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NATO ENLARGEMENT TO THE EAST AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE FROM THE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT: The aim of the article is to analyze the legitimacy of justifying the outbreak of war in Ukraine by expanding NATO to the East after the Cold War. The study was conducted from the American perspective. The main research problem is the question of whether, from the point of view of American scholars and experts, post-Cold War NATO expansion to the East was a strategic mistake and was responsible for the current war in Ukraine. There is no consensus among them whether NATO enlargement after the Cold War was an error and led to Russian aggression in Ukraine. Most of them, however, dispute such a statement, rejecting Moscow's accusations that the United States and the West are accountable for the current situation in Ukraine.

KEYWORDS: War in Ukraine, Russian aggression, NATO enlargement, Central and Eastern Europe, US security policy

Introduction

After the Cold War, the vast majority of Central and Eastern European states adopted the Western vector in their foreign and security policy. They strove for closer cooperation and, consequently, full membership in the Western political, economic and military structures, including the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union. The actions were directed against the interests of the Russian Federation whose aim was to maintain these countries within its sphere of influence. They were, however, to a large extent distrustful of Russia, and thus inclined to be covered by the security guarantees of the most powerful military alliance in the world, namely NATO. Apart from East Germany's entry into NATO through the unification of the state, the first NATO enlargement took place in 1999, when it was joined by three former members of the Warsaw Pact – Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Although the West made a number of steps to reassure Russia that the process was peaceful and not targeted against it, Moscow did not consent to that action. An even greater problem for Russia was the enlargement of NATO in 2004, when the former Soviet republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia bonded

with NATO, along with Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The subsequent phases of the process in 2009, 2017 and 2020 were less spectacular, as the small Balkan states – Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia entered NATO. However, it should be borne in mind that historically the Balkans were also a zone of Russian influence and domination.

In recent years, the most serious controversies have resulted from Ukraine's and Georgia's NATO membership aspirations. Due to its territorial, demographic and economic potential as well as its historical, social and economic ties with Russia, Ukraine is a key element in the Kremlin's efforts to rebuild its superpower. In the past few years, a number of political parties have declared their willingness to strengthen relations with NATO, including the reception of the Membership Action Plan (MAP), which marks the way to full membership of the Alliance. This direction of foreign and security policy had a great support in the west of the country, but a smaller proportion in the east, whose society, of Russian origin, has been closer to the idea of tight cooperation with Russia (Pietnoczka 2021, 127). At the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, a pledge was made that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually become full members of NATO (NATO 2008). This provoked a decisive reaction from Russia, which supported the separatists from Abkhazia and South Ossetia and committed aggression against Georgia. It was assumed to hinder the process of NATO enlargement to both countries by destabilizing Georgia and making Ukraine aware that it could face similar consequences.

Along with the Euromaidan revolution, pro-Western integration tendencies in Ukraine intensified, provoking the Kremlin to seize Crimea and support the separatists in the Donbas. President Vladimir Putin justified these actions by Russia's numerous humiliations from the West, including the alleged promise not to enlarge NATO beyond the borders of the reunified Germany (Matsaberidze 2015, 79-80). Hybrid operations and strategic deterrence led to the destabilization of Ukraine and created a frozen conflict that for years limited the possibility of democratization of the state and its integration with the West (Banasik 2022, 199). The Kremlin not only questioned Ukraine's right to sovereign foreign and security policy, but also undermined its state independence. Finally, on February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale aggression against Ukraine, which, owing to the support of the United States and NATO, had been fiercely resisting it. On March 26, 2022 in Warsaw, President Joe Biden rejected Russia's allegations and justifications, asserting: "The Kremlin wants to portray NATO enlargement as an imperial project aimed at destabilizing Russia. Nothing is further from the truth. NATO is a defensive alliance. It has never sought the demise of Russia" (The White House 2022).

The aim of the article is to analyze the legitimacy of justifying the outbreak of the war in Ukraine by expanding NATO to the East after the Cold War from the American perspective. The main research problem is whether, according to American scholars

and experts, post-Cold War NATO enlargement to the East was a strategic mistake and is responsible for the current war in Ukraine. There is no consensus on this, nevertheless, the majority of them question such a statement, rejecting Moscow's accusations that the West is liable for the war in Ukraine. As part of the research, the author interviewed scholars and experts in the field of international security from universities and think tanks in Washington and New York. He also made use of a study conducted by Foreign Affairs on American scientists and experts specializing in NATO issues.

1. Main arguments for and against NATO enlargement after the Cold War

In April 2022, Foreign Affairs conducted research involving 61 scientists and experts in the field of international relations, focusing on, among others, NATO issues (Foreign Affairs2022). The vast majority of scholars and experts are Americans, and the remaining ones collaborates with US universities and think tanks. The study included the relationship between NATO expansion after the Cold War and the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The participants were to respond to the following statement: "Proceeding with NATO enlargement after the end of the Cold War was a strategic mistake". They were asked to declare whether they agreed or disagreed with the above declaration and to rate their confidence level in their opinion. 19 experts strongly disagreed with the assertion, 20 disagreed, 3 expressed a neutral attitude, 8 agreed, and 11 strongly agreed¹. It should be noted that twelve of them were not Americans, and most of them came from Central and Eastern European countries, of which the Russians constituted a smaller group than the citizens of the countries of NATO's eastern flank. Therefore, taking into account the votes of only American participants, the numbers were respectively: 16 strongly disagreed, 14 disagreed, 3 were neutral, seven agreed, and 9 strongly agreed. This means that out of 49 US scholars and experts, 30 denied NATO enlargement was a strategic

¹ Stance and confidence level (in brackets): 1) strongly disagree: J. Benitez (10), I. Daalder (10), J. Dempsey (10), L. Fix (10), C. Florea (10), D. Fried (10), J. Goldgeier (10), L. Kulesa (10), B. Pavel (10), A. Polyakova (10), Ch. Salonijs-Pasternak (10), C. Stelzenmüller (10), A. de Tinguy (10), A. Vershbow (10), S. Charap (9), M. Popova (9), J. Puglierin (9), Ch. Miller (8), M. Snegovaya (8); 2) disagree: A. Grizold (10), J. Davidson (9), R. Gottemoeller (9), B. Haddad (9), M. Madej (9), D. Piatkiewicz (9), R. Allison (8), Ch. S. Chivvis (8), F. J. Gavin (8), A. Kolesnikov (8), K. Marten (8), S. Pifer (8), R. Rizzo (8), C. Roberts (8), S. Sestanovich (8), K. Skinner (8), J. S. Nye Jr. (7), M. Duss (6), N. Tocci (6), D. Nexon (1); 3) neutral: A. Cooley (9), M. Kimmage (8), S. Goddard (5); 4) agree: E. Ashford (8), M. P. Leffler (8), S. Radchenko (8), S. Biddle (7), E. Borgwardt (7), A.-M. Slaughter (7), S. Wertheim (7), D. Treisman (6); 5) strongly agree: N. Arbatova (10), A. Bacevich (10), M. Mandelbaum (10), J. J. Mearsheimer (10), Ch. Kupchan (9), S. Walt (9), R. K. Betts (8), R. Menon (8), A. Pravda (8), Ch. Preble (8), J. Shiffrin (8).

mistake and 16 supported it. It is worth emphasizing that out of 16 Americans who strongly disagreed with the thesis, as many as 12 did so with the highest possible level of conviction.

American scholars and experts who disagreed and strongly disagreed with the thesis that NATO enlargement was a strategic mistake used the following arguments:

- NATO enlargement has been the best option for managing the post-Cold War security environment in Europe;
- NATO enlargement has taken place in accordance with international law, including the right to pursue reasonable measures for its own self-defense;
- the countries of Central and Eastern Europe made a sovereign decision on aspiration and membership in NATO to which they had full rights, and all the decisions were made by democratically elected authorities;
- NATO enlargement is a moral success and an expansion of the zone of positive values, such as freedom, peace, democracy and prosperity;
- NATO protects European states against Russian imperialism and attempts to recreate the post-Soviet zone;
- NATO membership has saved the Baltic states and perhaps several other neighbours of Russia from its aggression;
- membership in NATO allows to protect countries against the violence executed by Russia against European countries that do not have such protection, such as Ukraine and Georgia;
- the countries of CEE have tried to join NATO because they perceive it as the most reliable external guarantee of security;
- after joining NATO, the countries of CEE have experienced a period of peace and prosperity unprecedented in their modern history;
- NATO enlargement to the East has anchored the countries of the region in the Western structures of integration and security;
- NATO enlargement remedies the injustice of the Yalta and Potsdam conferences towards the countries of CEE;
- NATO enlargement has met the aspirations of nations which had escaped from the yoke of Soviet domination to be free and secure;
- NATO enlargement increased the level of stability in CEE after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the outbreak of the war in Yugoslavia;
- NATO enlargement increased the chance for the enlargement of the European Union, and thus gave development opportunities to the states of CEE;
- NATO enlargement to the East has been defensive and has never threatened Russia;
- NATO enlargement increases European deterrence and defense, which is positively verified after the Russian aggression against Ukraine;
- when Russia was more pro-Western, the issue of NATO enlargement was not emphasized by the Kremlin as a significant problem;

- in parallel to NATO enlargement, the United States significantly reduced its military presence in Europe, agreed to the limits of NATO troops in CEE, signed a number of arms control agreements with Russia, and created various bilateral and multilateral channels of cooperation with Russia;
- the West had made considerable efforts to ensure that Russia remained its partner in Europe, including in European security, nonetheless Russia itself rejected this offer;
- the argument that, if there was no NATO enlargement, the present relations between the West and Russia would be friendly and based on peaceful cooperation is incorrect;
- there is no reason to believe that Russia would agree to an alternative European security architecture in which it would abandon imperial nostalgia and abandon its spheres of influence;
- without NATO expansion in CEE could have emerged as a dangerous power and security vacuum, which would have various, particularly serious negative consequences;
- without security guaranteed by NATO, the countries of CEE could decide to develop nuclear programs;
- NATO enlargement is a fake pretext to excuse Russian aggression against its neighbours;
- president Putin does not recognize Ukraine as a separate state and wants to destroy its statehood at all costs, and NATO enlargement is only an argument used politically to brutally implement this goal;
- president Putin destabilizes Ukraine because he is afraid that, after integration with the West, it could quickly increase prosperity, develop democracy and human rights, which would increase the risk of an anti-Kremlin uprising in Russia;
- president Putin uses anti-NATO rhetoric to maintain and deepen his dictatorial rule;
- in relations between the West and Russia, there were equally important or even more important issues than NATO enlargement, including the “color revolutions”, strategic balance, and the wars in Kosovo and Iraq.

The following arguments arose among American scholars and experts agreeing and strongly agreeing that NATO enlargement was a strategic mistake:

- the West built a post-Cold War security environment in which it accumulated power against Russia;
- the West has not exerted enough effort into creating a genuine European and Eurasian security architecture that takes due account of Russia’s interests;
- Russia has not been included in a serious way in a new security architecture and network of mutually beneficial interactions above and beyond NATO;

- NATO enlargement has increased tensions with Russia and has perpetuated a zero-sum approach to European security;
- with NATO enlargement, the United States has increased its position as the dominant military power in Europe;
- NATO enlargement has increased Russian nationalism;
- NATO enlargement towards the borders of Russia, to the area of its traditional spheres of influence, was against its strategic and security interests, therefore its decisive reaction was to be expected;
- NATO enlargement changed Russia's attitude from pro-Western to anti-Western;
- Russia was humiliated and disregarded by the West in the period of its weakness;
- the West should have limited itself only to the development of the Partnership for Peace, which makes it possible to cooperate with NATO, without formally enlarging the Alliance;
- the West pretended that Ukraine and Georgia were on the way to membership in NATO, which was groundless, as neither NATO nor these countries were ready for it, and this destabilized the situation in Europe;
- president Putin had the opportunity to use the issue of NATO enlargement to Russia's borders in order to justify his authoritarian aspirations and revisionist policy;
- covering Western Europe, and later CEE with the American security umbrella, discouraged European countries from making efforts to ensure their own security.

Among American researchers and experts who were neutral regarding the claim under discussion, there were considerations pertaining to how realistic the alternatives were to NATO enlargement in ensuring security for the countries of CEE. They also pondered if it would be legitimate investigate the broader perspective of NATO-Russia relations, including mainly the circumstances that determined NATO enlargement.

2. Discussion on the legitimacy of NATO enlargement in the context of the war in Ukraine

President Vladimir Putin claims that the United States and NATO have continually violated pledges from the early 1990s that the alliance would not expand into the former Soviet bloc. Supporters of this argument principally cited the U.S. Secretary of State James A. Baker who addressed the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in February 1990: "there would be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction for the forces of NATO one inch to the east" and nodded at Gorbachev's words, which read:

“Any extension of the zone of NATO is unacceptable”. Firstly, however, no agreement was reached that would include these guarantees, and secondly, it is unclear whether it concerned the discussion of the inclusion of East Germany into NATO, or the future of NATO in general (Asmus 2002, 5). Representatives of the United States believe that this did not concern the issue of NATO’s long-term development, but only the talks conducted at that time in the context of German reunification. Due to the existence of the Warsaw Pact at that time, it was difficult to raise such matters as confirmed by the words Gorbachev uttered in the interview for the newspaper “Kommersant” in October 2014:

The topic of ‘NATO expansion’ was never discussed; it was not raised in those years. I am saying this with a full sense of responsibility. Not a single Eastern European country brought up the issue, not even after the Warsaw Pact had ceased to exist in 1991 (Eckel 2021).

It is, therefore, challenging to treat this vague conversation from years ago as the crowning argument in the discussion on the legitimacy of NATO enlargement, the more so as, according to Western representatives, those were merely empty promises.

As noted by J. H. Lebovic (2022), the process of NATO enlargement was conducted in such a way so as not to excessively enter the course of confrontation with Russia, which in the 1990s was struggling with numerous internal problems. Before NATO enlargement to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, the NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security (NATO 1997) was signed, whose purpose was to regulate the principles of cooperation between partners. It should be stressed that it did not fulfill the commitment by NATO to halt further expansion. In the document, NATO reiterated that it had “no intention, no plan and no reason” to implement nuclear weapons and to send permanent military forces to the new member states. Therefore, Russia strongly protested against the plans of 2009 to deploy elements of the US anti-missile defense system in the CEE region. Under pressure from Russia, the concept was significantly modified, and it was assured that the program was not directed against it, but intended to protect against Iran and possibly other erratic international actors (Tardy 2022, 55). It should be emphasized that the obligations of 1997 concerned “the current and foreseeable security environment”. In the following years, the security environment changed significantly. Russia violated a number of agreements with the West and committed aggression against Ukraine and Georgia. Accordingly, none of the 1997 commitments ought to be binding on NATO, particularly after the full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022. According to J. Goldgeier, after the Russian assault of 2022, the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 “is dead”, therefore NATO obliged to consider transferring some of the permanent infrastructure to Poland and other countries of the region. The West must not allow itself to be intimidated

by Russia as it has done before (Goldgeier 2022). S. Pifer (2022) shares a similar view on this issue, and believes that with the Russian aggression of 2022 it is time to formally renounce or withdraw from the 1997 Act. This, in turn, is to enable the transfer of a part of permanent infrastructure to the new NATO member states.

The risk of Ukraine joining NATO was a red line for Moscow due to the importance of Ukraine in Russia's foreign policy and its imperial ambitions. At the Munich Conference on Security Policy in 2007 Putin reiterated the alleged guarantees of the early 1990s and described NATO enlargement as a provocation:

It represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? (President of Russia 2007).

Before NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit, Putin warned the U.S. Undersecretary for Political Affairs William J. Burns, declaring:

No Russian leader could stand idly by in the face of steps toward NATO membership for Ukraine. That would be a hostile act toward Russia. [...] We would do all in our power to prevent it (Burns 2019, 327).

Putin also revealed the real reasons for his opposition to Ukraine's accession to NATO, undermining the foundations of its statehood:

If people want to limit and weaken Russia, why do they have to do it through NATO enlargement? Doesn't your government know that Ukraine is unstable and immature politically, and NATO is a very divisive issue there? Don't you know that Ukraine is not even a real country? Part of it is really East European, and part is really Russian. This would be another mistake in American diplomacy, and I know Germany and France are not ready anyway (Burns 2019, 327)

NATO expansion ranks as one of the great successes of US foreign policy after the Cold War (Brands 2019). NATO is committed to the assumption that no external state should interfere with the accession process (Zwack | Pierre 2019, 29). As indicated, however, Russia has repeatedly endeavoured to stop or at least disrupt the process. Also at the turn of 2021 and 2022, Putin, threatening military intervention in Ukraine, demanded several major security concessions from the U.S.-led alliance, including a commitment to cease expanding eastward. NATO leaders expressed their readiness to create a new formula for a dialogue with Russia on arms control and other international security issues. Nevertheless, they rejected the possibility of submission to Russia regarding the end of the process of NATO enlargement to the East (Masters 2022). As C. Conetta (2022) stated, this did not

prompt the Russian attack on Ukraine. Neither NATO nor US policy caused the Ukraine war, and unprovoked aggression was the Kremlin's choice.

One of the cardinal rights of the state is to conduct a sovereign foreign policy and to ensure one's own security. As J. George asserts:

Every country should be permitted to take its own foreign policy in a direction where it feels safest and create alliances with those, with whom it wants to build stronger relationships, and I think that urgency was especially felt for the countries of Eastern Europe and former Soviet space, just given the imperialism of Russia (George 2022).

Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and later the Russian Federation have all posed a permanent threat to their neighbours. The potential of Central and Eastern European countries, which have experienced a series of wars and crises, caused mainly by their powerful neighbours, including Russia, is too limited for them to be able to resist the peril from the eastern power on their own. For this reason, membership in NATO is the only real guarantee of security for them and a way of evading a difficult geopolitical position.

Goldgeier (2022) believes that NATO enlargement was a proper decision, and if it had not occurred, the events that are currently taking place in Ukraine would have transpired throughout the CEE region. Owing to the inclusion in NATO, countries such as Poland, the Baltic states as well as other territories of the Alliance's eastern flank are stable and secure. He claims that joining NATO, in turn, enabled them to become part of the European Union, additionally strengthening their safety. According to him, without NATO enlargement, that of the EU, in particular to include the Baltics, would be much less likely.

As noted by Lebovic (2022), the decision to expand NATO to the East was motivated by the desire to create a broader security community consisting of democracies. Similarly, Goldgeier (2022) believes that stretching the zone of democracy was essential in the process of NATO expansion. Here, however, problems arise, as countries such as Hungary and Poland, and to some extent even the United States, are departing from democratic values. He is convinced that member states ought to recommit to democracy and help one other to counter anti-democratic forces. This is necessary if NATO as a community is to successfully face the tyranny and intimidation of Putin's Russia.

George realizes that the enlargement of NATO thwarted Putin's understanding of Russian imperial ambitions. Although she is aware of the current actions on his part towards Ukraine and the West are partly the answer to that, from her standpoint his imperial notion is a stable one and would exist regardless of NATO expansion. Shifting responsibility for the war in Ukraine to NATO is inaccurate and wrong (George 2022). Considering the methods of conducting foreign policy by the Kremlin, using military aggression, intimidation and blackmail, contempt

for the basic principles of the international community, and the desire to rebuild the empire, NATO enlargement appears to be an action that has limited the territorial scope of Russia's destabilizing policy.

In mid-May 2022, Vladimir Putin concluded that there was no hazard to Russia if Sweden and Finland joined NATO. Simultaneously, however, he threatened that developing the infrastructure and increasing NATO's military presence in these countries would meet with a decisive reaction on the part of Russia (Faulconbridge 2022). It can be assumed that Putin's statement resulted from the fact that he would be unable to stop NATO's enlargement to the Nordic countries, and therefore he strove to underestimate the significance of the event provoked by the aggression against Ukraine. It is worth inquiring, nevertheless, on what basis Russia would decide which states could and could not implement an independent foreign and security policy, including entering into military alliances.

As previously indicated, there is no consensus in the opinions of American researchers and experts on the legitimacy of NATO enlargement to the East after the Cold War and its impact on the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. According to John J. Mearsheimer, most of the responsibility for the crisis in Ukraine rests with the United States and its European allies, and the main reason for this is the expansion of NATO to the East. It is part of a broader strategy aimed at extracting Ukraine from the Russian orbit and integrating it with the West. This is also accompanied by the support for the pro-democratic national uprisings in Ukraine. He derives his thesis from a realistic position, and perceives Putin's reaction as a response to the West's violation of Russia's strategic interests. He believes that the West has been blinded by the liberal delusions that freedom and security can be sustained by spreading the principles of democracy and human rights (Mearsheimer 2014, 77-84). Mearsheimer's approach appears to ignore the interests of the sovereign states of Central and Eastern Europe, which are staunch allies of the United States.

R. K. Betts considers that NATO enlargement after the Cold War for Central and Eastern European countries was a poor decision, yet does not justify Russian aggression against Ukraine. He remarked:

I would have preferred not to kick Russia when it was down (since its recovery to major power status should have been anticipated), but to reach an understanding that combined western offers of assistance to bring Russia closer to the West while avoiding expansion of an alliance that appeared aimed against it. For former members of the Warsaw Pact this could have involved some measure of what during the Cold War was termed 'Finlandization', especially for the newly independent republics resulting from dissolution of the USSR. This might not have worked, but we should have tried, since NATO expansion was provocative to Moscow. That does not in any way excuse the aggression against Ukraine, but it does help to explain it (Betts 2022).

Also S. Biddle was opposed to NATO expansion after the Cold War. He was of the opinion that the risks associated with NATO enlargement could be severe and hence lead to a complicated situation. Nonetheless, in his view the current war in Ukraine is not a direct consequence of NATO enlargement to the East:

Going back to the immediate post-Cold War era, I was opposed to NATO expansion. I thought there was a downstream risk that we'd get into a situation like we are now in which the risks of an expanded NATO would be severe. But I understand the dilemma that NATO statesman faced at the time. I don't ascribe to the kind of hardcore Mearsheimer view that NATO expansion was a mistake and it's why the war is happening now. I don't see it that way at all. I think the balance of cost and risk for me counseled against (Biddle 2022).

According to him, however, the inclusion of Sweden and Finland into NATO will not cause a major challenge. If the war in Ukraine escalates, it is not because of the NATO enlargement, but the situation in Ukraine itself does not offer any other alternative to Putin (Biddle 2022).

In M. Doyle's estimation efforts could be made to reverse a number of the policies previously adopted and reduce tensions between NATO and Russia. He urges to develop something like 'détente', which he refers to as "cold peace". This would require to conclude agreements with Russia on Ukraine, cyber security, arms control and other issues. However, it would entail concessions also on the part of the West, including, for instance, the withdrawal of NATO forces from the new member states of the alliance. He believes that the deepening of the "new cold war" will lead to further tensions and conflicts. However, he realizes that this approach is idealistic and will be challenging to implement (Doyle 2022).

Conclusion

President Putin's claims and demands go beyond the mere issue of NATO enlargement, as he denies states the right to pursue sovereign foreign and security policy, and in the case of Ukraine, even undermines the foundations of its statehood. There is no unanimity among American researchers and experts as to whether NATO's expansion to the East after the Cold War was a strategic mistake, yet most of them disagree with this statement. The key factor is from what positions the considerations are conducted, whether it is a perspective closer to political realism or to the liberal current. Regardless of the assessment of the decision to expand NATO after the Cold War, the vast majority assume that justifying the Russian aggression against Ukraine with is groundless.

It cannot be unequivocally determined whether NATO enlargement to the East was a strategic mistake of the West and the reason for Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This is due to the fact that it is impossible to check the scenario in the real world without NATO enlargement. In fact, it might become apparent that failing to enlarge NATO could lead to even greater destabilization in Europe, and the war might spread not only to Ukraine, but also to other countries in the region. It may be regarded as certain that being outside NATO, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe would feel much more threatened by Russia than they are as NATO members.

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