



No. 46

February 11, 1998

NATO EXPANSION FLASHPOINT NO. 3

Kaliningrad

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Executive Summary

The decision to expand NATO eastward threatens to create serious frictions with Russia. An especially worrisome flashpoint is the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, which has a border with Poland, one of the countries invited to join NATO. An even more dangerous situation will develop if a subsequent round of NATO expansion brings in the Baltic republics. Kaliningrad would then be separated from the rest of Russia by a belt of NATO countries. That would create a "mirror image" of West Berlin during the Cold War--with the thorny problem of military transit rights and other potential quarrels.

Russian officials are already concerned about secure access to Kaliningrad. That is one reason among many that there is intense Russian opposition to NATO membership for the Baltic republics. The serious possibility of a collision exists, since Clinton administration officials have given strong indications that those countries will be invited to join NATO in the near future. The probable Russian response would be greater reliance on nuclear weapons (including adoption of a first-use policy) and renunciation of the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation. Expansion of the alliance, therefore, risks provoking a new and even more dangerous version of the Cold War.

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Introduction

So far the debate over NATO expansion has concerned the admission of three states of Central Europe: the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. NATO has made clear, however, that the first states will not be the last. In particular, implied promises of membership in the not-too-distant future have been given to the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. "The history of your country is one of invasion. You cannot afford another Yalta," Gen. John Sheehan, NATO Atlantic Forces Group commander in chief, said in Riga, Latvia, in October 1996. "Your security lies in integration into European structures and drawing closer into NATO. That is why I am here."¹

General Sheehan revealed the dirty little secret of NATO expansion, which the administration has sought to downplay: NATO expansion is directed against a potential threat from Russia. After all, what other country could conceivably threaten to invade Latvia? Any debate over NATO expansion must begin from this starting point. In addition, it should be recognized that the inclusion of the three Central European candidates for membership will initiate a process of further enlargement to the east. "Let me be absolutely clear on this point. The question of NATO membership for the Baltic states is not if but when," the U.S. ambassador to Sweden, Thomas Siebert, has stated.² Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has confirmed that that sort of statement accurately represents the administration's position. "We have said that the whole NATO expansion process will not be complete until all the democracies of Europe will be part of it," she told an audience at Vilnius University on July 13, 1997. "He has stated what we have all said in different ways."³

The administration has confined the first stage of NATO expansion to three countries to make enlargement of the alliance easier for the Senate to accept, but at the same time it has offered assurances to other applicants. If the Baltic states are not issued an invitation, especially in light of the recently signed U.S.-Baltic Charter, what will they make of those assurances? Yet if those countries are admitted, how can we defend them? Those questions need to be addressed now, before any decision is made on the first three candidates, so we know exactly what NATO expansion entails, particularly since there is considerable misunderstanding of what the first stage of expansion involves. "If Russia's transformation into a cooperative member of the international community is so fragile that it could be derailed by NATO expansion to countries that don't share a common border with Russia, NATO enlargement is in fact a prudent insurance policy," Adrian

Karatnycky, president of Freedom House and a founding member of the pro-expansion New Atlantic Initiative, has written.⁴ But the first stage will create a shared border, since Poland abuts the Russian territory of Kaliningrad.

Kaliningrad Tensions

The problem posed by Kaliningrad is one of the least understood difficulties of NATO expansion, and it is potentially explosive. Kaliningrad is a Russian enclave completely cut off from the rest of Russia, much as Alaska is cut off from the contiguous 48 states.⁵ Any land connection between Kaliningrad and the rest of Russia must therefore cross foreign countries, countries that now want to be members of NATO. That situation is causing apprehension in Moscow, which wants assurances that its access to Kaliningrad will not be affected. "Russia has a real big problem as NATO expands," Peter Swartz, the first U.S. ambassador to Belarus, has pointed out. "Its Kaliningrad enclave becomes ever more isolated. One result of the NATO expansion is certain to [be] greater pressure by Russia on Lithuania for access to Kaliningrad."⁶ Indeed, in 1996 Russian president Boris Yeltsin suggested that Poland let Russia have "a bit of highway on its territory" to facilitate such access.⁷ The proposal was vehemently rejected, and the Russians backed off. But if NATO expands, and especially if membership is offered to the Baltic states in the second round of enlargement, we can expect the Russians to raise this issue more urgently.

Another concern is the concentration of military forces in and around Kaliningrad. During the Cold War Kaliningrad was a major military base, and it retains many of the characteristics of a military base. According to Klaus Naumann, NATO Military Committee chairman, Kaliningrad has an "extremely dense military presence."⁸ But Kaliningrad is not the ominous military bastion it once was. "In recent years the military presence in the Kaliningrad has been greatly reduced," notes a Danish newspaper.⁹ But that situation could change, especially if the Russians feel that their presence in the enclave is being threatened. The general in charge of Kaliningrad's air defense is already complaining that aircraft belonging to NATO countries are conducting intensified reconnaissance missions near Kaliningrad with the cooperation of Poland and Lithuania.¹⁰ Similarly, Polish radio has reported that "Moscow is worried by the increase in the number of Polish border guards on the Russian-Polish border."¹¹ According to Sergei Glotov, a member of the Russian Duma's anti-NATO group, Poland has doubled its military personnel in

the region near Kaliningrad since 1994 to 22,000, while Lithuania has concentrated 3,000 troops on its border with the enclave.¹²

To be sure, the fact that the Russians make those claims do not mean they are justified, and for their part the Poles have disputed the allegation that Poland is serving as a staging ground for improper reconnaissance flights, saying that any such flights were merely for the purpose of monitoring arms control agreements.¹³ Nevertheless, it is striking that such issues are emerging at this early stage of the NATO expansion process. Unless they are seriously addressed and resolved, the climate of trust that characterized East-West relations at the end of the Cold War could evaporate, which would torpedo any notion of a "new NATO" and leave NATO with its old mission: preventing war by deterrence.

An Excessive Faith in Deterrence

NATO expansion is based on the premise that deterrence is the best way to prevent war. According to that view, NATO prevented war in Europe during the Cold War by deterring Soviet aggression, and what worked during the Cold War should work just as well, if not better, in the aftermath of the Cold War, when the military balance has shifted so decisively in favor of the United States. According to the conventional wisdom, countries embraced by NATO have an absolute guarantee of protection, since Russia would not dare challenge the United States. That pervasive belief explains the scramble of countries in the former Soviet bloc to join NATO and their fear of being left out of the alliance. According to the logic of advocates of expansion, gray areas--that is, countries not within NATO but not in the Russian orbit either--invite aggression because "nature abhors a vacuum."

There are many problems with that thinking. To be sure, since armed conflict in Europe did not occur during the Cold War, it is reasonable to assume that deterrence helped to maintain the peace. Nevertheless, we should be careful about putting our faith entirely in deterrence. When something does happen, it may be possible to determine a single cause. When something does not happen, and especially when it does not happen over a period of 40 years, postulating a single explanation is bound to lead to error.

It is also pertinent to recall that deterrence during the Cold War worked both ways. The Soviets did not overrun West Berlin, but neither did NATO tear down the Berlin Wall.

When Soviet troops crushed democratic movements in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the United States and its NATO allies did not intervene. Major war was averted in Europe because the Soviet Union was not alone in recognizing limits on its actions.

But peace did not prevail everywhere during the Cold War. War broke out in Korea and subsequently in Vietnam. The Vietnam War was a significant failure of deterrence, since Hanoi clearly was not deterred by the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, the American military buildup, or even the bombing of its territory. The failure of deterrence in Vietnam is not unique, and it brings into question the tendency of NATO enthusiasts to have blind faith in deterrence so long as it includes an American guarantee. Indeed, one of the curious aspects of NATO expansion is that it is being promoted by officials (most notably President Clinton) who opposed the fulfillment of Washington's Southeast Asia Treaty Organization guarantee to South Vietnam.¹⁴ If they saw no reason to fulfill a U.S. guarantee to an Asian country under SEATO, why should anyone believe they would fulfill a similar guarantee to an East European country under NATO, especially when fulfilling the NATO guarantee carries a much greater risk of escalation to the use of nuclear weapons?

That question is not as superficial or insulting as it initially seems. Promoters of NATO expansion typically cite Munich to justify their position. "My mind-set is Munich," Secretary Albright has affirmed.¹⁵ Similarly, in a recent talk at the Heritage Foundation, then prime minister of the Czech Republic Václav Klaus invoked Munich. "We were not saved by various treaties and agreements signed during the 1920s and 1930s," he acknowledged, "and, as you know, a very strange, I may even say 'collective,' agreement signed in Munich in 1938 led to the end of our sovereignty and to the German occupation of our country during World War II."¹⁶

Two points need to be made in that regard. The first is that America's intervention in Vietnam was also justified by the lessons of Munich. "We learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression," President Lyndon Johnson explained in 1965.¹⁷ In an interview five years later, he reinforced that view. "Everything I knew about history told me that if I got out of Vietnam and let Ho Chi Minh run through the streets of Saigon, then I'd be doing exactly what Chamberlain did in World War II," he told biographer Doris Kearns. "I'd be giving a big fat reward to aggression."¹⁸ It is therefore fair to ask why representatives of the Clinton administration are so impressed by the Munich argument now, since Clinton was so

obviously unmoved by it at the time of the Vietnam War.

The second problem with the Munich analogy is that the way NATO is expanding bears eerie similarities to the manner in which France (and by implication, Britain) extended security guarantees to Poland and Czechoslovakia in the interwar period. "Although [the Locarno Treaty] seemed dangerous in theory--pledging us in fact to take part on one side or the other in any Franco-German war that might arise--there was little likelihood of such a disaster ever coming to pass; and this was the best means of preventing it," Winston Churchill wrote in his history of World War II.¹⁹ Similarly, President Clinton has acknowledged that "if we extend membership [in NATO] to another country, it means that we are committing the people who wear the uniform of our nation to go and fight and die for that nation, should it ever be attacked." But he added, "I think it's a pretty good gamble, because no NATO nation has ever been attacked, ever, not once."²⁰

NATO is not taking its new obligations seriously and is thereby repeating the tragic experience of Locarno that led to the capitulation at Munich. Concerned that expansion may be rejected by the U.S. Senate because of its cost, NATO has now determined that the expense, at least for the first three new members, will be much lower than anybody imagined.²¹ The strained effort to make NATO expansion "affordable" recalls the British "10-year rule" recommended by Churchill when he was chancellor of the exchequer shortly after Locarno. "It should now be laid down as a standing assumption that at any given date there will be no major war for 10 years from that date," he advised the cabinet.²² Although it is not commonly recalled now, Churchill himself contributed to the mindset that later frustrated him as he sought to alert his country to the danger from a resurgent Germany under Adolf Hitler.

It appears that that sad experience is being repeated. To justify its lower cost estimates, NATO now notes that the original cost estimates were made in anticipation of four rather than three new members. Given the promises to those countries not invited in the first round, that explanation recalls the lack of realism that made the 10-year rule so dangerous. Any estimate of the cost of NATO expansion that is to be taken seriously must be for a comprehensive (or reasonably comprehensive) expansion (a person thinking of buying a house looks at the total cost of the house, not merely the down payment).

More to the point, if our emphasis is on deterrence, we should be sure that our actions will preserve peace rather than provoke war. In the case of the Baltic states, that is questionable. Given their small size and their location next to Russia, it is difficult to imagine how they could be defended by conventional forces in the absence of border fortifications and pre-positioned forces. Even then, their defense would be difficult. Moreover, the Russian reaction to any such effort might be violent. According to a Russian journalist with good defense ministry connections,

Russia's future reaction to any attempt to deploy foreign troops near its borders (including such a move under the guise of conducting maneuvers) is quite predictable. It will be exactly the same as Washington's reaction in 1961 [*sic*], when our troops landed in Cuba. First there will be a blockade (if the geographic location of the future conflict zone allows this), then an ultimatum demanding an immediate troop withdrawal and, if the ultimatum is not complied with, a preventive strike that would deprive the adversary of offensive capabilities.²³

Perhaps that is bluff, but Russian officials have uniformly expressed vehement objections to the inclusion of the Baltic states in NATO. "We hope that sensible leaders in the West will not want to play Russian roulette," Yeltsin's spokesman, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, warned in May 1997. "Expanding the bloc at some time in the future to bring in former Soviet republics would force Russia to review its whole set of legal relations with the West, including the Founding Act, which will be signed in Paris, and to review its foreign policies."²⁴ As an Estonian newspaper noted after the signing of the Founding Act, "The Russian-NATO Act is hiding a minefield under its smooth surface, which could blow the act up. The Baltic States are one of the mines."²⁵ We should take those warnings seriously and not simply assume that the mutual deterrence that prevailed in Europe during the Cold War can be effectively replaced now by a unilateral deterrent, especially if ordinary Russians come to believe that NATO expansion represents their exclusion from Western civilization.

NATO Expansion and the Western Civilization Argument

Although Americans might regard that Russian objection as overwrought and misplaced, the argument based on "civilization" is emerging as a major one for NATO enlargement. "We consider the invitation to join NATO as a promise of our return to the Euro-Atlantic civilization context, to which we have always naturally belonged and from which we were for several decades forcibly removed," Prime Minister Klaus told the Heritage Foundation.²⁶ President Václav Havel of the Czech Republic has elaborated on that idea in a manner that deserves extended treatment.

It is no disgrace to be a part of any one of the world's regions or any one of these cultural spheres. None of them is a priori better than the others. They are equal, but so that they can enter into good cooperation, they must first define themselves. Only those entities that are clearly defined can work together in a creative fashion. The worst alternative of all would be not knowing where one ends and another begins, to have undefined areas, areas of vacuum. The existence of such undefined areas would encourage certain forces to look anew for opportunities to penetrate these "no man's lands." That is why I find it tremendously important that the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance be expanded by admitting the countries of Central Europe and possibly Eastern Europe. . . .

. . . It is tremendously important that NATO should gradually start to embrace the sphere of civilization that it is called on to defend, an imperative that includes enlarging by admitting those countries that have belonged to the European-American tradition through their entire history. The countries of Central Europe should be admitted since not only do they belong to the same civilization, but they have in fact for centuries taken part in shaping that civilization.

Questions remain about Russia. Russia is a huge Euro-Asian power, with which all spheres of the world and all regions have to have good relations. We could hardly imagine peace in the world without having good relations with the Russian Federation or with the Commonwealth of Independent

States. NATO too should build a genuine partnership with the Russian Federation. NATO's enlargement should take place against the background of such a partnership. I believe, however, that such a partnership can be built only if both entities are clearly defined.²⁷

Havel's analysis is both extraordinary and shocking, for it amounts to nothing less than dividing the world into precisely defined spheres of influence according to some supposedly natural line of division called "civilization." But who will decide where those lines are to be drawn, where one civilization ends and another begins? What criteria will be used? And who will be called upon to enforce those decisions if they are challenged--if some people decide they do not belong to the civilization to which they have been assigned?

Indeed, it must be noted that Havel's current position directly contradicts what he told Congress in 1990, when he called for the creation of a "new pan-European structure that could decide upon its own security system. This system would naturally involve some links with the part of the globe we might call the 'Helsinki' part, stretching west from Vladivostok to Alaska." Then, there was no talk of Europe's being divided into two civilizations, one tied to the United States and the other to Russia. On the contrary, Havel said that, with the end of the Cold War, Europe could "begin again to seek its own identity now that it need not be an armory split in two" and "we will be able to create what your great President Lincoln called 'the family of man.'"²⁸

Havel had it right the first time. The family of man is closer to the American ideal than is the division of the world into separate and impermeable civilizations. The practical impossibilities of that scheme are obvious, and Havel himself inadvertently admits as much when he expresses uncertainty about the proper place of Eastern Europe. What is worse, however, is the exclusion of Russia. When the Cold War ended, Russians not unreasonably thought they would be embraced by the West. Now they are being told that their expectations were misplaced, that they are not part of our civilization, that all they can hope for is "partnership." Let us not expect that they will be assuaged by assurances that the partnership will be equal. We in the United States had experience with the philosophy of "separate but equal," and we concluded that it was unworkable and hypocritical.

How should we expect the Russians to react when they are told, in effect, that everyone is equal on Europe's bus, but, because they are "Euro-Asians," they are to sit at the back?

We should not underestimate the effect of that attitude on the Russians. So far, NATO expansion is an obsession of elites. That situation could change once expansion occurs, however, especially if it is justified on a civilizational basis. "Polls and interviews with the 'ordinary Russians' suggest that the West may be suffering from a serious case of wishful thinking," says U.S. News & World Report. "A recent poll by the newspaper Moskovskiye Novosti found that 51 percent of Russians viewed NATO expansion as 'a serious threat' to Russia; only 14 percent disagreed."²⁹ Similarly, the Journal of Commerce recently noted that "the debate over expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is driving ordinary Russians, and opinion leaders in Moscow, to become more suspicious of the United States." An August 1997 public opinion poll "found 32 percent of Russians see the United States as a threat."³⁰

In short, if NATO expansion occurs in the present climate, we can expect a reaction from ordinary Russians. And we should not delude ourselves that a second cold war will be as manageable as the first. The first cold war was an elite affair, in which the leaders maneuvered for advantage in a great power contest. If cold war returns, it will be because ordinary Russians feel they have been betrayed. To be sure, Russia's power will be constrained, and its military reach will be limited, at least over the next decade or so. This is why the principal danger of NATO expansion lies not in Central Europe but in the Baltic states. They are close to Russia and they have large populations of ethnic Russians. If Europe is divided along lines of identity, those considerations will play a major role. If there are to be no gray areas, the Baltic states must be in one camp or another, and Havel's hesitation about including Eastern Europe in the Euro-Atlantic civilization demonstrates how fraught with peril such a division would be.

The Myth of Unstable Gray Zones

Perhaps the most curious argument put forward in favor of expanding NATO is the cliché that nature abhors a vacuum and that consequently there should be no "unstable" gray zones in Europe. That argument amounts to a repudiation of the 1955

Austrian State Treaty, which removed Soviet occupation troops from Austria on condition that Vienna adopt a policy of neutrality between the two blocs. It is difficult to see how rejection of that agreement would have benefited the Austrians. More to the point, it is hard to imagine how it would have improved European stability. After 1955 Austria simply was not an issue in the Cold War. Neither was Switzerland, nor Sweden. And although "Finlandization" became a derisive word in the West, neutral Finland also did not pose a threat to European stability.

The threat of war did not come from tensions involving the neutral gray zones; it came from the direct confrontation of the armed forces of the two major blocs, notably in Germany. NATO planners did not worry about a thrust through neutral buffer states; they worried about an attack through the Fulda gap, from East Germany into West Germany. And the most dangerous moments of the Cold War in Europe were crises, not over Helsinki or Vienna, but over West Berlin, an isolated Western city surrounded by forces of the other bloc.

In the name of spreading stability, NATO expansion would recreate the most unstable characteristic of the Cold War, the friction of two opposing armies confronting each other. Recognizing that problem, Polish president Alexander Kwasniewski recently acknowledged that "Poland wants to be in NATO, but does not want to be a front-line country exposed to all the consequences of an enlarged NATO and Russia, and its partners."³¹

Kaliningrad as Russia's West Berlin

Unfortunately, because Poland borders Kaliningrad, President Kwasniewski's wish cannot be realized. "The expansion of the NATO zone of responsibility to the East will create a situation similar to what we had during the Cold War, when the confronting groups of forces were deployed against each other and were maintained at a high level of combat readiness for attack," Col. Gen. Igor Rodionov, then Russia's defense minister, told a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Bergen, Norway, in September 1996. "The Russian forces deployed in the special Kaliningrad region will come in direct contact with the joint armed forces of NATO [in new NATO member Poland]."³²

Even worse, if the Baltic states are later included, the Berlin problem will literally be recreated, only in reverse, for Kaliningrad will then be separated from the rest

of Russia by NATO members. That helps to explain why the Russians are so hostile to the expansion of NATO into the Baltic states. If those states do become members of NATO, it is likely that the Russians will demand secure lines of communication from their main territory to Kaliningrad. The Russian press has already begun to complain that "Lithuania, with support from Latvia and Estonia, is artificially aggravating the problem of the Region by meddling with the transit of any Russian freights, especially military, via its own territory, and the Russian citizens' access to the Region."³³

For their part, Poland and Lithuania are very sensitive to the issue of transit. One Polish commentator has warned that any agreement with Russia on that issue could jeopardize Poland's chances of joining NATO. "This is a substantive argument," insists Marek Karp, director of the Center for Eastern Studies. Russia could tell NATO that "our military transport passes through Poland, and thus the presence of NATO in this zone threatens our transport lines, threatens our garrison in Kaliningrad."³⁴ But it is difficult to understand how the Baltic region could remain stable if Russia were not assured of some reliable land lines of communication with Kaliningrad, which must involve transit through either Poland or Lithuania.

Another issue is the presence of the Russian military garrison in Kaliningrad. "Russians explain the concentration of troops and military materiel in that region by the fact that they had nowhere to place the personnel and equipment after the pullout from the then German Democratic Republic," Bronislaw Geremek, recently appointed Polish foreign minister, noted in August 1996. "However, with more and more time passing and no changes in sight, this explanation hardly has a leg to stand on. . . . This immediately raises the question, Who is this military base aimed against? To counter what countries bordering Kaliningrad Oblast is the military power being amassed?" Geremek urged Europe to "raise the problem of demilitarization of Kaliningrad Oblast. From the standpoint of peace in Europe, the present situation is unacceptable."³⁵ But if the present situation is unacceptable, it is once again hard to see how NATO expansion will improve it, since the Russians have bluntly stated that their military presence in Kaliningrad then becomes even more important for their security. "In the context of the NATO enlargement," Russian security council head Ivan Rybkin has explained, "Kaliningrad region is becoming a key element of guaranteeing the security of

Russia and its ally Belarus."³⁶

A third area of concern is the border between Kaliningrad and Lithuania. On the surface, that issue was resolved in October 1997, when a border agreement was reached between the Lithuanian and Russian governments. Yet there are forces in both countries that oppose the agreement. The Russian Duma actually appealed to Yeltsin to reject the treaty. "The conclusion of a treaty on the state border between the Russian Federation and the Lithuanian Republic on the basis of the existing draft treaty would also lead to a worsening of the position of Kaliningrad Oblast, which is not linked to Russian territory by a land corridor," it warned. "Kaliningrad Oblast's position could deteriorate still further if Poland and Lithuania join NATO."³⁷ And in Lithuania, the nationalist Young Lithuanian Party also opposed the treaty, in part because it allowed Kaliningrad to remain part of Russia. "We reckon Lithuania should clearly stand for handing over of Karaliaucius [Kaliningrad] enclave to UN rule," urged party leader and member of parliament Stanislovas Buskevicius.³⁸ Thus, although the signing of the treaty is an encouraging sign, there exists the possibility that it could be challenged if the relationship between Lithuania and Russia sours in the future.

Because of such concerns, the desirability of further expanding NATO is already being questioned in the initial candidates for membership. "The real circus starts when more zealous U.S. planners take the program of NATO's eastern expansion seriously and also expand NATO responsibilities to the Russian-Estonian or Russian-Ukrainian borders," writes a commentator in a prominent Hungarian newspaper. "If NATO really takes the further expansion program seriously, tensions could develop in the Baltic or in Ukraine and, as fresh NATO members, we will also have to participate in dealing with these tensions, whether we like it or not."³⁹

People who think that problem will be manageable, just as fighting was avoidable during the Cold War, should recollect that Berlin is not the only precedent. Germany's pretext for war against Poland in 1939 focused on Danzig, an ethnic German city then separated from the German heartland by Polish territory. The ostensible reasons for war then were uncomfortably similar to the situation that exists today: the status of an enclave (then Danzig, now Kaliningrad) and the treatment of ethnic minorities (then Germans, now Russians). And it is no answer to say that Russia's complaints are insincere; even if that is correct, it is

irrelevant, for Hitler's complaints were unquestionably insincere. Indeed, if the complaints are insincere, that is even more worrisome, because it means they cannot be resolved.

The more probable danger, however, is a confrontation arising out of a genuine misperception. "The danger inherent in political games around the Baltic states is that both NATO and Russia will have to bluff to reach their aims, and may misinterpret the intentions of each other and thus provoke a conflict," argues a Russian commentator.⁴⁰ A proponent of NATO expansion provides a scenario for one such misunderstanding. "At least some Russian leaders are likely to increase pressure on Vilnius for a special transit regime to allow Moscow to resupply its Kaliningrad region," writes Paul Goble of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. "And they may be counting on Western understanding of Moscow's position to add to that pressure."⁴¹

Kaliningrad, the Baltics, and the Nuclear Threshold

When the Cold War ended, people around the world breathed a sigh of relief, believing that the danger of a nuclear catastrophe had passed. Unfortunately, NATO expansion is raising that danger to new heights. In the first place, it is lowering the nuclear threshold on both sides. "In the prevailing adverse conditions, Russia cannot ignore the overwhelming superiority of the potential adversary, even taking all its CIS allies into account," writes a Russian general in the Independent Military Review. "Therefore, a stronger adversary can be forced to cease his aggression on conditions acceptable to Russia only by lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. This is the logic of deterrence."⁴² An article in a Polish newspaper has graphically outlined the danger:

Thus, the Russians speak of reinforcing their troops on the Western border, aiming nuclear missiles at the [future] new member countries of NATO, deploying nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad Oblast, and breaking off talks on conventional and strategic disarmaments. It is hardly conceivable that planning by the Russian military, who are mentally accustomed to treat NATO as the main enemy, does not provide for carrying out some of these threats. I think that we should consider the possibility of becoming a target of Russian

missiles with nuclear warheads, owing not so much to our automatically becoming one of potential military enemies as to the current weakness of the conventional armed forces of the Russian Federation. . . . The status of Kaliningrad still remains unclear. . . . But any plan for turning Kaliningrad into a significant [conventional] military factor in Europe will remain unrealistic so long as military transports to that enclave run across sovereign countries, which moreover aspire to membership in NATO (Lithuania). In this situation, the only way of turning Kaliningrad into a territory that matters, given the prospects for extending NATO to Poland, is to deploy nuclear weapons there. Such weapons had anyhow been deployed there during the cold war era (short- and medium-range missiles of the Baltic Fleet, mounted on submarines and missile cruisers). It is noteworthy that such a measure does not entail substantial financial outlays, in contrast with the attempts to deploy troops in the western military districts of the Russian Federation.⁴³

Even worse, just as NATO expansion would impel the Russians to lower the nuclear threshold, including the Baltic states would have the same effect on NATO. "A representative of the Pentagon, with whom Rzeczpospolita had a chance to talk, said bluntly that NATO would 'have difficulties defending' the region of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia," the Polish newspaper reported last November.⁴⁴ A prominent American expert is even more blunt. "If, for example, NATO is expanded to include the Baltic states, no conventional defense would be possible," former defense secretary James Schlesinger told Congress in October 1997. "If we were to fulfill a commitment to provide protection, we would be driven back to threatening a nuclear response to a conventional attack, a commitment from which we have only recently escaped."⁴⁵ It is an indication of how bizarre the debate over NATO expansion has become that apparently neither Schlesinger nor the Wall Street Journal, in which his testimony was excerpted, thought a return to the horrible situation from which we had just recently escaped was something we should try to avoid.

The other nuclear danger, which is more threatening because it is more urgent, is environmental. Russian territory adjoining Scandinavia is a nuclear dumping ground, especially for old nuclear submarines that have been taken

out of service. "The big problem is the subs that have already sunk," notes physicist Mikael Jensen of the Swedish Radiation Protection Institute. "Nothing is leaking out yet but this is not a storage facility, it's a graveyard for sunken subs. It's just a matter of time before they start to leak."⁴⁶ Significantly, the Russians themselves do not seem to dispute that assessment. "Unless proper steps are taken, a radiation disaster will become inevitable in Northern Europe," flatly concludes an article in the journal Science and Life. "These problems cannot be solved with existing Russian and foreign technology."⁴⁷

Recognizing the seriousness of the problem, Russia has invited NATO's assistance in seeking a solution.⁴⁸ NATO's further expansion to the east, however, could jeopardize this incipient cooperation. "Bringing the alliance's powerful military grouping closer to our borders will certainly cause a defensive reaction and a diversion of funds for military measures, possibly at the expense of those earmarked for the disposal and destruction of chemical and other weapons," argues Lt. Gen. L. G. Ivashov in Military Thought. "This will not add to Europe's security."⁴⁹

In other words, far from enhancing the security of Europe, NATO expansion will endanger it. The security of the Baltic states will be especially compromised. At the present time, the Russian military presence in Kaliningrad has been significantly reduced. "Only an extremely truncated Baltic Fleet, and individual ground units deployed near Kaliningrad defend the Western reaches of Russia," reports Moscow News. "The strategic defense system of the Western sector that once existed is now a thing of the past."⁵⁰ The Russian government has just announced a reduction in military forces in the Baltic area, and a Russian diplomat has told me informally that, in his personal opinion, Russia would be amenable to the virtual demilitarization of Kaliningrad in the absence of NATO expansion. It is difficult to see how the security of the Baltic states would be better protected by a nuclear threat on which we almost certainly would not make good (and which probably would lead to the annihilation of the very countries we were "protecting" if we did) than by the withdrawal of Russian forces, the forces they regard as most threatening, from adjoining territory.

In their debate over NATO expansion, members of the Senate should recognize that they are not debating the admission of merely three new members. Promises have been given that the first shall not be the last. In particular,

as we have seen, the Baltic states have been given assurances of membership. Unless we mean to see this process through, unless we are convinced that further expansion is in our interest, we should not start down that road.

We have, after all, been here before. Proponents of expansion say NATO has already expanded, with Spain and Greece and Turkey. They are right, but their analysis is not complete. The real expansion of NATO--or at least of the kind of collective defense it symbolized--was CENTO and SEATO, and those ventures did not turn out so well, in part because the debates over replicating the NATO model were not conducted seriously. As the late secretary of state Dean Rusk put it in his memoirs, I was amazed, even dismayed, by the casual way the Senate ratified the SEATO Treaty. Senate debate was limited, and unlike the NATO case, there was little public discussion. No one really stopped to think what an American commitment to collective security on the Asian mainland might mean.⁵¹

The result, of course, was Vietnam, and in that case we realized our mistake only after tens of thousands of Americans had died. The Senate should recall that experience as it considers NATO expansion.

Notes

The author gratefully acknowledges the contribution of Nerijus Udrenas to the preparation of this paper.

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