

History, Grand Strategy and NATO Enlargement

John Lewis Gaddis

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. NATO enlargement, I believe, manages to violate *every one* of the strategic principles just mentioned.

Perhaps that is why historians – normally so contentious – are in uncharacteristic agreement: with remarkably few exceptions, they see NATO enlargement 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 practising historian at which there was less support, within the community of historians, for an announced policy position.

A significant gap has thus opened 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. This article focuses on how this has happened, which leads us back to a list of basic principles for grand strategy.

First, consider *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. They applaud the settlements of the Napoleonic Wars and of the Second World War 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 post-war security structures.

Historians tend to criticise (if not condemn) the First World War 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,

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paved the way for yet another conflagration. It was not for nothing that Winston 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. Its defeat finally came not on the battlefield but as the result of a change of heart, and then of character, and then ultimately of system. The use of force, very fortunately for everyone, was not even necessary.

The process of rehabilitating our adversary – of transforming it from a revisionist or even revolutionary state to one prepared to accept the existing international order – began, therefore, 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, democratisation and economic reorganisation 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 US could afford to be *inclusive* in dealing with its *actual* enemies Germany and Japan after 1945 – 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 most often given is that the Russians have no choice but to accept what NATO has decided to do – that having swallowed the loss of their sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany and the eventual break-up of the former Soviet Union itself, their only alternative with respect to enlarging the alliance is to gulp and swallow yet again. We, the victors, are free to impose upon them whatever settlement we choose.

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 favour either their Eastern or their Western occupiers. The fact that they chose the West had much 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 post-war Germany, and the brittleness of the other. The Germans had a choice, and they made it decisively.

If the US could be that accommodating then to the wishes of a country that had produced one of the most loathsome regimes in history but had lost its capacity to inflict injury, it is difficult to understand why Washington now has elected not to accommodate a country that has chosen to democratise itself, but

still retains a considerable capacity to do harm. By insisting on NATO enlargement, it seems, we are 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 lean 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 US itself did a quarter century ago under the guidance of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger: it can tilt towards 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.¹ 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.² And of course classical balance-of-power theory tells us that this is what we should expect: if country A feels itself threatened by country B, it is apt to align itself with country C. Country C in this case is one less likely even than Russia to see its interests as compatible with our own.

That brings us to a third strategic principle that is being violated here, which is *the need to take a global and not just a regional perspective*. US General George C. Marshall coined the term 'theateritis', during the Second World War, to refer to the tendency among some of his military commanders to see only the requirements of their own campaigns, not those of the 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'.³

The temptation to do is certainly understandable. NATO was the West's most impressive institutional success during that conflict, and it is only natural to want to find some purpose for it in the post-Cold War era. But does it fit current needs? Will we really be able to say in years to come – can we 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 us?

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

Containing Russia, of course, 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 a US 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 spectre 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 grant, though, for the sake of argument, that NATO enlargement is, or should be, an urgent priority, there is yet another strategic principle that has been by-passed here, which has to do with *providing the means to accomplish selected ends*. The dangers of letting interests outstrip capabilities are well known. One would surely expect, therefore, that on as important a matter as this – the designation of three additional countries in the centre of Europe as vital to the defence of the US – those charged with organising those defences would have been consulted, and carefully listened to.

Yet 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 suggests that quite clearly.⁴ It is true that the military were 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*.⁵

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 bring into NATO are not in danger, in which case one wonders why it is then necessary to include them. Or they are in danger, in which case we have yet to prepare adequately to protect them. Either way, ends and means are misaligned.

So where did the decision to enlarge NATO come from? 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 became interested in the issue through an impromptu conversation with Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa at the April 1993 dedication of the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC; former National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, who kept the idea alive within the administration through the next year and a half; and Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, who insisted at several critical moments in autumn 1994 that NATO enlargement was official policy – thereby, or so it appears, making it so.⁶

With almost no public or Congressional debate – and with remarkably little inter-agency consultation – 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 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 recognised, both symbolically and institutionally. How did it happen, though, that the Americans responded so much more favourably and rapidly than EU members 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.⁷

If so, the history behind that sentiment is pretty shaky. The US, after all, had no hand at all in the 1938 Munich agreement, and it could have challenged Soviet control of Eastern Europe after the Second World War only at the risk of starting a Third World War, which would hardly have liberated anybody.⁸ Nor is it clear that the Czechs, the Poles and the Hungarians suffered more during the past half-century than the people we propose 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 us more than does that of others, despite the fact that they all have compelling claims as victims. Emotionalism, but of a surprisingly élitist character, appears to be at work here.

One of the clearest 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*. Stalin’s authorisation to Kim Il-Sung to invade South Korea, Khrushchev’s placement of missiles in Cuba, and Brezhnev’s decision to invade Afghanistan all took place because leaders at the top responded to events emotionally, and then acted without consulting their own subordinate experts.⁹ 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 enlargement emotions at the top do 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, people will say, maybe NATO enlargement was not the best model of thoughtful, strategically informed decision-making. But the decision has 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 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 is just plain irresponsible*.

Only historians will be able to say with any assurance whether this is such a moment. 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 we hold to our present course?

It is not unknown for great nations – even the US – to acknowledge mistakes publicly and change their policies. Ronald Reagan did it in Lebanon: in 1983 that country's security was a vital US interest; in 1984 (after over 200 Marines had been killed there) it was no longer so. Surely the Nixon–Kissinger opening to China was an acknowledgement that the long-time policy of isolating that country had been misguided. The US certainly reversed course in Vietnam, although only after years of resisting that possibility. John Foster Dulles once threatened an 'agonizing reappraisal' of Washington's whole policy toward Europe if the French did not approve the European Defence Community. Paris did not approve, Dulles did not reappraise, and the skies did not fall. And, lest we forget, Washington's entire containment strategy after the Second World War constituted an implicit acknowledgement of error in having believed, as it 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: the US could resolve most of the problems its policy of selective enlargement has caused by acting upon the implied premises of its own argument, and *enlarging the enlargement process*. We could say that NATO enlargement is such a good idea that we think it unfair just to apply the benefits to the Czechs, Poles and Hungarians – that we 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. 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 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 enlargement, just as he was of the Vietnam War. Commenting on the Johnson administration's claim that any reversal of course in South-east Asia would fatally compromise American

credibility, Kennan reminded the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1966 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'.¹⁰

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

Acknowledgement

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Notes

¹ My colleagues Bruce Russett and Allan Stam have developed this possibility in an unpublished paper, 'Expanding NATO Expansion: From a Dangerous Idea to a Safer World'.

² See John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 68–70.

³ Richard N. Haass, 'Fatal Distraction: Bill Clinton's Foreign Policy', *Foreign Policy*, no. 108, Autumn 1997, p. 119.

⁴ See Paul Kennedy, 'Let's See the Pentagon's Plan for Defending Poland', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 May 1997.

⁵ Wojtech Mastny, *Reassuring NATO: Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Western Alliance* (Oslo: Institutt for Forsvarsstudier, 1997), p. 61.

⁶ James M. Goldgeier, 'NATO Expansion: The Anatomy of a Decision', *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 1, Winter 1998, pp. 85–102.

⁷ See, for example, Sherle R. Schwenninger, 'The Case Against NATO Enlargement: Clinton's Fateful Gamble', *The Nation*, no. 265, 20 October 1997, p. 26.

⁸ Michael Mandelbaum, *The Dawn of Peace in Europe* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996), pp. 55–56.

⁹ Gaddis, *We Now Know*, pp. 290–91; on Afghanistan, see 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), pp. 132–33.

¹⁰ Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Hearings. *Supplemental Foreign Assistance Fiscal Year 1966 – Vietnam* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1966), pp. 335–36.