

IMPACT OF NATO EXPANSION ON EUROPEAN SECURITY

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Abstract

This paper examined the impact of NATO expansion on European security. NATO did not dissolve following the Soviet Union's collapse and the end of the Cold War. Instead, the alliance expanded, in stages from 16 members at its Cold War peak to 30 in 2020. While NATO expansion alone did not cause the deterioration of US Russian relations, it did contribute significantly to that outcome. Champions of NATO expansion aver that it maintains peace in Europe and promotes democracy in East-Central Europe. They add that Russia has nothing to fear. But Russia's leaders have always seen NATO expansion differently. The objective of this paper isto examine the impact of NATO's expansion on the European Security.This paper adopted a Constructivist theory to elucidate the activities of NATO expansion on Russia, data was generated qualitatively using secondary method which include; journals, Textbooks, and internet. The work discovered that, the expansion of NATO has both positive and negative impact on the European securityit moves from a strictly selective defense organization to a collective or cooperative security organization. Negatively, the expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) reduces the effectiveness of European security in Europe. This work recommends that, there should be collaboration between NATO and European Security where necessary.

Keywords: NATO, Expansion, European Security, cold war, Constructivist

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was formed against the backdrop of emerging tensions after World War II. It has been argued that NATO had been a European initiative from the beginning: it was as explicit an invitation as has ever been extended from smaller powers to a great power to construct an empire and include them within it. On April 4, 1949, in Washington, DC, the Foreign Ministers of Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, United Kingdom, and the United States signed the North Atlantic Treaty, the political framework for a defensive alliance designed to prevent aggression, or, if necessary, to resist attack against any alliance member. On September 17, 1949, the first North Atlantic Council session was held in Washington and in December 1949 adopted the Alliance's first strategy which approved plans for the defence of Western Europe including US use of nuclear weapons, if necessary, to defend NATO nations. (Josh, 2022) At present, NATO Member States comprises 30 countries from the original 12 countries that signed the North Atlantic Treaty on 4 April 1949.

NATO expansion's advocates and latter-day defenders have hailed it as a resounding success (Brands 2019; cf. Larison 2019). In their minds, it has preserved US engagement in Europe's

security, ensured Eastern and Central Europe's security, disproved those who predicted turmoil and even nuclear proliferation in that region, and checked a resurgent, nationalistic Russia. But the relevant question is not whether these outcomes are desirable, but whether NATO expansion was the only way to achieve them. In fact, it was not. Western Europe, which was not prostrate at the end of the Cold War as it was after the ravages of World War Two, had the wherewithal to help achieve alternative solutions. The argument that the USA would have abandoned Europe had NATO not expanded is open to challenge. The USA could have remained involved in Europe in a variety of ways. NATO expansion's proponents posited a false choice between their policy and a wholesale US departure from the continent.

Statement of the Problem

The expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into Eastern Europe after the Cold War has significantly reshaped the security dynamics of Europe. While NATO expansion has been justified as a means of enhancing collective security, promoting democratic values, and stabilizing former Eastern Bloc countries, it has also been associated with growing geopolitical tensions, particularly with Russia. NATO expansion has provided security guarantees to smaller and vulnerable states, strengthened military cooperation among member states, and contributed to the establishment of a liberal democratic order in Europe. These developments have fostered a sense of belonging for many post-communist states, anchoring them in Western security structures and offering protection against potential external aggression.

Conversely, the enlargement has been perceived by Russia as a direct challenge to its sphere of influence and national identity, contributing to a deterioration of East-West relations. Russia's security concerns and perceptions of betrayal by the West have fueled regional instability, manifested in conflicts such as the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea. As a result, what was intended to enhance European security has also exacerbated polarization and revived a Cold War-style security environment in parts of Europe.

Despite extensive academic and policy discussions, there remains a lack of consensus on whether NATO expansion has ultimately enhanced or undermined European security. The problem this study seeks to address is the need for a balanced assessment of both the positive and negative impacts of NATO's expansion.

1.1. Research Question

What are the impacts of NATO expansion on European Security?

1.2. Research Objective

To examine the impact of NATO expansion on European Security

1.3. Conceptual clarification

i. Security.

Is a state of being or feeling secure, freedom from fear, anxiety, danger, doubt, etc; state or sense of safety or certainty tranquility. Something that gives or assures safety, tranquility, certainty, etc; protection; safeguard. During the Cold War, security was all about states, strategies, military power and *status quo* (Williams 2013). From a traditional realist perspective, most nations entrusted their security to a balance of power among states for over forty years. Williams (2013:1) works with a definition of security that involves the "alleviation of threats to cherished values".

Constructivism also considers security as an inherently subjective value, or, more specifically, an intersubjective value. In assessing security, it gives attention to ideational factors, not material

factors. From a Constructivist perspective then, security is expected to be achieved only once the “perception and fears of security threats, challenges, vulnerabilities and risks are allayed and overcome” (Brauch 2011:61). Sure, it is important to take objective factors in the security perception into account. However, even though they are a necessary condition, they are not sufficient. This happens because subjective factors will certainly influence security perceptions. As a consequence, the *perception* of security threats, risks and dangers will depend on the beliefs, culture, traditions, interests, and worldviews of the analyst. The meaning of security would then be socially constructed. Paraphrasing Alexander Wendt (1992), security would be what you make of it.

ii. Expansion

Expansionism refers to states obtaining greater territory through military empire-building or colonialism. The full extent of the empire of Alexander the Great, assembled in the 4th century BCE as he strove to conquer the lands of Asia and the Mediterranean. The meaning of expansionism is a policy or practice of expansion and especially of territorial expansion by a nation. This refers to the acquisition of new territories by a country often through military conquest or the settlement of frontier areas. This can lead to the incorporation of new territories into a country or the establishment of protectorates or sphere of influence. (Cataliotti&McCullon, 2023)

1.4. Different Types of Expansion in International Relations

- i. **Territorial Expansion:** Expanding the borders of, or amount of land that belongs to a country. Example: Annexation of Crimea by Russia: In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, a region previously part of Ukraine. This action was widely criticized by the international community and raised concerns about the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Pierskalla, De Juan&Montgomery, (2017)
- ii. **Economic Expansion** - Example: China's Belt and Road Initiative: China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a massive infrastructure and economic development project that involves investment in infrastructure projects in various countries. It is seen as an example of China's economic expansion and its efforts to increase its economic influence globally. (Jie& Wallace,2021)
- iii. **Alliance Expansion** – Example. NATO Enlargement, NATO has expanded several times since its formation. In 1999, the alliance expanded to include the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. Subsequent expansions added more countries, such as the Baltic states and Balkan countries. These expansions were aimed at increasing the security and stability of Europe. (International Security Center, 2023)
- iv. **Institutional Expansion** - Example: United Nations Security Council Reform: Discussions about expanding the United Nations Security Council to include more permanent members have been ongoing for years. This is an example of efforts to expand the institutional structure of a major international organization to reflect changes in global power dynamics.(Google scholar, 2022)
- v. **Cultural Expansion**– According to Drysen(2016). Culture is something that is shared, learned or acquired and constantly and non-static. Example, Soft Power through Hollywood,Hollywood movies, produced in the United States, have been a significant cultural export that has helped shape perceptions of American culture worldwide. This can be seen as a form of cultural expansion, where American values, lifestyles, and ideas are disseminated globally through the entertainment industry.

1.5. Impact of NATO expansion on European Security

1.5.1. Positive Impacts:

Enhanced Security for New Member States: NATO expansion has provided enhanced security guarantees to new member states, particularly those in Eastern and Central Europe. These countries, once part of the Eastern Bloc, have benefited from NATO's collective defense clause (Article 5), which deters potential aggressors and provides a sense of security. (George,2023)

Stability and Peace: NATO expansion has contributed to stability and peace in Eastern and Central Europe by helping to consolidate democratic transitions and prevent conflicts in the region. It has reinforced the idea of a Europe whole, free, and at peace. (Menon, &Ruger, 2020)

Security Sector Reform: New member states have undergone security sector reforms to meet NATO standards, which has led to the modernization and professionalization of their armed forces. This, in turn, has contributed to regional security. (Caparini,2018)

Conflict Prevention: The presence of NATO forces in certain regions, such as the Balkans, has played a role in preventing and managing conflicts. NATO-led peacekeeping missions have helped maintain stability in areas with a history of ethnic and political tensions. (Google scholars,2022)

Interoperability: NATO standards promote interoperability among member states' armed forces. This means that NATO allies can work together more effectively in joint military operations, enhancing the collective defense capabilities of the alliance. (NATO,2023)

1.5.2. Negative Impacts

Tensions with Russia: NATO expansion has strained relations between the alliance and Russia. Moscow views NATO's eastward expansion as a security threat and has expressed concerns about the alliance's proximity to its borders. This has led to increased tensions and a more complex security environment in Europe.

Costs and Burden-Sharing: NATO expansion has required investment in infrastructure, military capabilities, and security commitments. This has placed financial and logistical burdens on both existing and new member states, leading to debates over burden-sharing within the alliance.

Potential for Conflicts: NATO's expansion has not been universally welcomed, and it has the potential to create security dilemmas. The presence of NATO forces in certain regions could be perceived as provocative by non-member states, potentially leading to conflicts or crises. (Menon &Ruger,2020)

Divergent Interests: As NATO has expanded, the interests and priorities of member states have become more diverse. Managing the interests of a larger and more heterogeneous alliance can be challenging and may lead to differences in strategy and decision-making. (Ricketts,2020)

The impact of NATO expansion on the European security is worth scholarly consideration for two principal reasons. First, as Europe's premier selective defense organization, its internal stability and cohesion can have important positive or negative consequences for the security of Europe. Second, NATO's viability as an effective selective defense organization with which the issue of enlargement seems inextricably intertwined may also prove to be vitally important to the

progress of democratic and capitalist reforms in the recently independent countries of Central and Eastern Europe international organization allows it to serve as an effective peacekeeper as it moves from a strictly selective defense organization to a cooperative security organization.

Soviet Union The expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) reduces the effectiveness of European security in Europe.

Chances of military friction. for example, Russia and Ukraine crisis.

NATO expansion has pushed European security into more dangerous directions

NATO enlargement or expansion has weakened the further development of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and also endanger armament limitation and disarmament agreements. The OSCE cannot enforce security. The disarmament agreements were based on firm behaviour toward Moscow and not on backing off.

NATO expansion has prevented European security from expanding and increasing. NATO enlargement since Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary are not threatened, while exposed countries (as, e.g., the Baltic states) cannot be admitted due to the fundamental Russian opposition in this case. The wish for enlargement does not come from the West, it comes from the Eastern Europeans. The longer Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania cannot join NATO, the more one will be willing in Moscow to surmise a Western recognition of the Baltics as part of the Russian sphere of interest.

The expansion to the East have returned the world to the old patterns of confrontation. Therefore, not bring stability and security for Central and Eastern Europe. Renunciation of the expansion, however, creates an open space of competing forces and would, therefore, bring increased instability. NATO expansion to the Europe (East) has narrow Russia's "breathing space", establish a new dividing line in Europe and isolate Russia. The geographically largest country in the world cannot be isolated, and, if Russia becomes an open democracy there also cannot be a dividing line; if not, then the further East the dividing line is, the better. (Reiter, 1997)

1.6. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on constructivism or constructivist theory initiated by Nicholas Onuf and popularized by an American political scientist Alexander Wendt to expatiate North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) expansion and its impact on European security, this theory posits that whatever happens in the international system is constructed and this construction is based on; interests, ideas, norms, assurances/ threat, and identity. Constructivism focuses on, ideas, identities, norms, and discourse in shaping international politics. Socially constructed realities actors behave based not only on material interests but also on how they interpret their identities and relationships. Emphasis on how states perceive threats based on historical experiences and inter-subjective meanings, not just objective power balances. NATO expansion after the Cold War was not merely a military enlargement it was about extending a particular identity: liberal democratic, Western, and post-Cold War cooperation. For Eastern European states (e.g., Poland, Czech Republic, Baltic states), joining NATO was a symbol of joining the "West" a way of redefining national identity after Soviet domination. Security was not only material but psychological: being "inside NATO" meant being part of a community of shared values. Russian Identity and the 'Threat' of NATO Russia's perception of NATO expansion is rooted in its historical identity and sense of status. Constructivists argue that Russia felt humiliated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and saw NATO's eastward movement not just as a military threat but as an attack on Russia's role and identity as a major power. NATO's rhetoric of "defensive

alliance” was interpreted differently by Russia, shaped by its historical experiences with Western encirclement.

The security dilemma created by NATO expansion is not inevitable but socially constructed. If both NATO and Russia had mutually recognized identities of cooperation, expansion might not have been perceived as a threat. However, prevailing narratives in Russian media and political discourse framed NATO expansion as Western betrayal, reinforcing adversarial identities.

1.7. Methodology

Secondary method of data collection was employed for this study and the data collected from the internet, textbooks, journal were analysed qualitatively through content analysis.

1.8. Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that, North Atlantic Treaty Organization(NATO)has both positiveand negative impacts on the European security. Positively, it enhanced Security for New Member States, it has maintained Stability and Peace, Conflict Prevention, it has served as an effective peacekeeper as it moves from a strictly selective defense organization to a collective or cooperative security organization.

Negatively, it has increased tensions between NATO and Russia, potential for conflicts and divergent Interests.The expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) reduces the effectiveness of European security in Europe. NATO expansion has also weakened the further development of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and also endanger armament limitation and disarmament agreements. The OSCE cannot enforce security.

1.9. Conclusion

The origins of NATO expansion, derived from the request of CEE states, thrived due to the US ambition to become the world’s hegemon. World order changed with the end of the Cold War, and NATO, a twisted product of a particular historical era, became obsolete. However, in conclusion, NATO expansion has had a complex impact on European security. While it has enhanced the security of new member states and contributed to stability in Eastern and Central Europe, it has also led to tensions with Russia, raised concerns about burden-sharing, and introduced potential security challenges. The overall assessment of NATO's expansion depends on one's perspective and the specific context in which it is considered.

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