordic states, became the members of NATO in 2023, under quite different conditions, as opposed to Ukraine and Georgia. Both countries are long-term neutrals, and both countries reevaluated their security policies after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Their membership was largely viewed as a direct reaction to heightened insecurity in the region and the

lack of trust in Russia as a country willing to live in peace (Forsberg, 2023).

To NATO, the inclusion of Finland and Sweden lets it have more power on the north flank and builds more weight in the region. Various countries were already highly military capable and able to interoperate with the NATO forces due to years of their cooperation unlike before. The ease with which they have been able to accede highlights the security reasons behind expansion especially in an extremely changing strategic environment.

Notably, Russian reaction to Finnish and Swedish accession though rhetorically unkind has been less intense than those in Ukraine and Georgia. This might indicate a difference in historical relations, or perceptions of the threats, or a re-setting of the strategic priorities of Russia during continuing conflict.

### The Debate: Security or Provocation Analysis.

The issue of the NATO expansion cannot be resolved only in terms of theoretical arguments, but it should be based on the empirical reality and the strategic implications observed during the last 30 years. The examples of Ukraine, Georgia, and Nordic countries have proven that the effects of NATO expansion are not unilateral. Instead, its results are very contextual, historically dependent and the combination of perception and misperception in international relations.

The case of Ukraine and Georgia highlights the dangers of partial or aspirational integration of NATO. The two nations were very interested at becoming members of the alliance and they were politically encouraged yet could not enjoy full security as guaranteed by Article 5. In either scenario, this liminal position played a factor in instability because Russia wanted to deter additional Western penetration by using military force (Krickovic, 2017; Charap and Colton, 2017). Although devised by Russia as a defensive measure, these actions had a de-escalating impact on the expansion pace of NATO and redefined the discussion of European security.

On the contrary, the case of Finland and Sweden accession gives an opposite example. These were states with high levels of military preparedness, wide popular participation and little Russian opposition than in the previous situations when they joined NATO. This comparison indicates that the benefits of expansion in the security-enhancing benefits are more inclined to become actualized, in the case of rapid, coherent, and accession by the states with high defensive power (Forsberg, 2023). It also points out that perceived legitimacy and credibility of the commitment of NATO can influence strategic outcomes.

The most important role in this debate is played by perception and misperception. NATO considers its growth as a defensive rules-based way that mirrors the sovereign decisions of the democratic states. Russia, in its turn, approaches the process through the prism of historical grievance and encircling the strategies and considers the actions of the alliance offensive and destabilizing (Jervis, 1976; Trenin, 2011). This difference is not just rhetorical but it affects policies, posture of the military as well as the behavior of alliances on both sides.

Failing in communication and divergent threat evaluation have led to a traditional security dilemma where the other party tries as much as possible to enhance security of themselves, which in turn diminishes the security of the other into a reaction that creates more tension (Glaser, 1997). This can be traced in the eastward movements of NATO and the respective military reinforcements by Russia as precautionary but viewed as offensive by the rival side.

The development of NATO has impacted greatly on European strategic architecture and the world order. On the one hand, it has managed to secure the security of most of the Central and Eastern European states and has enhanced transatlantic relations. Conversely, it has also played a role in intruding the post-Cold

War security consensus and increasing the possibility of great power war in Eastern Europe.

The war in Ukraine has accelerated the process of changing the alignments in the world, aggravated the polarization between NATO and Russia, and renewed the military expenditure and deterrence policies in the continent. These events imply that we are going back to a more bipolar-like confrontation like in the Cold War, but now it is in a more multipolar and interconnected world (Kroenig, 2020). Managing the deterrence without escalation and balancing between the commitments of the alliance and the avoidance of the further polarization of the strategic positions is the challenge in the future.

#### Discussion of the key findings of the research.

The factual data proves that NATO enlargement has served as a source of security and trigger of confrontation, depending on the geopolitical situation. In Central and Eastern Europe, NATO accession had the effect of increased deterrence, modernization of defense and political integration to democratic standards (Reiter, 2001; Asmus, 2002). But in the post-Soviet region, and especially in such states as Georgia and Ukraine, the desire of the country to join NATO, but not as a member state, was a sort of strategic gray zone, which Russia used to impose its control and prevent the influence of NATO (Charap & Colton, 2017; Krickovic, 2017).

One common element of this analysis is the perception gap that exists between NATO and Russia. The internal reason of the expansion of NATO is based on the defensive force and a demonstration of democratic sovereignty by the potential of NATO members. In its turn, Russia views expansion as an intentional infringement of its former sphere of influence, which leads to coercive and even violent retaliation (Trenin, 2011; Sarotte, 2014). These conflicting stories highlight the significance of perception and misperception in international security theory (Jervis, 1976).

Such a security dilemma as explained by Glaser (1997) explains how a sense of defensiveness may give birth to hostility. The attempt by NATO to reassure its members by use of troops or military drills are seen by Russia as an escalator, which triggers countermeasures and arm buildups. What ensues is a worsening strategic situation that is characterized by poor communication and increasing chances of escalation.

The renewal of the high-intensity confrontation in Europe with Ukraine, in particular, indicates how the current strategy of NATO is constrained. The normative power of the open-door policy has exceeded the capability of the alliance to offer credible levels of security assurances to aspirants which leaves them exposed to external aggression. This imbalance has helped in instability in the borderlands between NATO and Russia.

On the other hand, the inclusion of Finland and Sweden speedily implies that NATO can continue to play the role of stabilizing force especially in instances where the enlargement process incorporates competent states whose citizens have overwhelming popular backing and minimum land claims. The Nordic and post-Soviet cases comparison prompts the idea that the consequences of expansion are very context-specific, and they depend on the environment of the threat in the region and national politics.

Lastly, the study cites a loss in post-Cold War mechanisms of arms control and trust-building. Treaties like the INF and CFE failed on cross blaming and nothing seems to be in compensation of them. The relationship between NATO and Russia has in any way changed to care-taking cooperation to the direct competition, and the consequences of this trend are severe concerning the future of the global security order.

#### Gaps in literature review

Although literature on the NATO expansion is comprehensive, various gaps are still critical that do not enable us to learn much about the NATO expansion on its long-term

strategic implications. The present study fills these gaps with a combination of theoretical knowledge and recent case-related evidence and points to the gaps that may be filled with appropriate research.

The current literature is inclined to nurture the idea of NATO expansion as a linear extension of the values of liberal internationalism, based on democratization, institutionalization and collective security (Reiter, 2001; Asmus, 2002). Although this lens comes in handy in interpreting the dynamics of alliances through the lens of the West, it does not give enough emphasis to the antagonistic security externalities created by enlargement especially in the strategic calculation of Russia. The literature does not always include a corresponding analysis that takes the initiative to examine the perception of the NATO actions by the opposing states, in particular, in the conditions of the historical resentment and disputable spheres of influence (Sarotte, 2014; Trenin, 2011).

Non-NATO countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova who are vocal about their desires to be included in the alliance make up a distinct unit in the theoretical study of security. These grey zone states have been given minimal systematic consideration, particularly in the context of the security risks of what can happen as a result of the open-door policy of NATO without credible defense pledges (Krickovic, 2017). The literature mostly addresses full members or foreign policy of Russia, other than highlighting the vulnerability of the intermediary actors.

The security dilemma and misperception theory has been mentioned often but in an abstract or ahistorical manner (Jervis, 1976; Glaser, 1997). It can be identified that there is an apparent deficit of empirical research that unites these theories and provides specific case studies of NATO-Russia interactions. As an example, the dynamics of escalation in Ukraine (2014-2022) or Georgia (2008) are hardly ever explored through systematic frameworks that could take into consideration mutual misinterpretation of intentions, domestic politics, and historical parallels.

The new membership of Finland and Sweden in reaction to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia is a significant phenomenon that is yet to be theorized and integrated into the literature on the dynamics of alliances in general. These instances offer good comparative evidence on the reasons why certain expansions are crisis-inducing, whereas others are not. Nevertheless, the academic reactions to such accessions remain immature, which may point to the temporal gap in coverage that requires timely academic coverage (Forsberg, 2023).

The other under-researched aspect is the normative conflicts between the sovereign choice and great-power restraint. Although international law favors the rights of states to form a partner, scholars have not been keen on the ethical consequences of promoting the desire to form an alliance without offering security measures. This disillusionment is particularly acute when aspirants are violently retaliated, and the question of accountability and competence in international undertakings enters the frame (Mearsheimer, 2014; Walt, 2015).

#### Conclusion, Summary and Recommendations.

##### Conclusion

This paper has discussed the controversial issue of NATO expansion in theoretical, empirical, and strategic perspectives. It has demonstrated that NATO enlargement since the end of the cold war has brought both security benefits and geo-political tensions, depending on the regional context and perception of the actors.

In security improvement terms, NATO has managed to stabilize new members on a stable institutionalized defense structure especially in Central and Eastern Europe. It has brought about democratization, defense modernization and defense against external aggression (Asmus, 2002; Reiter, 2001).

Simultaneously, the eastern shift of the alliance has triggered the feeling of being surrounded and not safe enough in Russia, leading to the intensification of tensions, armed conflict in Ukraine and Georgia, and the decline of East-West confidence (Charap & Colton, 2017; Krickovic, 2017).

The case study discussion highlights the fact that the security outcomes differ greatly, as the accession of Finland and Sweden was facilitated without any significant conflict, whereas the lack of resolution of the situation with Ukraine and Georgia led to the realization of the Russian aggression. All these distinctions dwell on the significance of geopolitical timing, power equilibrium in the region, and viable security assurances.

More importantly, the research concludes that the perceptions and misperceptions continue to be strong forces behind the development of conflicts. The way NATO views itself as a defensive alliance is not an alleviation to the Russian threat perception that is based on great power identity and historical trauma. The result of this dynamic has been a vicious cycle of security dilemma where diplomatic avenues are scarce to undo the mistrust (Jervis, 1976; Glaser, 1997).

### Recommendations

- Based on the findings, the following recommendations are suggested to the policy makers and scholars:
- It is possible to reopen the strategic conversation forums like the NATO-Russia Council to eliminate the misunderstanding and help in arms control talks.
- Military transparency and crisis communication channels are just some of the confidence-building measures that are essential in minimizing the risk of unintended escalation.
- To prevent the aspirant states to be exposed to security vacuum, NATO ought to give definite timelines and promises of membership.
- The enlargement should not simply be measured in normative or institutional terms, but in terms of strategic risks.
- The long-term stability can demand the rethinking of European security outside NATO and Russia.
- International organizations and security organs of the nation ought to invest more in the cognitive and psychological approaches of the world of threat perception because these determine the choice of decisions no less than material power.

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