Did NATO's Expansion Cause the Escalation Culminating in Russia's War on Ukraine?

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George Kennan, the architect of Cold War containment strategy, wrote in a New York Times article back in 1997, that NATO expansion would be “the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era.” He went on to predict that it would “inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion” and “restore the atmosphere of the Cold War to East-West relations” (Kennan, 1997). Almost thirty years later, Russian President Vladimir Putin cited NATO’s eastward expansion (particularly Ukraine’s preliminary steps toward membership) as the principal justification for the February 2022 invasion. This, in turn, raises the critical question: Did NATO expansion cause Russia’s war on Ukraine?

The answer to this question is neither denial nor simple affirmation. NATO expansion did not cause Russia’s 2022 invasion in a single causal sense, but it contributed significantly to escalation by exercising multiple, intersecting forms of power that shaped the conditions under which conflict became highly probable. Expansion violated realist security imperatives that Russia would predictably resist (Mearsheimer, 2001). It also created cumulative brinkmanship dynamics that raised war risk incrementally beyond either side’s full control (Schelling, 1960). It generated dangerous ambiguity about Western commitments and limits that invited miscalculation (Miskel, 2002).

Rather than operating through a single causal mechanism, these three dynamics (security threat, brinkmanship, and ambiguity) worked simultaneously to make escalation increasingly probable.

The first mechanism through which NATO expansion contributed to escalation operates through what realists call the *security dilemma* and the defense of vital spheres of influence. Mearsheimer argues that great powers inevitably compete for security in an anarchic international system, and that they view regional hegemony (dominance over their geographical neighbors) as essential to survival. For great powers, the presence of rival military alliances near

their borders represents an existential threat, regardless of those alliances' stated defensive intentions. According to this logic, states must respond to the capabilities of potential adversaries, not just their intentions, because intentions can change rapidly while capabilities do not (Mearsheimer, 2001). Applied to the NATO expansion, realist theory predicts that Russia would perceive eastward enlargement as a fundamental security threat and would resist it, potentially through military means, as the alliance approached areas Russia considers vital to its strategic depth.

Russia's geography reinforces this security imperative. Lacking natural barriers such as mountain ranges or large bodies of water on its western borders, Russia has historically relied on buffer zones and territorial depth to defend against invasion. President Putin has explicitly invoked this history, claiming that Russia rightfully deserves a sphere of influence in its near abroad (the former Soviet republics that provide strategic depth). Whether one accepts the legitimacy of this claim, realist theory suggests that Russia's leaders would predictably view NATO's approach to these territories as a threat to core security interests.

NATO has had three post-Cold War waves of expansion: First, in 1999 when Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined. Next in 2004 with the Baltic states including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (which had been Soviet republics). And finally in 2008 when it was declared that Ukraine and Georgia would become members, although no timeline was specified. Each expansion moved Western military infrastructure closer to Russia's borders and integrated former Soviet allies or republics into a military alliance Russia views as fundamentally hostile. From a realist perspective, this represented not merely a political rebuff but a material shift in the strategic balance of power in Europe.

In terms of Barnett and Duvall's taxonomy, NATO expansion exercised compulsory power: the relations of interaction of direct control by one actor over the conditions of existence and/or the actions of another (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, pp. 48-49). While NATO did not directly

attack Russia or issue ultimatums, expansion placed military infrastructure, including air bases, missile defense systems, etc. progressively closer to Russian borders. This created what realists call a commitment problem. Even if NATO members genuinely intended the alliance to be purely defensive, Russia could not be certain that NATO would not use its forward position for offensive purposes in a future crisis. As noted by Barnett and Duvall, compulsory power operates through the material resources that enable an actor to do so and that work whether or not the object of the power's application approves (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, pp. 49-50).

While realist theory explains why Russia would resist NATO expansion as a security threat, it does not fully explain how the expansion process created escalatory dynamics that made war increasingly probable over time. Thomas Schelling's concept of the threat that leaves something to chance, he argues that the most effective and credible threats are often not those where an actor commits definitely to a course of action, but rather those where an actor creates a shared risk that neither party can fully control (Schelling, 1960, pp. 187-188). In brinkmanship, the threatener does not simply promise to retaliate if a red line is crossed. Instead, they create a situation in which the final decision is not altogether under the threatener's control (Schelling, 1960, pp. 199-201). The threat works because there is a genuine uncertainty about whether the threatened action will occur in that both parties recognize that events might spiral beyond anyone's full control.

Schelling's logic suggests that the West may have genuinely believed each expansion decision was manageable and controllable, yet still created dynamics where war became more probable. Schelling emphasizes that brinkmanship works through a threat that the situation may get out of hand rather than through deliberate intention to follow through on the threats (Schelling, 1960, p. 199). Western leaders likely did not intend to provoke a Russian invasion of Ukraine. They may have calculated that each expansion wave would produce Russian protests but no military response. However, Schelling's framework reveals the flaw in this reasoning in

that in brinkmanship, “the threat is not quite of the form “I may or may not, according as I choose,” but has an element of “I may or may not, and even I can’t be altogether sure” (Schelling, 1960, p. 188). The cumulative process of expansion created conditions in which neither NATO nor Russia fully controlled. This ambiguity about NATO’s commitment to Ukraine points to a deeper problem in Western policy which is the failure to clearly define vital interests and communicate credible limits.

Miskel argues that foreign policy is most effective when national interests are defined with precision, yet policymakers routinely resort to vague formulations that “mean all things to all people” and fail to provide actual guidance for strategic decision-making (Miskel, 2002, p. 104). When national interests are articulated through ambiguous catchphrases rather than specific commitments, the result is often miscalculation by adversaries who must guess what actions will trigger retaliation and what actions will be tolerated.

Miskel’s analysis of a previous foreign policy disaster illuminates the consequences of such ambiguity. He discusses Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s January 1950 speech excluding South Korea from the U.S. defense perimeter in Asia, which North Korea and the Soviet Union interpreted as a green light for invasion (Miskel, 2002, p. 100). The result was the Korean War, a conflict that cost millions of lives and which might have been avoided if U.S. commitments had been clearly defined. NATO expansion created a similar dynamic in that Western leaders never clearly stated where expansion would stop or what would trigger military response. The alliance’s official position of an open-door policy and that each country decides for itself was diplomatically flexible but strategically dangerous. Without clear answers, both Russia and potential NATO members were left to guess at Western resolve.

This analysis does not claim that NATO expansion was the sole or even primary cause of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Alternative explanations deserve serious consideration. First, Putin may harbor imperial ambitions to rebuild Russian hegemony over former Soviet territories

regardless of NATO's action. In 2021, he wrote an essay titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" and in it had repeated assertions that Ukraine is not a *real* country. This suggests ideological motivations independent of security concerns. Second, the Ukrainian people exercised sovereign agency in choosing Western orientation through democratic processes, notably in the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2014 Euromaidan protests. Russia has no legitimate right to veto the foreign policy choices of an independent state. Last, Russia's violation of the formal 1994 Budapest Memorandum (which Russia pledged not to use force against Ukraine in exchange for Kyiv giving up its nuclear weapons) while simultaneously complaining about informal verbal assurance regarding NATO expansion suggests Putin is acting in bad faith and using expansion as a convenient pretext.

These alternative explanations do not disprove the argument advanced in this essay. They add necessary complexity. The central question here is not whether NATO expansion alone caused the war but whether expansion contributed significantly to the escalatory conditions under which war became probable. The theoretical frameworks examined here demonstrate that it did, through multiple intersecting mechanisms that operated simultaneously to shape the conditions in which both Russia and the West made decisions. Through the lens of a realist theory, expansion violated Russia's perceived security imperative by systematically eroding its buffer zone and placing Western military infrastructure progressively closer to its borders, exercising what Barnett and Duvall identify as compulsory power (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). Through Schelling's framework of brinkmanship, the incremental nature of expansion created shared risk that spiraled beyond either side's full control, with each wave appearing manageable to Western policymakers while cumulatively creating a trajectory toward conflict (Schelling, 1960). Through Miskel's analysis of ambiguous national interests, the West's failure to clearly define where expansion would stop or what would trigger military response created a dangerous uncertainty that invited miscalculation on both sides (Miskel, 2002).

The tragedy of NATO expansion is not that it was intended to provoke war, but that by exercising multiple forms of power without fully recognizing or controlling their cumulative effects, it created conditions in which escalation to war became increasingly difficult to avoid.

References

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