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NATO ENLARGEMENT AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE COLD WAR

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the United States not only sought to preserve the NATO alliance but also supported its eastward enlargement. Beginning in 1999, NATO welcomed new member states; most were from the former Soviet bloc. America's support for NATO enlargement deserves scrutiny. Why did the United States support NATO enlargement even when the Cold War had ended? To answer such a question is to uncover the rationale behind America's decision. This is what this research aims to do. Utilizing the publicly available archival materials from the administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton and through a review of the scholarly literature, we argue that the U.S. decision to support NATO enlargement is largely consistent with the basic premise of offensive realism: that states are acutely aware of uncertainty and that they seek to maximize their power for security reasons. Notwithstanding the presence of liberal ideals, America's support for NATO enlargement, in other words, did have sound strategic rationale.

Keywords: NATO enlargement, U.S. foreign policy, offensive realism

INTRODUCTION

The period between 1989 and 1991 was widely regarded as a period of profound changes in world politics. Beginning in 1989, the region of Central and Eastern Europe was in flux. Throughout the Soviet Bloc, communist governments' grip on power was shaking. At the same time, there were waves of protest and pro-democracy movements throughout the region. At this point in history, the Soviet Union had been undergoing reforms mainly due to its declining economic well-being. As a result, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev ultimately decided not to intervene to restore communist control. The Soviets' decision ultimately sealed the fate of communist governments of central and eastern Europe, symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. By the 1990s, it was increasingly clear that the postwar bipolar order was shattering. The Cold War was coming to an end with the reunification of Germany and eventually the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was truly a monumental change in world history, as U.S. President George H. W. Bush recognized in 1992, "For in the past 12 months, the world has known changes of almost biblical proportions" (Bush, 1992). He continued that while he had not fully absorbed the whole situation, "But communism died this year." The president went on to declare American victory in the Cold War. Indeed, President Bush was right in recognizing the magnitude of the change that brought about the end of the Cold War.

Scholars and historians alike have also recognized that the end of the Cold War was a world-historical moment (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008; Ikenberry, 2001; Brands, 2025; Cronin, 2023). For once, the decades-long superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union that had come to define the postwar period came to an end without a major war breaking out (Ikenberry, 2001). Power transitions, historically, have never been easy. Yet, the Cold War ended, to the surprise of many, peacefully. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States stood at the height of global power. Never before has one state acquired the level of power preponderance that the United States acquired in the immediate years after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Wohlforth, 1999; Ikenberry et al., 2011). Furthermore, this also meant that the United States faced no immediate geopolitical threat in Europe. No country, not even the widely recognized successor to the Soviet Union, Russia, had the capability to challenge Washington's primacy in the international system.

Charles Krauthammer (1990) characterized this new post-Cold War international system as "the unipolar moment." "The center of world power," Krauthammer argued, "is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies." The United States had won the Cold War, and it was—for the time being—unchallenged.

The Cold War bipolar order, in other words, was shattered, a credit to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet, some were wondering what this would mean for NATO, which is a by-product of the Cold War rivalry. Some scholars predicted that NATO would eventually disentangle itself. The main underlying reason behind this prediction is rather straightforward: NATO was created to wage a cold war against the Soviet Union, and with the Soviet Union gone, there is nothing holding NATO together (Mearsheimer, 1990; Hellmann & Wolf, 1993). This prediction of the eventual disentanglement of the transatlantic alliance seemed to have stemmed from the notion that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States faced no potential hegemon; it is likely the United States will exit Europe, and with that, spur the emergence of a multipolar system in Europe.

Nonetheless, despite the rather pessimistic prediction regarding NATO, the alliance survived. Furthermore, not only has the NATO alliance remained intact, but it has also expanded beyond Western Europe. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has been admitting new member states, mostly from the former Soviet Bloc. In fact, in the decades that followed the end of the Cold War, NATO enlargement took place during four different periods spanning from the 1990s to the 2020s. The first period came in the late 1990s, specifically in 1999. That year, the alliance welcomed three new member states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union's sphere of influence: Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. The second period was in the 2000s. In 2004, the three Baltic states, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Romania were accepted into the alliance, followed by Albania and Croatia in 2009. Later, in 2017, in the third period of NATO enlargement, Montenegro acceded to NATO membership. Lastly, three new states were admitted in 2020: North Macedonia in 2020, Finland in 2023, and the alliance's newest member, Sweden, in 2024 (Mearsheimer, 2014). This proves that not only does NATO remain firmly intact, but it also enlarges, thus maintaining its central position in European geopolitics.

The question is then why? Why does NATO keep enlarging even if the

Cold War has ended? One of the possible answers is that it is because countries of Central and Eastern Europe wanted to join. After all, they know exactly what it meant being under the occupation of the Soviet Union, and with Russia still lurking in the background, they still have—understandably—the fear that Russia might return to its Soviet past. While this may be true, to a large extent, the enlargement of NATO could not have been possible without the support of the alliance patron and its most powerful member, the United States. Indeed, NATO is widely considered to be a geopolitical tool of the United States, notwithstanding the agency of its members. The United States had been supporting the extension of the alliance mainly to include new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, as Joshua Shifrinson (2023) noted, NATO enlargement became a central element in the wider context of U.S. foreign policy in post-Cold War Europe. Indeed, every U.S. president in the post-Cold War era witnessed the admission of new member states into the transatlantic alliance. U.S. policymakers made repeated cases in favor of incorporating new members, especially central and eastern European states, and thus, their support was a crucial element in why NATO admitted new members in the first place. This was especially the case with the 1999 period of enlargement, when Washington "successfully pushed its current NATO allies to invite the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to begin accession talks at the July 1997 Madrid Summit" (Shifrinson, 2023).

Once the role of the United States is recognized, a different question emerges: why did the United States support and even push for NATO enlargement? This question is especially puzzling since when the United States first decided that it wanted NATO to enlarge in the 1990s, it had no great power rival. No state was challenging the United States. To discover the reason(s) behind why the United States supported NATO enlargement, one needs to unravel the rationale of U.S. policymakers. This is precisely what this study aims to do. Specifically, our goal is to analyze U.S. foreign policy in the lead-up and after the end of the Cold War to try to find out the thinking behind the eventual decision to support NATO enlargement. That means examining U.S. foreign policy during the years of the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. In so doing, I seek to utilize the publicly available, mostly declassified, archival materials.

This research builds upon the frameworks and findings of previous

research on U.S. foreign policy and NATO enlargement. There are many excellent scholarly works on U.S. foreign policy that highlight its "maximalist" nature (Art, 2004; Jervis, 2009; Posen, 2014; Brands, 2018; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008; 2016, Mearsheimer, 2018). These groups of studies provided an important baseline upon which subsequent analysis on U.S. post-Cold War foreign policy can be built. On the specific issue of NATO enlargement, there are also important contributions already made by scholars. Kenneth Waltz (2000), for instance, wrote specifically about a realist perspective of NATO post-Cold War expansion. Waltz offers a structural perspective on what drives NATO expansion, which also highlights the role of unipolarity, particularly the absence of great power threats and thus external constraints on U.S. foreign policy choices (Waltz, 2000) Other works, while recognizing the role of the structural or external strategic environment, point to the influential role of domestic/unit-level variables such as domestic politics and ideology (Shifrinson, 2023; Mearsheimer, 2018; Walt, 2018a). In short, this is not the first study on U.S. foreign policy and its correlation with NATO enlargement.

Nonetheless, between this research and those that have preceded it, there are major differences. As is apparent, most studies incorporate the role of domestic-level variables in explaining U.S. foreign policy and NATO enlargement. Even realists such as John Mearsheimer (2018) and Stephen Walt (2018a), despite their mentioning of Washington's external environment, ultimately argued that domestic-level variables were relatively more powerful in driving U.S. foreign policy. This research, however, adopts a strictly structural realist view of NATO enlargement and U.S. foreign policy. In so doing, our aim is to show that the structure of the international system is sufficient enough to explain why the United States supported and pushed for NATO enlargement after the Cold War. Providing such a strictly structural argument is not without precedent. Christopher Layne (2003) has previously looked into NATO enlargement after the Cold War from an offensive realist perspective. Layne's study thus provided yet another insight, which our research will be built upon.

RESEARCH METHODS

Our purpose in this research is to solve the puzzle of why the United States supported NATO enlargement even after the Cold War had ended. In so doing, we rely extensively on both international relations theory, namely offensive realism,

and diplomatic history. IR theory provided the basic framework upon which analysis can be built. Offensive realism allows us to put forward hypotheses that will then be tested against the evidence. An examination of diplomatic history provided us with the means to test those hypotheses against the historical records. Specifically, this research utilizes the publicly available archival materials collected from sources online such as 1) the Wilson Center Digital Archive, particularly its Cold War International History Project; 2) the National Security Archives maintained by George Washington University; 3) the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum; and 4) the Clinton Presidential Library & Museum. Materials from these sources will be thoroughly analyzed and will be supplemented by a review of the scholarly literature.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Unipolarity and U.S. Foreign Policy Options After the Cold War

Compared to the post-1945 period, the post-Cold War produced a radically different international system. It was a unipolar system, where power is concentrated in only one great power: the United States (Wohlforth, 1999; Wang, 2020; Layne, 1993; Pape, 2005; Monteiro, 2011; 2014; Hansen, 2011). The world was no longer dominated by two opposing powers (for discussion on polarity see, for instance: Waltz, 1964; 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001; Grieco, 2007). Consequently, after the Cold War, this opened up a possibility for the United States to adopt a different grand strategic posture. Scholars such as Robert Art (2004), Nuno Monteiro (2011; 2014), and Stephen Brooks & William Wohlforth (2016) have laid out the grand strategic choices that emerged for Washington due to its newfound primacy in the international system. Indeed, a structural theory would predict that the United States, as the sole pole, would choose from three grand strategic postures. First is what scholars called disengagement. In the case of the United States, this means that Washington could return to its isolationist strategy of the pre-20th century era. Disengagement is theoretically possible since structural realism expects that states balance against a looming threat or a potential hegemon. Since the demise of the Soviet Union meant that Washington faced no such threat, it could theoretically employ an isolationist grand strategy and focus exclusively on its own region, the Western Hemisphere (Mearsheimer, 1990).

Second, and this is most widely suggested by realist scholars, is the

strategy of selective engagements, or, in a more realist term, offshore balancing. This grand strategic posture would require the United States not to fully disengage from the world but rather to set priority on the most strategically valuable regions (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016). What makes this grand strategic option different is that offshore balancing dictates buck-passing, that the United States should let nations of the three regions balance against potential hegemons and only intervene when it is necessary (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016; Posen, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2018). The third and last grand strategic option is essentially expansionism, defined as a strategy to expand one's relative power. Such expansionism has been characterized by various terms such as "offensive dominance strategy" (Monteiro, 2011; 2014), "deep engagement plus" (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016), "liberal hegemony" (Walt, 2018ab; Mearsheimer, 2018) and "primacy" (Onea, 2021). At its core, this strategy entails the United States exploiting its newly found primacy, expanding its relative power abroad, and "remaking the world in its own image" (Mearsheimer, 2018). All of these grand strategic options are both theoretically and practically possible under unipolarity, because the United States was largely unconstrained.

These three grand strategic options would then produce different grand strategic postures and international outcomes. For instance, with isolationism, the United States would withdraw, completely, its military presence in Europe and disengage itself from the matters of the continent. In other words, isolationism implies that the United States should basically leave Europe alone and not try to shape its future geopolitical trajectory. Moreover, isolationism also means that the United States leaves NATO. Thus, under such a scenario, Europe would return to "normality" as the Transatlantic Alliance would collapse and multipolarity would return (Mearsheimer, 2001b). This option was not simply a theoretical abstraction, as the United States had previously chosen to go down such a path after it had helped to defeat the Central Powers in World War I. If the United States opted for a grand strategy of offshore balancing, which is what most realists suggested, then Washington would still maintain a presence in Europe, albeit a scaled-back one. NATO could also remain intact, but the United States would demand that its allies take more of a role in defending their security and not rely completely on the United States. Furthermore, also as a consequence of offshore balancing, the United States would be unlikely to push

for the enlargement of the transatlantic alliance beyond its current borders. Lastly, if the United States chooses primacy, it entails the maximization of power and influence on the European continent. Primacy, in other words, is an expansionist and maximalist strategy designed to consolidate the gains the United States had obtained after the end of the Cold War and preserve them. The consequences of such an approach are not only the maintenance of the NATO alliance but also its enlargement.

Offensive Realism and U.S. Foreign Policy After the Cold War

Our model of offensive realism stresses the crucial role of uncertainty. Uncertainty, as briefly explained in chapter II, has been a persistent feature and an endemic problem in international politics. Uncertainty mainly stems from the problem of attaining information. In international politics, we argue, uncertainty revolves around two basic elements. First is about motives and intentions. Charles Glaser (2010) argued that motives concern what type of state one is in. State X can either have security motives or greedy motives. On the other hand, intentions involve whether state X is revisionist or status-quo oriented. Since offensive realism maintains that a state's ultimate goal and interest is security and its long-term survival, for the purpose of this research, I assume that state X is mainly motivated by security and could either have malign (revisionist) or benign (status quo) intentions. Second, states are also uncertain about the trajectory or trends in the distribution of power. Specifically, state X is uncertain whether state Y's power will be rising (or continue to rise) or declining (or start peaking and then declining). Furthermore, state X is also uncertain whether their own power trajectory will continue to be in their favor (Copeland, 2024). In each of these two main types of uncertainty, the level of uncertainty varies. Realists theorize that uncertainty is the underlying reason for interstate conflicts, as it incentivizes power-maximizing behavior. But why and how does uncertainty lead states to adopt power-maximizing policies?

Without reliable and accurate information, states in the international system mainly have expectations about other states' behavior in formulating their policies. Different expectations will naturally lead to different policies and behavior. If state X expects that state Y has greedy motives or revisionist intentions (or both), then state X will be very likely to take more hawkish, hard-line policy measures to increase its share of

relative power to try to ensure its long-term security (Copeland, 2024). Conversely, if state X expects state Y to be benign and is largely motivated by security concerns, it could lay the foundation for state X to engage state Y and adopt more cooperative policy measures (Glaser, 1996). Nonetheless, considering that international politics takes place in a highly uncertain world (Mearsheimer & Rosato, 2023), state X cannot accurately infer the nature of state Y (that is, whether state Y is indeed a security-motivated actor or a greedy, revisionist-oriented actor). Acknowledging that it is almost impossible to completely discern the nature of state Y, state X, offensive realism predicts, would be largely driven by the worst-case scenario thinking by simply assuming that state Y is motivated largely by greed and is willing to use force to pursue its greedy ends.

The level of uncertainty thus determines whether state X will employ assertive or cooperative policies toward state Y. Yet, while it is generally true that uncertainty ultimately leads states to act now rather than later in securing their position in the international system through the maximization of relative power, there are also tradeoffs. Such tradeoffs, however, are largely absent in the original formulation of offensive realism by Mearsheimer (2001). Still, recent works by Dale Copeland (2024), who emphasizes the "offensive realist baseline" of his dynamic realist theory, incorporated this concept in the wider systemic realist framework. As such, the notion of trade-offs will also be incorporated in this research to provide a more nuanced theoretical framework. In essence, the concept of trade-offs helps moderate the effects of uncertainty. Assuming that leaders and states are rational actors, in some instances, they recognized that hard-line, power-maximizing policies might lead to further deterioration of their external environment, which could make them less secure than otherwise might be. Viewed this way, states have rational inclinations to moderate their behavior even if they are still clouded by uncertainty surrounding other states' motives and intentions (Jervis, 1978; Glaser, 1996; 2010; Copeland, 2024). This is not to say, however, that states completely give up on pursuing additional increments of relative power. Rather, it shows that states have to be cautious in approaching power politics. Again, such a notion is at the heart of the offensive realism that assumes that states are rational actors, capable of calculating the costs and benefits of their actions (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Both of these concepts, uncertainty and tradeoffs, will have to be further incorporated into the concept of polarity, particularly unipolarity. How, then, does the concept of uncertainty and tradeoffs apply to unipolarity? On the one hand, some scholars argue that in a unipolar system, there is little—if not none—uncertainty, particularly with regard to the balance of power. William Wohlforth (1999) most famously put forward this line of thinking by arguing that since the system has one superpower, for the rest of the international system, there is little doubt who's the most powerful state. Furthermore, since there is a significant power gap between the unipole and the rest of the system units, other states have little doubt about what might happen if they pick a fight against the sole superpower. On the other hand, scholars have also pointed out how the uncertainty problem ultimately drives second-tier states to balance against the unipole. Nuno Monteiro (2014), for example, suggested that even as the unipole may not have revisionist, malign intentions, secondary powers may well decide that it is better to arm themselves to prepare for the worst since they cannot simply figure out the intentions of the unipolar power. While these two arguments have shown how the forces of uncertainty work under a unipolar system, what is unclear is the effects of uncertainty on the unipolar powers. Wohlforth and Monteiro's arguments work well if we seek to explain the behavior of secondary powers vis-à-vis the unipole. Yet, they cannot explain the behavior of the unipolar power. To solve this problem, one must further incorporate the notion of uncertainty into unipolarity.

The unipolar power, despite the substantial power gap between itself and the rest of the international system, still has to grapple with the uncertainty problem. In particular, the unipole faces two main dilemmas. First, it cannot be sure whether its primacy will last long or whether other states in the system will likely catch up in the near future. In other words, the unipole is uncertain about the trajectory or the trends in its own material power and the trends of other states' power. Second, assuming that other states will eventually rise and close the power gap, the unipolar power cannot be sure whether these new centers of power will adopt policies or behavior that are acceptable to the unipole. Or, in simple terms, the unipole is simply uncertain whether other states will become revisionist powers or not. Accordingly, offensive realism predicts that under such uncertainty, the unipolar power is expected to try to extend its power and influence as

a hedge against possible threats to its interests and security in the future. Indeed, this power-maximizing impulse will always be present regardless of the ideology of the unipolar power, given that offensive realism maintains that it is the structure of the international system that drives states to pursue more and more power after all. Nonetheless, the extent to which the unipole is willing to adopt hardline power-maximizing policies, that is, policies that are likely to spur international conflicts, will be determined by the assessment and expectations of the external strategic environment by policymakers inside the body politic of the unipolar power. We can expect a more cautious power-maximizing approach from the unipolar power if its leaders expect that the strategic environment will still be favorable to them. When the strategic environment is expected to become more restrictive, however, the unipolar power is likely to engage in hardline power-maximizing policies.

The End of the Cold War and Changes in the Global Balance of Power

The major unraveling of the bipolar Cold War order began in Eastern Europe. For decades since the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union had turned the region to suit its own interests. The Kremlin had satellite states, suppressed dissidents, and sustained communist authoritarian governments. Yet, in 1989, the Soviet Union's domination over the region was shaking. the ascendancy of democratic opposition movements was a trend throughout Eastern Europe, signaling that Communism's influence and, for that matter, Soviet influence were waning. What made it worse—for the Soviet Union—was that the leadership of the Kremlin was unwilling to intervene. Indeed, Soviet documents from the late 1980s revealed that the leadership recognized the seemingly structural shifts against the Soviet Union (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1989). Gorbachev himself has said in December 1988, that he was against the use of foce as an instrument of foreign policy in ("Gorbachev's UN Address, December 1988"). Then, in November 1989, the Berlin Wall, a symbol of the Cold War and of Soviet power and influence, came tumbling down. Gorbachev's foreign policy advisor, Anatoly Chernyaev, wrote that with the collapse of the wall, "This entire era in the history of the Socialist system is over" (Chernayaev, 1989).

Amidst this shifting global environment, the United States emerged clearly as the winning power. there was a

sense of optimism within the U.S. government. “We can plan our foreign policy with a high degree of confidence that the Soviet leadership’s preoccupation with internal reform will continue throughout the first Bush administration,” a February 1989 cable from the U.S. embassy in Moscow suggested (U.S. Department of State, 1989). Yet, Bush wasn’t entirely triumphant about these structural changes. His foreign policy approach was one of caution and prudence. “We are in a period of transition and uncertainty,” Bush recognized. “We will be vigilant, recognizing that the Soviet Union is still governed by authoritarian methods and that its powerful armed forces remain a threat to our security and that of our allies” (Bush, 1989. September 2).

The United States was also initially reluctant to engage the Soviet Union. In fact, the administration viewed that the Kremlin was undermining the U.S.-led containment strategy by trading concessions and that it was also uncertain what Gorbachev's real motives were behind the shift in Soviet foreign policy (Shifrinson, 2018). Nonetheless, the United States ultimately sought to cooperatively engaged the Soviet Union, albeit with terms that the president thought would have to be complied with by the Kremlin if there was to be further progress in U.S.-Soviet relations, as Bush stated in his national security directive (Bush, 1989, September 2). Moreover, the United States was determined to take advantages of rapidly changing international environment and of an increasingly dysfunctional Soviet Union (Brands, 2018). The president remained firmly committed to preserving and even extending America’s geopolitical dominance in the midst of rising challenges and uncertainties surrounding the Soviet Union.

The Rationale for Enlarging NATO.

The previous section laid out the changing international environment that the United States faced in the lead up to the end of the Cold War. In this section, we will analyze how the United States, under two administrations. sought to take the opportunities provided by the new international environment especially with regards to NATO. Under the Bush administration (1989-1993), the United States made no definitive decision to enlarge the North Atlantic Alliance. Nonetheless, the historical evidence from publicly available archival materials suggests that the Bush administration sought to expand America’s footprint in Europe through the preservation of the transatlantic alliance, which in effect

paved the way for subsequent enlargement. This was most clearly evident during the 1990 negotiation on the reunification of Germany. As we shall explain, throughout the negotiation period, policymakers in Washington were actively seeking to assert U.S. influence over the reunification of Germany and subsequently the remaking of post-Cold War European security architecture. This was done at the expense of the Soviet Union. NATO became an important tool for the Bush administration's efforts to expand America's power and influence over Europe. As we shall see, even as the United States informally offered the Soviet Union that NATO would not expand eastward in exchange for Soviet agreement on the reunification of Germany and the inclusion of a reunified Germany within NATO, policymakers in the United States were privately contemplating power-maximizing ambitions. The following explanation of the diplomacy surrounding the reunification of Germany and its correlation with NATO enlargement will be largely based on publicly available U.S. archival materials and secondary scholarly literature such as the works of Joshua Shifrinson (2016), Mary E. Sarotte (2014; 2021), Von Plato (2016), and Spohr (2020), among others.

Bush, German Reunification and NATO

German reunification was arguably an inevitable consequence of a series of events developing throughout central and eastern Europe in the 1980s. Throughout that period, as previously explained, momentous changes were taking place that would soon spell the eventual end of Central and Eastern European Communism, the Soviet Union, and, of course, the Cold War. Much of the changes can be attributed to the decline of Soviet power in the region. Furthermore, amidst the rising revolt against pro-Soviet communist governments across the region, the Kremlin leadership under Gorbachev refused to intervene, thus giving even more momentum to the anti-communist movements. Overall, in the 1980s, Central and Eastern Europe went into political turmoil, and it seemed like the political order was up for grabs.

The German question began to gain international momentum when, on May 2, 1989, the Hungarian government began to dismantle its barbed wire border with Austria (Savranskaya et al., 2010). Then, on 9 November 1989, the Berlin Wall, a symbol of the Cold War, came down. Initially, the Soviet Union and also countries of Western Europe were reluctant to rush the issue of reunification, as was the United States under the Bush

Administration (Miles, 2020). For the Soviets, it was no surprise, since East Germany was part of their sphere of influence. Reunification could lead them to lose East Germany. For countries of Western Europe, they were worried about the geopolitically destabilizing effects a reunified Germany could have on the European balance of power.

The United States, for their part, were also initially cautious. President Bush preferred caution, restraint, and prudence (Sarotte, 2021; The White House, 1989, September 21). Nonetheless, the administration recognized the magnitude and possibility of change in the region (Bush, 1989, February 15). Still, the Bush Administration had no interest in rushing the process. In an October phone call (before the fall of the Berlin Wall) with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Bush stated that "We are trying to react very cautiously and carefully to change in the GDR" (The White House, 1989, October 23; 1989; 1989, November 19; Brands, 2016a; Sarotte, 2021; Zelikow & Rice, 1995). Later, the President also made it clear to Gorbachev that the United States would be cautious in approaching the German question (The White House, 1989, December 2a; The White House, 1989, December 2b).

Nonetheless, the Bush administration, despite its cautious approach, had foreseen the development inside Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall (Hutchings, 2008). The President, unlike his Soviet, British, and French counterparts, made it clear that the United States would be supporting German reunification. When Bush met Gorbachev at the Malta Summit, the President defended the idea of reunification (The White House, 1989, December 2; 1989, December 3). The President also said to Helmut Kohl over dinner before the NATO December 1989 Summit, "Go ahead. I'm with you completely" (Sarotte, 2021). American support for German reunification was part of what policymakers in Washington called an effort to make Europe "whole and free," which could not be separated from the German question (Baker, 1989, December 2). However, what made supporting German reunification strategically important was the thinking that U.S. interests on the continent can be best served through an active policy to shape and guide the reunification process. U.S. policymakers were well aware of the need to include the Four Powers that occupied West and East Germany. Still, the Americans were thinking about how they could secure gains and, in particular, how

to prevent the Soviet Union from taking on the advantages. American policymakers were also concerned about the possibility of West Germany striking a deal with the Soviet Union that would jeopardize American influence (Enge, 2017). Thus, for the United States, it was crucial that a reunified Germany maintain its commitment to the Western alliance, particularly to NATO (Bush & Scowcroft, 1999).

The West Germans, however, were cautious about extending NATO jurisdiction to the territory of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher said that such extension will not happen (U.S. Department of State, 1990, February 1). U.S. policymakers were initially agreed to such a proposal (Sarotte, 2021. In fact, Secretary of State James Baker said to Gorbachev that "there would be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east" if reunified Germany becomes a NATO member (U.S. Department of State, 1990, February 9a; 1990, February 9b; The Gorbachev Foundation, 1990, February 9).

To try to navigate the negotiation process, the United States came out with the Two-Plus-Four formula, which mandated the two Germanies, West and East, to make a settlement on the internal/domestic aspects of reunification, while the Four Major Powers, the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France negotiated the external/international aspects of reunification. James Baker believed that the proposal would also serve to prevent West Germany from getting a deal with the Soviet Union independent from the United States and the West, as the Americans feared that a deal between West Germany and the Soviet Union, without their involvement, might undermine America's interests and influence over the region (Sarotte, 2021).

However, while Baker's proposal was somewhat well received by Gorbachev, officials in the U.S. government were skeptical of the practicality of not extending NATO's jurisdiction over the territory of East Germany. President Bush himself sent a letter to Kohl on the very same day that the meeting between Baker, Shevardnadze, and Gorbachev took place, which sought to clarify the U.S. position regarding the status of a reunified Germany. In that letter, Bush stated that the United States would like to see a reunified Germany inside NATO and that the territory of East Germany would be given "special military status." In addition, the president also wrote that NATO would take on a more

political rather than military role (Spohr, 2014; Shifrinson, 2016). For the rest of the negotiation process, the United States would adopt this new stance on the status of Germany, as American policymakers were not interested in the notion of pan-European institutions (The Gorbachev Foundation, 1990, May 18). The United States continued to stress that they would like to see Germany inside NATO. While the Soviets were reluctant to accept such a proposal, a series of assurances from Western leaders ultimately led to Gorbachev, in July 1990, conceding that a reunified Germany would be a member of NATO with a 3- to 4-year transition period (National Security Archive, 1990, July 15; Baker, 1990; The Gorbachev Foundation, 1990, May 18; The Gorbachev Foundation, 1990, May 31; The White House, 1990, July 17a; The White House, 1990, July 17b; Sarotte, 2010).

The evidence shows that the United States made assurances to the Soviet Union that their interests would be taken seriously and offered concessions. Notwithstanding the efforts to assure the Soviet Union and the offering of concessions, the United States was, from the beginning, interested in maximizing its power and influence vis-a-vis the Soviet Union and over Europe's security architecture. As shown, there were three main ways in which the United States sought to seal its dominance over Europe. First, the United States wanted to preserve NATO and its relevance despite the new geopolitical realities. The Bush administration had always believed in the importance of the NATO alliance and linked NATO with the overall U.S. presence in Europe (The White House, 1990, February 24; The White House, 1990, April 19). Second, the United States was not willing to let the Soviet Union gain at their expense (The White House, 1989, March 1; U.S. Department of State, 1989, November 29). Specifically, on the German question, the U.S. policymakers wanted a process and outcome that suited American interests. In fact, policymakers in Washington believed that a reunified Germany, particularly inside NATO, would be favorable to the United States after all (The White House, 1989, December 3; U.S. Department of State, 1990, February 21; Strong, 2020; Engel, 2013). Third and relatedly, the United States did want to limit future possibilities of NATO being expanded eastward to Central and Eastern Europe (Bush, 1989, February 15).

The Clinton Administration and NATO Enlargement

Bill Clinton inherited a radically different international system. When Clinton took office, the Cold War had come to a definitive end and the Soviet Union dissolved in December 1991. In its place emerged the Russian Federation, a country that was apparently willing to cooperate with the West and seeking integration with the wider international community. The United States was the undisputed superpower leading a unipolar system. Foreign policy-wise, Bill Clinton inherited an America that had secured its place on the European continent through the continuation of its military presence and, of course, NATO. In short, the international system was relatively more benign compared to what the United States had confronted during the decades-long Cold War (Slocombe, 2011). The question was then what to do with this more benign strategic environment and with the gains America had made?

The Clinton administration came up with a strategy of "Engagement and Enlargement." Considering that geopolitical fluctuation, particularly across Eastern Europe, Clinton administration officials believed that the U.S. had great interests at stake, which were mainly the success of democratic and market-oriented reforms but also included the question of political-security relations with the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. The strategy was also put forward to fill the power vacuum and the geopolitical uncertainty that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union (the White House, 1993, July 5; the White House, 1994, July). Against this backdrop, American policymakers formulated a two-pronged strategy. The first prong involved assurances to Russia. The Russian Federation was the most powerful among the former Soviet states. Nonetheless, in the immediate years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia was not seeking confrontation with the United States and the Western world. The United States sought to capitalize on this opportunity to establish a working partnership with Russia while at the same time encouraging economic and political reforms (Slocombe, 2011; The White House, 1999, March 31). The second element of the strategy was "enlargement," which was the extension of America's power, influence, and values mainly through the spread of free market and democratic governance (The White House, 1994, July; Bouchet, 2013).

NATO became a central element in the Clinton administration's Engagement and Enlargement strategy. In its early months, the Clinton Administration had recognized the desire of Central and Eastern European countries to become

eventual members of the transatlantic alliance. Nonethless, during this point in time, members of the Clinton administration had not yet produced definitive policy on NATO enlargement and thus adopted cautious approach in dealing with the issue (The White House, 1993, April 20; National Security Council, 1993, April 29; The White House, 1993, July 5; Goldgeier, 1999b; Sarotte, 2019). This cautious approach can be attributed to the concerns surrounding Russia. As noted, the United States wanted to develop a working partnership with Russia and sought to support Russia's democratic reforms. NATO enlargement could risk worsening relations with Moscow and dampen its reforms (Talbott, 2003) Indeed, within the U.S. government, there were those who opposed the alliance's enlargement (Sarotte, 2019; Asmus, 2002).

Still, there were also people inside the administration who were adamant supporters of NATO enlargement. Chief among those was Anthony Lake, National Security Advisor. Lake was the main architect behind the enlargement grand strategy and NATO enlargement as he advocated for the expansion of markets and democratic governance. Most importantly, he did not see this "enlargement" strategy as an ideological crusade. Rather, he saw it as a strategy to guarantee American security interests (U.S. Department of State, 1993, September 21). Another strong proponent was President Clinton himself. Clinton had always believed in the importance of NATO and making it relevant for a post-Cold War world. His views on enlargement really began to take shape when he met President Walesa of Poland in April 1993. In that meeting, as previously indicated, the Polish president made a strong case for the enlargement of NATO, particularly to Poland. The case made by Walesa was said to have strongly resonated with Clinton, who expressed positive attitudes toward enlargement after the meeting ("The President's News Conference," 1994; Goldgeier, 1999).

The proponents of NATO enlargement held the ground. However, the decision to support the enlargement was not straightforward. Goldgeier (1998) argued that the process leading up to the eventual decision on NATO enlargement consisted of three main phases. The first, he argued, was during the summer and fall of 1993, when President Clinton was preparing for the upcoming NATO Summit in Brussels in January 1994. As Goldgeier put it, this need to prepare for the summit led to the proposal of the Partnership for Peace (PfP), which was largely seen as a compromise, one that

would be acceptable to the two camps within the Clinton Administration. The second phase is when the United States signaled their commitment to enlarge the alliance when Clinton said in his speech in Prague in January 1994 that on the matter of NATO enlargement, the question was not whether, but when. The third and last phase was, as Goldgeier argued, the period between April and October of 1994, where members of the administration sought to make the president's position on enlargement into concrete policy. If one is to uncover the rationale behind America's support for NATO enlargement, one needs to thoroughly examine these three phases. As such, the following paragraphs will be especially dedicated to examining the stages leading up to the decision to support NATO enlargement.

Looking at the debates and internal policy formulation processes within the Clinton administration, one may be expected to conclude that the decision to support NATO enlargement was largely driven by ideas and domestic politics. President Clinton himself, judged from his rhetoric, both private and public, was seemingly heavily influenced by the notion of liberalism. Furthermore, his views were shared by his National Security Advisor Anthony Lake. Most important, the historical evidence suggests that liberal ideas were indeed present throughout the period between 1993 and 1994, in the lead-up toward the decision to support NATO enlargement.

Nevertheless, a more complete and thorough reading of the available historical evidence would also suggest the importance of strategic, power-political factors. After all, Clinton's overall grand strategic approach, especially based on his administration's 1994 National Security Strategy, had important realist elements. For instance, the United States during the years of Clinton was acutely aware of the changed international environment. Policymakers within the administration realized that the Soviet Union's demise created opportunities for America to shape how the world works. The United States, in other words, wanted to fill the vacuum, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, in order to create a regional environment favorable to U.S. interests and values. If the United States was not up to the challenge, "instability and backsliding toward authoritarian government" could bring back division in Europe, which would undermine Western (and American) interests (The White House, 1993, July 5).

Viewed this way, the Clinton administration's push for an enlargement strategy, one that would include the expansion of free market and democratic

governance anchored by the NATO alliance, is not entirely incompatible with offensive realism. The theory rests on the premise that states want to maximize security by maximizing their power and influence relative to other states. For Clinton, the pursuit of security through NATO expansion was linked to the advance of markets and democracy. In other words, at its core, the Clinton administration's strategy of "engagement and enlargement" was designed to maximize U.S. security through the creation of a regional environment in Europe that is compatible with American interests and values (Clinton, 1995; U.S. Department of State, 1993, September 7).

Moreover, the Clinton administration's support for NATO enlargement was also partly driven by the uncertainty surrounding Russia. President Clinton had made establishing a working cooperative relationship with Russia one of his chief foreign policy goals (Stent, 2015; The White House, 1993, January 23; The White House, 1994, July; U.S. Department of State, 1994, January 14) Still, policymakers were uncertain about whether Russia's democratic reforms would be successful, and they also did not want Russia to get a free hand in shaping Europe's security arrangements as the administration officials recognized that they got the upper hand vis-a-vis Russia (The White House, 1993, March 31). Most notably, American officials were suspicious of Russia's conception of Europe's security architecture being under the NACC and CSCE (U.S. Department of State, 1994, January 12; U.S. Department of State, 1995, January 16). The Clinton administration made clear that the United States will not concede by giving other countries (Russia most likely) veto over who gets to be members of NATO. President Clinton himself made this point clear, saying that "NATO will not automatically exclude any nation from joining. At the same time, no country outside will be allowed to veto expansion" (Clinton, 1994, December 5).

NATO enlargement, in other words, whether the administration would like to admit it or not, was partly aimed to address the Russian question. Private and public exchanges, especially from the president, may have shown that the United States was embracing Russia. In practice, behind those appraisals of U.S.-Russia relations, however, were wary of the uncertainty surrounding Russia's future trajectory (Clinton, 1993, April 19; The White House, 1994, July). Moreover, speculations about Russia's future were present within the administration, as highlighted in the exchanges between

Secretary of State Warren Christopher and foreign ministers of Central and Eastern European countries; the United States recognized the possibility of Russia returning back to its aggressive past (U.S. Department of State, 1994, January 16; U.S. Department of State, 1995, January 25).

To conclude this section, the evidence confirms the basic premise of offensive realism: states are acutely aware of the uncertainty problem and seek to increase their power relative to their peers. The Clinton administration, despite its initial desire to focus on domestic policies, was driven by the much more benign security environment to adopt primacy as its grand strategy. The United States wanted to fill the power vacuum created by the dissolution of the Soviet Union through the expansion of market economy and democracy anchored by the NATO alliance. The engagement toward Russia could be seen as somewhat of a puzzle for offensive realism. Still, America's embrace of Russia was not entirely inconsistent with offensive realism. As previously alluded to, the extent to which a great power employs hard-line competitive policies in maximizing power depends in large part on the assessment of the security environment. The Clinton administration's approach in dealing with Russia rested on the fact that the United States recognized the power disparity so as to take advantage of Russia and assessed that Russia could be persuaded to agree with America's vision of post-Cold War European security architecture. This explains why, while it was seriously engaged with Russia to develop a working partnership, the United States sought to deny Moscow gains at their expense. As such, American support for NATO enlargement was partly designed as a hedge against the possibility of Russia, especially if its democratic reforms fail, reverting back to expansionism (Goldgeier, 1999; Cox, 2022; Shifrinson, 2023). "We are optimistic that it will, but one should not dismiss the possibility that Russia could return to the patterns of its past," Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated in a hearing before the U.S. Senate. "By engaging Russia and enlarging NATO, we give Russia every incentive to deepen its commitment to peaceful relations with neighbors, while closing the avenue to more destructive alternatives" (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 1995).

CONCLUSION

After the Cold War ended, the United States sought not only to preserve the transatlantic alliance but also to enlarge it. This research proves that the rationale to

preserve and enlarge the alliance was largely compatible with offensive realism. Evidence in the form of declassified materials from two U.S. presidential administrations suggests that both the Bush and Clinton administrations based their policy on sound strategic motives: to extend America's power and influence over Europe. Both presidents had to deal with uncertainty surrounding the Soviets and then Russia's future. Under Bush, the United States was not expecting the Soviet Union to collapse and had to prepare for a post-Cold War world where the Soviet Union was still a potential geopolitical threat in Europe. This underlines the Bush administration's support for German reunification and the subsequent inclusion of a reunified Germany into NATO. With the Clinton administration, the United States faced an even more favorable security environment. The United States recognized the profound changes the end of the Cold War had brought and sought to capitalize. Nonetheless, the Clinton administration still had to deal with the uncertainty problem in the forms of ongoing conflicts in the Balkans and democratic reforms taking place inside Central and Eastern European countries, especially Russia. Taking advantage of America's unrivaled primacy, the Clinton administration promoted the expansion of free market and democratic governance through NATO enlargement to create a security environment that is much more favorable to U.S. interests and values. At the same time, the United States was also hedging against the possibility of Russia taking on an aggressive foreign policy in the future

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