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How Bill Clinton Accidentally Started Another Cold War

By Dave Majumdar
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Who bears responsibility for the current tensions between America and Russia? There are many answers to that question but blame is overdue to President Bill Clinton who in 1994 sealed the fate of any potential U.S.-Russia partnership when he made the decision to expand the NATO alliance into Moscow's former sphere of influence. That set the stage for a renewed great power struggle in Europe against a revanchist Russia, just as legendary diplomat George F. Kennan repeatedly warned the Clinton administration that it would.

“Expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era,” Kennan wrote on February 5, 1997 in *a New York Times* op-ed.^[1] “Such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”

Kennan's sage advice was ignored, and the exact scenario he warned about has today come to pass. More than 25 years after the end of the Cold War, relations between Moscow and Washington are at their lowest point since the fall of the Soviet Union. Indeed, some have suggested that the United States and Russia are entering into a new cold war of sorts.

As a liberal internationalist, Clinton was dedicated to the goal of spreading democracy and promoting free-market reforms in Russia and the former Soviet Bloc. The idea was rooted in the Kantian democratic peace theory that was popularized at the time by Francis Fukuyama in his 1989 essay “The End of History” in *The National Interest*. The problem ultimately was in the idea’s execution and perhaps a certain level of naiveté on Clinton’s part.

In Eastern Europe, the Clinton administration hoped to use the NATO alliance to stabilize those newly liberated states and integrate them into the West. At the same time, Clinton wanted to enter with Moscow into some sort of transatlantic security arrangement, while simultaneously promoting democratic reforms and market liberalization inside Russia. Securing such a partnership with Russia while expanding the NATO alliance would have been a challenge for any U.S. administration. Indeed, it might have been an impossible task since these are in some ways fundamentally incompatible goals. However, the Clinton administration made the situation worse because of its somewhat misleading communications with the Russian leadership—particularly during an October 1993 visit to Moscow by Secretary of State Warren Christopher.

The issue was the inclusive Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, advocated for by the Pentagon and by Christopher when he met with Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Even though the PfP was designed to become a path towards eventual NATO membership, it was open to all of the former Warsaw Pact and Soviet republics on an equal basis. Thus, it was palatable to Russia as Yeltsin told Christopher, later recounted in a U.S. State Department memorandum of conversation. Yeltsin interpreted PfP as meaning the NATO expansion would be deferred indefinitely into the future. “It really is a great idea, really great,” Yeltsin told Christopher according to the memorandum. “Tell Bill I am thrilled by this brilliant stroke.”

According to the memo, Christopher also told Yeltsin that “we will in due course be looking at the question of membership as a longer term eventuality. There will be an evolution, based on the development of a habit of cooperation, but over time.” However, discussions on NATO expansion started almost immediately thereafter. During a January 12, 1994 speech in Prague, Clinton made it clear “the question is no longer whether NATO will take on new members but when and how” the alliance would expand. “We reneged on our part of the deal,” either James Collins or Thomas Pickering (it is unclear which ambassador said this) told Angela Stent in her book *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*.

Unsurprisingly, as plans for NATO expansion started to come together, the reaction in Moscow was not a positive one. Clinton had promised Yeltsin “no surprises, no rush and no exclusion”—but the Kremlin did not see it that way. From the Russian perspective, the United States was keen on expanding into what had been the Kremlin’s backyard while offering Moscow only empty platitudes. “Europe, even before it has managed to shrug off the legacy of the Cold War, is at risk of plunging into a cold peace,” Yeltsin said in December 1994.

To mollify the Kremlin, the Clinton administration proposed a NATO-Russia council where Moscow would have a voice but no veto power. Effectively, the Russians would remain outside the transatlantic security structure.

Even Clinton himself seems to have recognized the underlying flaw in that plan. “What the Russians get out of this great deal we’re offering them is a chance to sit in the same room with NATO and join us whenever we all agree to something, but they don’t have any ability to stop us from doing something that they don’t agree with,” Clinton said, as quoted by James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul in their book *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy toward Russia after the Cold War*. “They can register their disapproval by walking out of the room. And for their second big benefit, they get our promise that we’re not going to put our military stuff into their former allies who are now going to be our allies, unless we happen to wake up one morning and decide to change our mind.”

The problem, however, was Clinton’s former roommate and primary Russia expert Strobe Talbott. Talbott, who was a journalist rather than a diplomat, did not seem to have a good answer when Clinton directly asked him why Kennan’s argument was incorrect. Indeed, Talbott—according to his own memoir *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy*—was plainly dismissive of Kennan’s argument. Clinton’s overreliance on Talbott—whose negotiating strategy seems to have been particularly obtuse—may have caused much of the later friction with the Russians over the NATO expansion and the NATO air campaign over Kosovo in 1999, which was not sanctioned by the U.N. Security Council. Indeed, the Russians saw the Kosovo intervention as a breach of international law that violated Yugoslavia’s sovereignty, and as the straw that broke the camel’s back in Moscow’s relations with the alliance.

“The U.S. negotiating position had been simple, unbending and, largely for that reason, successful,” Talbott wrote. “‘Table and stick’ we’d called it: Go straight to your bottom line and stick with it; wait until the other side bends. We’d been able to look the Russians in the eye and tell them that we were going forward with or without them.”

Unsurprisingly, the Russians were not impressed with Talbott’s methods. “You know it’s bad enough having you people tell us what you’re going to do whether we like it or not,” Andrei Kozyrev, the Russian foreign minister at the time, told Talbott during a private meeting about Kosovo. “Don’t add insult to injury by also telling us that it’s in our interests to obey your orders.”

Unfortunately for the Russians, the Kremlin was living out Thucydides’ Melian Dialogue—“the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”—and was meekly forced to acquiesce to Washington’s demands. Essentially, the United States, despite its rhetoric to the contrary, imposed a victor’s peace on Russia in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russian academic Sergei Karaganov, as quoted by Conradi, aptly summed up Moscow’s perspective:

The West has consistently sought to expand its zone of military, economic and political influence through NATO and the EU. Russian interests and objections were flatly ignored. Russia was treated like a defeated power, though we did not see ourselves as defeated. A softer version of the Treaty of Versailles was imposed on the country.

Ultimately, while the reaction was not immediate—Russia during the 1990s was simply too weak to object strenuously—the seeds of resentment were planted under Clinton. Indeed, Moscow’s reaction has played out over time almost exactly as Kennan predicted.

As Kennan told the *New York Times* in 1998:

I think it is the beginning of a new cold war. I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. This expansion would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves. We have signed up to protect a whole series of countries, even though we have neither the resources nor the intention to do so in any serious way.

In the end, despite Clinton’s best intentions to build a new partnership with post-Soviet Russia, American triumphalism and NATO expansion created an impasse that still haunts us to this day. It was all sadly avoidable—and now it’s too late.