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NATO Expansion and the Road to Simferopol

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Beyond the policy issue of what to do now to bring the crisis with Russia over Ukraine to as much of a satisfactory conclusion as may be possible, we ought to reflect on our own role—the role of the West and especially the United States—in paving the road toward this crisis. To do so is not to minimize the direct responsibility of Vladimir Putin's government for what Russian armed force has done, and for the disingenuous aspects of what that government has said. Nor does it negate the role of dysfunction in the Ukrainian political system. But a significant part of this story is how the West cornered the Russian bear before the bear bit back.

More specifically, an important element in that story was the eastward expansion of NATO into what had been the Soviet empire, as well as talk about expanding it even further to embrace

Ukraine and Georgia. We should not only understand the importance of that development for getting to the current crisis, but also what that development exhibited about American habits of thought and action in foreign affairs. It exhibited several such American tendencies, which also have surfaced in other ways and on other issues.

Forgetting the power of promises. The expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe broke a promise that the United States had made to Mikhail Gorbachev and that was part of a package of understandings facilitating the peaceful reunification of Germany. Breaking the promise was probably in part the arrogance associated with being the remaining superpower and feeling untroubled about the keeping of commitments. It also reflected a general American tendency, amid one-sided focus on the credibility of threats, to overlook how the making of promises and commitments is a useful diplomatic tool. Breaking promises weakens the tool. Holding one's own side accountable for fulfilling promises is important for the same reason that the right to be sued, and not just to sue, is an important civil right domestically; it is the right to be able to make an enforceable promise.

Institutional inertia. NATO has been one of the biggest success stories among multilateral alliances. It went well beyond most such alliances in constructing a joint command structure that even the French rejoined after a Gaullist spell outside it. The hazard of such institutionalization, supported in the case of NATO by a civilian bureaucracy ensconced in its compound outside Brussels, is that the institution starts being seen as an end rather than a means, which is not what alliances are supposed to be about. This was the case with much discussion about the military mission in Afghanistan, which was seen as a way to keep NATO healthy and occupied. When earlier decisions were being made about the future of the alliance at the end of the Cold War, it was psychologically hard to bring the success story to a conclusion. This would have been like breaking up a winning team. Once it was decided to keep the team in business, eastward expansion naturally followed as a way to keep the business healthy.

Impulsively using a direct U.S. hand. For the United States, NATO has been the principal means to keep a direct U.S. role in the security affairs of Europe, and along with that much of the political affairs of the continent as well. So the United States has had this additional perceived stake in not only the continuation but the expansion of NATO. Using the instrument of NATO, however, has exemplified an American tendency to think that if something is worth doing it needs to be done by the United States itself or with the United States in the lead, rather than realizing the advantages of letting others carry most of the necessary water. As the former Soviet vassals in Eastern Europe called out for inclusion in the West, an opportunity was missed to let the West Europeans carry most of that water. In the first few years after the end of the Cold War, the European Union was at a height of attractiveness and vitality, with the Maastricht Treaty (which converted the European Community into the EU) signed in 1992 and the troubles of the eurozone still some years away. The EU was the perfect instrument for leading the way in westifying the east, and surely the economic and cultural risks that the Union would take on should be considered no greater than the commitment represented by Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty, which commits every member of the alliance to come to the defense of any other member under attack. But instead the order for the East Europeans became NATO first, EU second.

Insensitivity to the fears and concerns of others. The United States, relatively secure in its North American redoubt, has historically had a hard time appreciating how much other nations see the threatening side of someone else encroaching into their own neighborhood. Even though we have had our own Monroe Doctrine, we tend not to notice equivalent sentiments on the part of others. It should not have been as hard as it apparently was to anticipate how extension of a western military alliance to the borders of the old Soviet Union, and moves toward extending it even farther, would elicit some of the Russian sentiments that it has, especially in a country that lost 20 million people in World War II.

Triumphalism. The world in American eyes is in many respects like a commercial battle for market dominance, with the outcome registered in terms of wins and losses. The Cold War was a Western win; it seemed natural for the winner to extend its market penetration even more. The win-loss outlook also resembles a sporting event, and there was a yearning not just to record but to flaunt the win. Except there would not be an opportunity for anything quite like, say, MacArthur's shogunate in Japan after World War II. Expansion of NATO became a way to put a big, bright "W" on the scoreboard.

Need for an enemy. Another aspect of the typically Manichean way in which Americans tend to look at international politics is that there has to be a foe—something or somebody against whom the United States leads the forces of freedom and light. Once 9/11 came along there were Sunni extremists and al-Qaeda, but terrorist groups never make as good a foe as a state. Besides, the eastward expansion of NATO was already under way before 9/11. Iran has served as a more recent *bête noire*, but it has not entirely displaced Russia, which evokes old Cold War habits and actually does have nuclear weapons.

Few, if any situations, will bring into play each of these habits in the same way the stand-off over Ukraine has. But the habits appear unhelpfully in other situations as well, and Americans would be well advised to be more conscious of them.