

# Domestic Politics of NATO Expansion in Russia: Implications for American Foreign Policy

Michael McFaul  
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Stanford University

## I. THE PAST: UNDERSTANDING SUCCESS TO DATE

For two years, opponents of NATO expansion both in Russia and the West have warned that the act of inviting former Warsaw Pact countries into the Western alliance would bolster Russia's opposition forces domestically. The historic Madrid NATO summit came and went, however, without producing any visible reaction in Russian domestic politics. Everyone from neo-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy to neo-liberal Anatoly Chubais opposes NATO expansion in principle. But, in practice, NATO expansion to date has played little or no role in Russian domestic politics. Why not?

### A. Internal Factors

1) Yeltsin won the 1996 presidential election. Had Gennady Zyuganov won the 1996 election, the debate about NATO expansion in Russia would have been much more pronounced. The current Russian acquiescence to NATO expansion is not deeply rooted in Russian institutions or society, but is a consequence of a small group of leaders within Russia. Though challenged at several critical junctures, Russian liberals have defeated their illiberal opponents during most of Russia's volatile regime transition. (The decision to invade Chechnya was a notable and tragic exception) Their victories, in turn, have ensured that Russia has pursued peaceful, integrationist policies regarding the West rather than belligerent strategies.

2) Russia's weak opposition. Russia's communist forces are weak and ineffective. While several former communist parties in Eastern Europe have regained political power, and a few have even regained and then lost power again, Russia's communists have been sidelined for the past decade. Russia's communists failed to oust those who had initiated economic reform in Russia's pivotal second presidential election in 1996. Despite running against an incumbent who had shrunk the economy in half, bombed the parliament, "allowed" NATO to expand, and initiated a disastrous civil war in Chechnya in which 100,000 lives were lost in defeat, Russian communist leader Gennady Zyuganov still lost to Boris Yeltsin at the polls. Since this election, Russia's communists have become even weaker as an opposition force. While the Russian government has pursued a partial economic reform strategy that has benefited only a few and caused considerable pain to many, the Russian Communist Party and its allies in the Duma have approved every budget proposed by Yeltsin's government since 1994. In four years, Russian legislators have threatened a vote of no confidence in Yeltsin's government only once. Similarly, at the regional level, Russian communist and nationalist organizations supported several

successful gubernatorial candidates during the flurry of local elections that occurred in the fall of 1996. Soon after assuming power, however, most of these new "opposition" governors quickly pledged their loyalty to Yeltsin's government and distanced themselves from their opposition supporters. To date, a serious nationalist opposition independent of the Communist Party also has not coalesced. In 1993, neo-nationalist Zhirinovskiy exploded onto Russia's political stage as the first politician to offer a "third way," but did much to discredit Russia's nationalist movement soon thereafter. In 1996, General Lebed's authoritarian presence began to fill the opposition void, but he currently is a marginalized political figure.

3) The primacy of domestic problems over foreign policy issues. Russian elites in Moscow care deeply about NATO expansion. Russian society as a whole does not. Midstream in a social revolution, Russian citizens have a long list of domestic issues considered more important than any foreign policy issue. In the 1996 presidential election, foreign policy issues received virtually no attention. When asked in exit polls during the 1996 elections to identify the major issues of the day, only two percent mentioned foreign policy. Regarding specific policies, three quarters of the population still see cooperation with the West as an overriding priority, despite growing suspicions about Western intentions. In January 1997, only 21 percent of the population thought that the United States, Western Europe, and NATO posed a threat to Russia.

4) Economic lobbies and Russian foreign policy. Russia's economic transformation has created a small set of powerful economic interest groups who dominate state policymaking. Gazprom, oil companies, mineral exporters, financial-industrial groups, electricity and telecommunication firms, and a handful of high-tech enterprises have been the sweepstakes winners in Russia's economic transition. This handful of very profitable corporations and their political allies have provided sustained momentum for continued integration with the West. Interest groups more openly opposed to Western integration such as domestic producers threatened by imports and enterprises associated with the military industrial complex more generally have proven to be weak and ineffective lobbyists. The pro-Western business lobby has a rather limited scope of foreign policy interests. Above all else, they seek to maintain access to Western capital and markets. When security issues such as opposition to NATO expansion threaten these access interests, the coalition of liberals within the Russian government and their allies in Russia's economic society have cooperated to sustain engagement. Regarding other foreign policy issues that are not seen to have a direct relationship to these economic interests (such as Start II or trade with Iran), this same coalition either has neglected the problem altogether or allowed other foreign policy entrepreneurs to assume center-stage. (For instance, Russian oil companies and bankers have demonstrated little interest in arms control issues, allowing other interest groups to dominate debate on issues like START II or CFE negotiations. Similarly, this engagement coalition has ceded arms trade promotion to the Ministry of Atomic Energy and individual enterprises of the military-industrial complex.)

5) Russian weakness. Finally, Russian political leaders accepted NATO expansion because they had no choice. Especially after Chechnya, Russian weakness is now recognized by all political forces in Russia.

## **B. External Factors**

1) The American strategy of engagement succeeded. The American strategy of assisting Russian economic and political reform and helping to integrate Russia into the international community of states served to diminish the negative consequences of NATO expansion for US-Russian relations. The personal relationship between presidents Clinton and Yeltsin played a central role in defusing the NATO expansion issue in Russia. The timing of the "group of eight" summit in Denver was particularly well-planned. American diplomats have offered Russia a set of arguments for why NATO expansion need not derail US-Russian and have provided concrete incentives to encourage continued engagement.

2) The selection of new NATO members. From Moscow's vantage point, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland are the most "European" and anti-Russian countries from the former Warsaw Pact. (Remember 1956, 1968, and 1980-81.) Psychologically, therefore, these countries occupy a different place in Russian geo-strategic thinking than the Balkan or Baltic states.

3) American motivations for expansion were vague. Paradoxically, the debate in the United States about NATO expansion helped to diffuse Russian elite criticisms. Whatever the true motivations behind the decision to expand NATO, the account most reassuring to Russian elites was the "electoral" explanation. If the Clinton Administration was pushing for NATO expansion to win votes in 1996, then Russian elites found it easier to believe that the United States was not expanding NATO solely to keep Russia out of Europe.

4) Russia had no credible counter options. Russian foreign policy responses to NATO expansion were and remain weak. Integration with Belarus is premature economically. A push to create a military alliance between Commonwealth states would exacerbate relations at a time when economic integration is proceeding successfully. A Russian-Chinese defense agreement serves no strategic purpose and would damage the economic interests of both countries.

## **II. THE FUTURE: FACTORS THAT COULD DISRUPT THE STATUS QUO**

None of the factors just described that combined to defuse NATO expansion as a consequential issue in Russian domestic politics are stable. A change in any one of them could seriously alter today's precarious balance and exacerbate in turn US-Russian relations.

### **A. Internal Factors**

1) Change at the top and the rise of the opposition. Boris Yeltsin will not rule Russia forever. In the next presidential election, scheduled for the year 2000, candidates associated with the current ruling government--such as Viktor Chernomyrdin and Boris Nemtsov--are unlikely to win. While three years is obviously a long time in Russia, an analysis of the causes of liberal electoral victories in the past and recent gubernatorial elections suggest a different electoral logic after 1996 than during the polarized period between 1991-1996.

The threat of a communist comeback ended in the ballot box in 1996. In every binary election in the past six years--the June 1991 presidential vote, the April 1993 referendum, the December 1993 constitutional referendum, and the 1996 presidential election--anti-communism triumphed over communism. But with the collapse of communism now complete, anti-communism is also

dead as an electoral platform. Additionally, in the next presidential elections, the founder and leader of Russia's anti-communist bloc, Boris Yeltsin, will no longer be heading the ticket.

Shifting alliances and reorganization in both the "party of power" and the opposition has blurred the traditional lines of cleavage that have shaped Russian electoral politics over the last six years. The salient differences between Mr. Chernomyrdin and Mr. Zyuganov are increasingly less apparent. Similarly, the cleavages between liberals and nationalists are less obvious. Is Luzhkov a nationalist or liberal when he declares that the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol must be returned to Russia? Was Lebed a patriot, reformer, or traitor by actively pursuing a peace settlement in Chechnya? This lack of ideological clarity is compounded by the absence of an institutionalized party system. Consequently, Russian citizens will be voting for personalities, rather than liberals, conservatives, or social democrats. Charismatic personalities like Lebed and even Luzhkov gain from this new context, while bland ones like Chernomyrdin and Zyuganov suffer.

This new electoral landscape, coupled with the blurring of ideological divisions, gives two kinds of candidates the upper hand--protest candidates like Aleksandr Lebed and the non-ideological "khozyani" (authoritative administrators) who get things done like Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov. Both of these candidates--and these kinds of candidates more generally--will complicate Russia's relations with the West, as they have little international experience, parochial interests, and only vague (or at least unknown) commitments to liberal policies regarding markets, democracy, and foreign policy.

In the long term, the end of polarized politics will provide opportunities for new political ideologies and new political forces to emerge. Both communism and liberalism are damaged and discredited political programs in Russia today. Liberalism has the potential for revival (communism does not), but the process will be a long one. In this political vacuum, authoritarian, nationalist and even fascist ideas still have potential. (In comparative perspective, authoritarian dictators--Napoleon, Stalin, Hitler--have tended to seize power during revolutionary transitions roughly a decade after the beginning of transition. Russia is only six years into its transition.)

2) The breakdown of the liberal, pro-Western coalition. During the 1996 presidential election, Russia's business leaders buried their differences and cooperated to help reelect Yeltsin. In the last year, however, competition between these groups regarding economic matters has soured their political alliance. (Divisions between Gazprom and the Chubais/Nemtsov part of the Russian government prompted alliance between Gazprom and the communists on demonopolization regulations. Similarly, the Svyazinvest auction fueled divisions between Oneksimbank and Chubais/Nemtsov on the one hand and Boris Berezovsky, Logovaz, and Most Bank on the other.) These divides between economic elites could begin to influence Russian foreign policy, especially during the next electoral cycle.

3) The postponement of elections. Given the electoral prospects of the current government, ideas about postponement and fraud already have begun to percolate. No event could be more detrimental to US-Russian relations than such an act. The current regime is simply not strong enough to carry out this strategy, but its attempt to do so would be very destabilizing, and offers the most likely road to a coup or installation of a military regime, and the ascension to power of Russia's most anti-Western forces.

4) The future significance of foreign policy. Paradoxically, the end of Russia's revolutionary transition may allow foreign policy issues to become more important for the population as a whole. Economic growth eventually may stimulate the emergence of a wider middle class that may not have the same foreign policy interests as Russia's oligarchies. Conversely, the sustained absence of economic growth will stimulate the search for scapegoats abroad. (The new government's composition combined with the ethnic backgrounds of many prominent Russian bankers already has served to increase anti-Semitic and anti-foreign attacks within the nationalist press.) Neither change, however, will occur quickly.

#### **B. External Factors**

1. The further expansion of NATO without Russia. If there is to be a second expansion of NATO, then Russia should be included at the next moment for new admissions. If Russia is not included, the next expansion will have far greater domestic consequences than the first expansion.

2. New belligerent acts by NATO. Nationalists in Russia are waiting for a belligerent NATO act against Russian foreign policy interests that can be used to confirm their explanations about the motivations behind NATO expansion.

3. Russian war with a neighboring state. Any military confrontation involving Russia will strengthen the hand of nationalist forces in Russia. The probability of such a confrontation, however, is not high.

### **III. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY**

1. Make the new NATO-Russian relationship meaningful. This is a major challenge for US diplomats that demands sustained attention.

2. Demonstrate that NATO has been transformed. Greater information about the new NATO must be disseminated in Russia. Russian delegations to NATO headquarters, international seminars and conferences about security issues convened in Russia, and articles by Western leaders and commentators in Russian newspapers are all useful and should be expanded.

3. Envelop Russia in international institutions. Above all else, Russian elite opposition to NATO expansion was driven by a suspicion that expansion would keep Russia out of Europe. This fear can be mitigated by further integrating Russia into other international institutions like the World Trade Organization, the "group of eight," and OSCE.

4. Assist and Insist on Russian democracy. Over the long run, Russia will remain a peaceful partner of Western democracies if liberal institutions and liberal norms take hold internally and remain in place to shape and constrain policy after the departure of Russia's current liberal leaders. American policy towards Russia now must refocus on fostering the consolidation of these liberal norms and institutions in Russia. It is premature to be cutting democratic assistance programs. American leaders also can help Russia avoid a domestic disaster by insisting that their

counterparts in the Russian government hold free and fair elections on time and under law. The Russian voters are the West's greatest allies today in Russia. The best guarantee of peace between Russia and other democracies in the world is to insure that Russian citizens become Russia's most important foreign policymakers.

5. Engage Russia's new leaders. American support for liberal individuals in the Russian government, including most centrally Boris Yeltsin, has been a wise strategy. In times of institutional change and especially revolutionary change, individuals play a much more independent role in making policy than in stable political systems. Just as "bad" leaders in times of crisis can exacerbate the potential for conflict, "good" leaders in these same conditions can make decisions that facilitate peace. To back good leaders whose interests coincide with American interests, therefore, makes sense. The strategy of engaging individuals with dubious reform credentials in order to convince them of the benefits of reform has been less successful. In the next few years, the lines between good guys and bad guys will become fuzzier. In this new context, US leaders should seek closer ties and better understanding of those in the "gray zone" such as Aleksandr Lebed and Yuri Luzhkov. Just as the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission has given American leaders an opportunity to know Chernomyrdin, similar kinds of contacts should be fostered with Russia's new leaders, especially regional leaders.

6. Promote Russian economic development. The faster the Russian economy begins to grow, the better the chances are the Russian liberals can stay in power. It is unlikely, however, that economic growth will be sufficient enough in the next three years to influence the next presidential election.

7. Open a dialogue with Russia's opposition leaders. Parallel to expanding contact with Russian government officials at lower levels of power, US policymakers should develop informal channels with Russia's nationalist and communist opposition leaders and ideologues. Many of these people have poorly formed ideas about the West and little if no contact with Westerners. Likewise, Western policymakers and analysts have an equally poor understanding of the ideas and interests that motivate these opposition forces. Through non-governmental organizations and academic institutions, relations with these political leaders should be greatly expanded.