A short history of NATO eastward expansion and the current tensions in Europe

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U.S. Army M1A2 Abrams battle tanks arrived in Estonia in 2017 as part of

NATO's Operation Atlantic Resolve.

Europe stands closer to all out war than at any time since WWII. It is imperative that the Western left fully understands the global geopolitical significance of the escalations currently taking place. Of course, the principal struggle which the U.S. is conducting is with China, and it is this that structures all other major world events. In the event of a major struggle with one adversary, the intelligent tactic would be to create and exploit divisions within that adversary's system of alliances. In this case, by far the most important geostrategic ally of China is Russia.

However, the tactics pursued by the U.S. over the past decade have amounted to the solidification of the Sino-Russian relationship. This curious way of proceeding can only be understood in terms of the very narrow limits placed on the room for maneuver by the U.S.'s prior project of encircling Russia. The principal instrument of this encirclement in Europe is NATO. And contrary to what is discussed in the Western media, it is the expansion of NATO to the east, to include first the countries of the former Warsaw Pact, and now the attempt to incorporate some former Soviet republics. Fig.1 shows NATO member states and their proximity to Russia. Note that the incorporation of Ukraine and Georgia, both of which are candidates for membership, would bring NATO right up to Russia's borders to join Latvia and Estonia. Moreover, given the attempt at regime change in Belarus in 2021 which if successful would probably have led to a government favorable to NATO candidacy, it is clear that Russia has legitimate security concerns.

Fig. 1: NATO member states.

It is instructive to summarize the stages in the planning and execution of this eastward expansion. A detailed summary of the early assurances against NATO expansion given by leading diplomats derived from declassified documents is given in the [National Security Archive](#).

In early February 1990, U.S. leaders made an offer. According to transcripts of meetings in Moscow on Feb. 9, then-Secretary of State James Baker suggested to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eduard Shevardnadze, that in exchange for cooperation on German reunification the U.S. could make "iron-clad guarantees" that NATO would not expand "one inch eastward." Less than a week later, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev agreed to begin reunification talks. After discussing the issue

with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl on February 24-25, the U.S. gave the former East Germany "special military status," limiting what NATO forces could be stationed there in deference to the Soviet Union.

However, by March 1990 – only one month after Baker's agreement with Shevardnadze – State Department officials were advising Baker that NATO could finesse Eastern Europe into the U.S.'s orbit. By October, U.S. policymakers were contemplating whether and when (as a National Security Council memo put it) to "signal to the new democracies of Eastern Europe NATO's readiness to contemplate their future membership."

The promise was [reiterated](#) in 1993 when the Partnership for Peace Program was proposed as a U.S. initiative at the meeting of NATO defense ministers in Travemünde, Germany, on October 20–21, 1993. In her [memoirs,](#) Madeleine Albright confirmed that the pro-expansion decision was reached in June 1993. Yeltsin was still in his first term as President of the Russian Federation. Indeed, in 1993 Yeltsin told Polish President Lech Walesa "Russia does not oppose Poland's membership in NATO and does not perceive its membership in NATO as a threat to Russia." [However](#), 'Under pressure from opposition within Russia, this informal declaration was retracted the following month, and Yeltsin wrote in October that NATO expansion violated the spirit of the 1990 agreement'.

Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic were invited to join NATO at its Madrid summit in 1997 and became full members in 1999. In 2004, during the George W. Bush presidency, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia joined, and Bush made an unsuccessful attempt to gain the membership of Georgia and Ukraine. In 2009 Albania and Croatia joined, in 2017 Montenegro became a member, and in 2020 North Macedonia became a member. The invitation to Georgia to join was a factor in the Georgian decision to attack South Ossetia in 2008 igniting the Russo-Georgian war of the same year. Incidentally, it is interesting

to note that a pro-Western government came to power in Georgia following the so called 'rose revolution'.

George W. Bush's successful push to expand NATO to include the Baltic republics, and his even more brazen though unsuccessful effort to gain membership for Georgia and Ukraine at the Bucharest NATO summit greatly antagonized Russia. This promise of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, was forestalled only by the opposition of Germany and France on the grounds that it would unnecessarily antagonize Russia, nevertheless encouraged Georgia to provoke a war with Russia by attacking South Ossetia. The background to the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 is the 'rose revolution' of 2003, which [replaced the pro Russian government of Eduard Shevardnadze with the pro-Western government of Mikheil Saakashvili](). This regime change occurred with the assistance of the suspension of aid by the IMF and U.S., and the active participation of some 4000 mostly foreign funded NGOs, including USAID, and which closely followed the model of the Serbian 'bulldozer revolution' which led to the [overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic]() on 5 October, 2000.

The model of regime change which led to the overthrow of pro Russian governments in Serbia and Georgia was further pursued by the Obama administration in Ukraine, building on the 'orange revolution' of 2004-5 and culminating in the Maidan uprising which overthrew the pro Russian government of Viktor Yanucovych in 2014 as a result of his refusal to sign a political association and free trade agreement with the EU. The overthrow of the Yanucovych government was accompanied by a purge of civil servants associated with the former government and a de-russification of the country. That is what has led to the current long standing internal civil struggle between the predominantly Ukrainian and predominantly Russian regions of the country (see Fig.2).

Fig. 2: Locations of the predominantly Russian speaking populations of Ukraine.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the NATO military alliance has extended its borders 800 miles to the east, incorporating Poland, Hungary, Czechia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia. In 2021, NATO officially recognized Ukraine itself as an "aspiring member," and Sweden and Finland are also considering joining the anti-Russia alliance. Both Finland and Estonia are less than 200 kilometers (125 miles) from St. Petersburg, and Ukraine's eastern border is less than 750 kilometers (465 miles) from Moscow. The current strategic situation facing Russia is shown in Fig.3.

Fig. 3: the western border of Russia currently threatened by the proposal to admit Georgia and Ukraine into NATO.

In addition to the already accomplished eastward expansion of NATO and the proposed additions of Ukraine and Georgia, it is also necessary to account for the failed attempts to overthrow the pro-Russian governments of Belarus in 2021, and Kazakhstan earlier this year. Had these attempts been successful it is extremely probable that there would be moves to incorporate these additional states into NATO. This would accomplish a complete encirclement of Russia on its European and central Asian borders. The cases of Ukraine and Georgia are particularly sensitive since membership of NATO means that states are covered by NATO's mutual defense article. Therefore Ukraine would be encouraged to retake Crimea

and the Donbas by force and Georgia would be encouraged to retake Abkhazia by force secure in the knowledge that if Russia intervenes they would have the protection of the other NATO powers. This would deprive Russia of access to the black sea.

As can be seen from the above, the current heightened tension has been building for some time, and results directly from Western deceptions around NATO expansion at the moment of the dissolution of the U.S.SR, which are intensified by the present day geopolitical confrontation between the Western powers and the Eurasian Bloc led by China and Russia. For instance, Fig.4 shows an excerpt from a speech given by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in 2018.

6 November **2018**, Lavrov:

"As for NATO's military activities on our borders, Russia is worried about this because it is creating a threat to our security.

They crudely violate the Russia-NATO Founding Act that compels the parties to abstain from permanently deploying significant armed forces on the territory of new members.

We are seeing brigades deployed in the Baltics and the US global missile defence system in Romania and Poland. Polish leaders have come up with an initiative to permanently deploy US divisions on a base on their territory.

It is clear that all **steps undertaken by our NATO colleagues to build up their infrastructure and military presence on Russia's borders are bound to cause reciprocal measures, primarily in the military technical area**.

However, this does not mean that we are interested in escalating tension.

Quite the contrary, **we are suggesting that they back their interest in de-escalating tension by practical actions** and, to begin with, resume full-fledged contacts between the militaries.

Regrettably, **our NATO colleagues are trying to avoid this subject but I believe that eventually reality will compel them to do this**."

Fig. 4: Excerpt from a speech by Sergei Lavrov. Taken from a twitter post by

@Laurie_Meadows

Source: Socialist Action Britain