

BOOK FORUM

EUROPEAN SECURITY, NATO–RUSSIA RELATIONS, AND THE POST–COLD WAR ORDER

❖ Commentaries by John E. Herbst, Philip D. Zelikow,
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M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. 550pp. \$25.00 softcover and e-book.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: Mary Sarotte has published extensively about the remaking of European security institutions after the Cold War, focusing in particular on the interactions between leaders in Washington, Moscow, and Bonn/Berlin. Her latest book, *Not One Inch*, takes its title from a comment made by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker in February 1990 when he traveled to Moscow and met with Mikhail Gorbachev and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. By this point, it was clear that the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) would be absorbing the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in a reunified Germany, even though no precise arrangements or time frame had yet been established and the Soviet Union was still formally opposed to reunification. Baker's discussion with Gorbachev on 9 February 1990 focused on the prospects for German reunification and the likely consequences for European security. Gorbachev made clear that if reunification happened, he did not believe the united FRG should belong to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Baker sought to convince Gorbachev that the Soviet Union would be better off if Germany remained firmly rooted in European structures rather than left to its own devices. He assured Gorbachev that NATO would devise a "special military status" for the territory of the former GDR and that "NATO jurisdiction" would not extend to that eastern portion of a reunified Germany for an interim period.

When Baker used the phrase "not one inch to the East" to characterize the extension of NATO's jurisdiction, he was referring to the territory of the former East Germany, which at the time was still a separate state, the GDR. At no point during this conversation or during Baker's conversations with Shevardnadze in previous days did the question of NATO enlargement to other countries in East-Central Europe arise. The declassified transcripts of the conversations and other

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declassified Soviet documents confirm that Gorbachev and Shevardnadze understood that the phrase referred to the future security arrangements for GDR territory, not to anything beyond that.

Many years later, the phrase resurfaced when public officials and commentators in Russia, above all Vladimir Putin, began insisting — falsely — that Western governments in February 1990 promised not to bring former Warsaw Pact countries into NATO. Regardless of whether Putin actually believes this baseless claim, he keeps reiterating it whenever he wants to justify Russia's malevolent actions against its neighbors. Sarotte has rejected Putin's arguments, but she nonetheless chose to use the phrase for the title of her book. We asked five distinguished experts on European security to write assessments of *Not One Inch*. They evaluate many aspects of Sarotte's book, including why the title matters, and discuss how Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine (which began after Sarotte completed her book in 2021) sheds new light on the evolution of European security structures after the end of the Cold War.

Commentary by John E. Herbst

M. E. Sarotte's *Not One Inch: America, Russia and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate* is a comprehensive and timely book. Meticulously citing official documents, memoirs of the principal actors, and her own interviews with key figures, Sarotte paints on a broad canvas the complex decision-making in the 1990s that led to the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and, in her view, the emergence of a post–Cold War stalemate.

This book could not have come at a better moment. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine now well into its third year, the West's newfound unity in arming Ukraine and sanctioning Russia, and the entry of perennial neutral states Sweden and Finland into NATO as a shield from Russian aggression, it is a good time to look at the factors that led to the expansion of NATO membership after the Cold War.

In brief, the process was driven by the determination of Moscow's former clients to achieve security from future Russian domination. But enlargement would not have moved forward unless U.S. leaders had decided that NATO must not shut the door on the East-Central European states' aspirations. Other NATO countries, though not all, also supported the East-Central European countries from the outset. (Chancellor Helmut Kohl, for instance, wanted NATO members to the east so that Germany would no longer be a frontline state facing Russian power.)

Yet, this choice was not a simple one because Western leaders understood that enlargement was a political burden for Mikhail Gorbachev and

then Boris Yeltsin, who were promising greater cooperation with the West, particularly important regarding weapons of mass destruction, and who were pushing Russia on the road to democracy. This last factor explains why U.S. President Bill Clinton's administration did not initially embrace enlargement and instead devised the ingenious halfway house, Partnership for Peace (PfP), which might have served as a modest substitute for the security offered by NATO or, as it turned out, a temporary measure to set the stage for enlargement.

Clinton's eventual decision in favor of expansion followed a sharp internal debate within his national security team and in the broader foreign policy community. But it is no accident that that decision came after the signing of the Budapest Memorandum in December of 1994, which codified the denuclearization of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. Concern about relations with Moscow and Yeltsin's political health also dictated U.S. and NATO tactics as they moved toward expansion. These included avoiding certain steps before Yeltsin's reelection in 1996 and offering Moscow concessions, such as membership in the Group of 7 (G-7) and the establishment of the NATO–Russia Council.

Sarotte lays out in readable prose the thinking of the principal actors at key points in the process. This is a real achievement, given the many turns of the plot and the details she must cover to explain what happened. She provides substantial background to perhaps the most famous line uttered in this entire NATO saga, which just happens to be the title of her book, “not one inch.”

This refers to what Secretary of State James Baker said in seeking to persuade Gorbachev in February 1990 to agree to German unification as a NATO member with U.S. troops and weapons remaining in the western part of country. Sarotte writes “Baker then repeated the key concept from his talks with [Foreign Minister Eduard] Shevardnadze in the form of a question, unwittingly touching off a controversy that would last decades: ‘Would you prefer to see a unified Germany outside of NATO, independent and with no U.S. forces, or would you prefer a unified Germany to be tied to NATO, with assurances that NATO’s jurisdiction would not shift one inch eastward from its present position?’” The Soviet leader replied that any expansion of the “zone of NATO” was unacceptable. According to Gorbachev, Baker answered, “we agree with that” (p. 55).

Yet, Sarotte also contends that Gorbachev has not always presented accurate information about his interactions with the West on NATO expansion (p. 11) and that one of the researchers for Baker's memoirs publicly alleged that the former secretary of state had made major changes in the manuscript that may “skirt the truth” (p. 12). Baker has always maintained that his

question to Gorbachev was hypothetical and that there was never any written commitment, but Russian and Western critics of NATO enlargement cite ambiguities in the record as proof of U.S./NATO perfidy.

More important than what Baker said or did not say was the strategic choice facing the United States when the Cold War ended: Should U.S. officials give priority to Russia or to the countries that had long been dominated by Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union? For Sarotte, both priorities were compelling, and she believes the United States should have sought a way to achieve both. She argues that in the early days the Clinton administration had found the right tool, the PfP, which would not provoke Russia and would still encourage democratization in East-Central Europe without drawing a new line between East and West there that would leave Ukraine on the wrong side of the line (pp. 4–5).

Here, Sarotte leaves behind her obvious gifts as a talented historian and offers a counterfactual. Like many a general bedazzled by the last war, she ventures that U.S. reconciliation with Germany and Japan after the Second World War could have been replicated with Russia. The West, she argues, did not need to antagonize Moscow by going forward with NATO enlargement in the 1990s. She might be right, but the book does not make a convincing case.

Perhaps the reason she came to that conclusion is the one relevant missing element in her impressive research on the subject of post–Cold War European security arrangements: Moscow’s policies toward the other newly independent countries that had emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

From the moment the USSR disappeared, Russian leaders began aiding pro-Kremlin forces in nearby states as a means of exerting pressure on their governments. That also meant military support, at times involving Russian troops, who doubled as “peacekeepers.” Moscow supported Abkhazia, Ajaria, and South Ossetia against the Georgian government; Transnistria against the Moldovan government; and, in a more complex fashion, ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh against Azerbaijan. This was Kremlin policy on the ground—the frozen conflicts policy—from the first moments of the post-Soviet period, years before there was significant public discussion of admitting specific countries to NATO.

Moscow’s quest to dominate its neighbors provoked legitimate concerns among other countries that had been under Soviet sway. Since 2022, with Russia waging a major conventional war against the second largest country in Europe, we are seeing the logical conclusion of the Kremlin’s three-decade-old frozen conflicts policy. We are also seeing a vindication of the momentous decision to enlarge NATO. This all suggests that expanding NATO was a very

wise decision that led to the spread of liberty and prosperity to countries that might otherwise have fallen once again under Moscow's illiberal sway.

But this decision also left Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova in a gray zone between Russia and NATO. One of the strengths of Sarotte's book is the recognition of Ukraine's centrality to the NATO enlargement question. Yet, while recognizing the risk to Ukraine and more broadly European security of expanding NATO and leaving Ukraine on the other side of the line, the Clinton administration decided to pursue NATO enlargement without seeking to include Ukraine.

Being left out of NATO made Georgia and Ukraine vulnerable, as Moscow demonstrated with its war on Georgia in 2008 and against Ukraine since 2014. The sensible conclusion is that, although the original decision to expand NATO was a wise one, more thought should have been given to the problem of security for the countries not granted entry. That did not happen because the United States and NATO did not pay attention to Moscow's frozen conflicts policy in the 1990s and because Putin has embarked on a revisionist agenda in his neighborhood and across the territory that once made up the Soviet empire.

Commentary by Philip D. Zelikow

Mary Sarotte's book is not really about the evolution of European security in the 1990s. An analysis of that topic would be dominated by Balkan wars, new insecurities, historic disarmament of the most militarized region in the world, and unprecedented arms control from the Atlantic to the Urals. It would describe how the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) transformed from an organization preparing to wage World War III to an instrument of latent reassurance, retaining a much-reduced U.S. connection to Europe's security. That is not what her book is about.¹

1. For a summary discussion of the material changes in European security, see Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *To Build A Better World: Choices to End the Cold War and Create a Global Commonwealth* (New York: Twelve, 2019), pp. 291–304, 344–345, but examples of other in-depth studies include Celeste Wallander, *Mortal Friends, Best Enemies: German–Russian Cooperation After the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Jenonne Walker, *Security and Arms Control in Post-Confrontation Europe*, SIPRI Research Report (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Mark Kramer, “NATO, Russia, and East European Security,” in Kate Martin and Uri Ra’anana, eds., *Russia: A Return to Imperialism?* (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 105–161; Frédéric Bozo, “The Failure of a Grand Design: Mitterrand's European Confederation,” *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 17 No. 3 (2008), pp. 391–412; and Mark Wilcox, “Russia and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) — A Paradigm Change?” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2011), pp. 567–581.

Instead, she recounts the debate over whether to make symbolic but controversial gestures to extend alliance commitments. At the time, these commitments were not extended to meet any concrete threat, enable military plans, or facilitate important military deployments. They were performative gestures of solidarity, above all toward Poland. These gestures would foreseeably irritate a new, post-Soviet Russian state under great stress. Her book is the best chronicle so far of the debates, mainly the U.S. debates, about whether to make that trade-off.

I was involved directly in the events she describes, as the official on the National Security Council (NSC) staff responsible for the NATO and European security portfolio in 1989–1991, and I participated in the later debate over NATO enlargement. In that debate, in the mid-1990s, my views were close to those of two prominent defense officials in the Clinton administration, William Perry and Ashton Carter (with whom I worked on other issues), and also close to the views of my old NSC boss, Brent Scowcroft. I thought the NATO enlargement debate had become a theatrical exercise on both sides, Western and Russian. Officials on both sides had begun using this issue in their domestic politics to divert attention from more serious problems.²

Sarotte’s thesis, elegantly explained, is that in the early 1990s there was no need to force a trade-off between, in essence, Poland and Russia. A strategy of “incremental security partnerships,” she argues, was “the smart move” adopted early on. “But having figured out the smart move, Washington called the question too soon anyway—and the American decision to do so ultimately combined with Russia’s own tragic choices in fateful ways” (pp. 4–5). I agree with this thesis. It is convincingly argued and darkly enlivened by examples of Boris Yeltsin’s tragicomic behavior and Bill Clinton’s diplomatic acrobatics.

I strongly disagree, however, with what Sarotte herself calls the “betrayal myth.” Supposedly, as Russian President Vladimir Putin has argued, U.S. and West German officials in February 1990 “promised that if Moscow let Germany unify, NATO would extend ‘not one inch’ eastward.” She adds: “In [Putin’s] view, the West reneged on that pledge and got away with it, since there was no binding agreement on this issue.” Sarotte explains that the actual German settlement “codified the opposite. . . . The written historical evidence does not support Mr. Putin’s narrative of betrayal. Still, Western

2. See, for example, Philip D. Zelikow, “The Masque of Institutions,” *Survival*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (January–February 1996), pp. 6–18, also published in Philip Gordon, ed., *NATO’s Transformation: The Changing Shape of the Atlantic Alliance* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), pp. 77–89.

negotiators should be cognizant of how deeply many Russians feel the psychological weight of these diplomatic battles, decades after the fact.”³

Yet, although Sarotte knew how deeply these misguided feelings of betrayal ran, she chose “Not One Inch” as the title of her book—a title that was bound to inflame those feelings further.

The title was a vivid hook for her book, but it had undesirable results. After the words of her title were invoked by Russian politicians to justify Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, Sarotte felt she should publish an op-ed article denouncing the “betrayal myth.” A year later, to her dismay, the three words in her title were still being adduced to justify the horrific invasion. “Every time Putin invokes [those three words], I’m inundated by a fresh wave of queries about the evidence I’ve collected.” Again and again, she finds herself having to explain that the archives “tell a different history from Putin’s.”⁴

At least since 1995, when Condoleezza Rice and I first published the details of the U.S., Soviet, and German negotiations in January and February 1990, there has been no real factual dispute about who said what to whom.⁵ There has been some confusion about why they said those things and what they meant at the time.

The idea of saying that NATO would not move eastward to the territory of East Germany (the separate German state under Communist rule until the end of 1989) originated in January 1990 with West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher. In a speech given in Tutzing under the title “German Unity in the European Framework,” Genscher announced his new security concept. He had worked on this speech for weeks, consulting almost no one else.

In the speech, Genscher declared that the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) would remain in NATO but that both NATO and the Warsaw Pact would be subsumed into a new structure. They would become “elements” of new “cooperative security structures throughout Europe.” This would build on the existing “Helsinki process,” the 35-country Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). Genscher’s concept was compatible with the French president’s proposal for a new European confederation (a confederation that would not include the United States). In Genscher’s view, a

3. M. E. Sarotte, “The Betrayal Myth Behind Putin’s Brinkmanship,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 January 2022, p. 17.

4. Mary Elise Sarotte, “‘Not One Inch’: Unpacking Putin’s Deadly Obsession with the Details of History,” *FT Magazine*, 17 February 2023, p. 3.

5. Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 160–191.

mandate to prepare this “future structure of Europe” would be adopted at a CSCE summit later in 1990. It would then reach fruition at another CSCE summit in 1992.

A few days later, on 2 February, Genscher planted this formulation with U.S. Secretary of State James Baker. At the time, Genscher thought there was no need to talk about extending NATO eastward because, in his plan, there might end up being no NATO at all. NATO would no longer need to exist. It and the Warsaw Pact would be merged into and replaced by the new pan-European security system that Genscher hoped could soon be created.

In fact, when reporters pressed Genscher about his odd formulation (after the meeting with Baker), he deflected their questions, saying, “Nobody ever spoke about a halfway membership [of Germany in NATO], this way or that. What I said is, there was no intention of extending the NATO area to the East. And I think you should wait for things to further develop. . . . That will be the situation at this summit, the CSCE summit.”⁶

At this point, Sarotte adds to the confusion. At one level, she seems to understand Genscher’s intent. She quotes Genscher’s remark to the British foreign secretary on 6 February that “both alliances [NATO and Warsaw Pact] would become part of the [new] common European security structure” (p. 51). Genscher ordered his subordinates, she says, to “flesh out alternatives to the two-bloc structure of European security” and “move beyond outdated bloc thinking” by institutionalizing and expanding the CSCE (pp. 52–53).

Yet, in other passages, Sarotte treats Baker’s subsequent February debrief of Genscher’s formula to the U.S. ambassador to West Germany as if it were “the crossing of a conceptual watershed.” In these passages she contends that “the small circle of top players in Washington and Bonn knew Genscher was sketching the contours of NATO’s future relationship not just with the eastern part of his own country but also with Central and Eastern Europe” (p. 50).

But read carefully what the debrief from Baker on 4 February to the U.S. ambassador actually said:

5. Genscher confirmed that neutrality for a unified Germany is out of the question. The new Germany would remain in NATO because NATO is an essential building block to a new Europe. In stating this, Genscher reiterated the need to assure the Soviets that NATO would not extend its territorial coverage to the area of the GDR nor anywhere else in Eastern Europe for that matter (he made this point with the press after the meeting).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

6. Genscher spent a lot of time elaborating on his recent speech [in Tutzung]. *He puts great emphasis on the CSCE process with a vision that CSCE ultimately be the vehicle to new security arrangements in all of Europe.* He therefore attaches great urgency to the forthcoming CSCE summit as a way both to reassure the Soviets and intensify the process between a 1990 summit and a 1992 summit.⁷

The text shows it is misleading to claim that Genscher (or U.S. officials recounting Genscher's vision) contemplated "NATO's future relationship . . . with Central and Eastern Europe."

In Genscher's vision, all the current alliance setups would be frozen, as they became ingredients in the new structure. It was the CSCE that would have the future relationship with Eastern Europe. As NATO transitioned into oblivion, it would not have much of a relationship with anyone.

For Baker's part, he and his inner circle were intensely focused on something else. They wanted to develop a process for negotiating the external aspects of German unification. They developed a vision for this that became known as the "Two Plus Four" (the two Germanies plus the four powers that had residual responsibility for Germany dating from 1945). Even as Genscher persuaded Baker to accept his Tutzung formula, Baker was persuading Genscher to accept the Two Plus Four.

Baker and his inner circle did not immediately understand the full significance of Genscher's Tutzung vision. Characteristically, Genscher was being elliptical. Baker and his aides had not focused on the impracticality of the Tutzung formula in purely NATO terms.

In December 1989, Baker had elaborated the U.S. vision for NATO's future, which was that it would be refashioned as a much more political organization. It would anchor a continuing U.S. commitment to Europe's security but would no longer focus on preparing for World War III. Just before seeing Genscher, Baker mistakenly thought his concept of a "demilitarized" eastern Germany was about the same as Genscher's Tutzung formula.⁸

So, for the following week (2–9 February), including the meetings in Moscow with Mikhail Gorbachev and Eduard Shevardnadze, Baker signed off on Genscher's formula as if it were somehow synonymous with his own

7. State 36191, "Baker/Genscher Meeting February 2," 4 February 1990, FOIA #2001-1166-F (emphasis added). The debrief came from Baker's counselor, Robert Zoellick, to the deputy (James Dobbins) to the assistant secretary of state for Europe, Raymond Seitz. Dobbins then drafted this message for the U.S. ambassador, Vernon Walters. Because Walters was getting this debrief in part so that he could share the information with visiting National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, I had a copy at the time of this message in draft and cited it in Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, p. 420 n. 44.

8. Zelikow and Rice, *To Build a Better World*, p. 468 n. 131.

notion of transition. His jotted notes refer to “unified Ger anchored in a changed (polit.) NATO—whose juris. would not move eastward!”⁹ But Baker made no mention of transitioning to new security structures or using the CSCE to build them.

Baker concentrated on making the case for accepting German unification in NATO and his proposal for a Two Plus Four negotiating process. Meanwhile, as Baker took off for Moscow, those of us who closely followed the European security and NATO issues realized what Genscher had in mind and the significance of this for any future of NATO at all.

There has never been a factual dispute about what happened next. At the NSC staff, Robert Blackwill and I conferred with colleagues in the State Department’s European bureau, British government, and West German chancellery. With Scowcroft’s support, Blackwill and I drafted a letter for President George H. W. Bush to send to Baker (and to Chancellor Helmut Kohl) to drop the “not move eastward” Tutzing formula. Instead, with all of Germany in NATO, the former East Germany would have some “special military status” to be determined. On receiving the letter, Baker instantly adopted this new line.

Chancellor Kohl’s government became more divided. In Moscow for his own meeting with Gorbachev, Kohl put aside Bush’s advice and stayed with Genscher’s Tutzing formula. Kohl did not abandon it until later in February, under pressure from internal dissenters in Bonn and from Washington.¹⁰

At the time, in February 1990, Soviet leaders reacted noncommittally. They neither understood nor accepted the Tutzing formula. They too were only beginning to understand that Genscher envisioned that a new pan-European system, based on the CSCE, would subsume and replace both of the old alliances. The Soviet government never quite bought into that idea, either. The Soviet government, led by Gorbachev, promptly reiterated its firm opposition to a united Germany remaining in NATO.

During the meetings in Moscow in February, Gorbachev had agreed in principle that Germany should be unified. Kohl’s team thought this was a public relations coup. But, to Gorbachev, this was not a new position. Nor was it a concession to Kohl’s (or Baker’s) blandishments.

9. Baker notes from James A. Baker Papers, Princeton University, Box 108, Folder 14.

10. Sarotte has a good treatment of the internal FRG debate, which began within Genscher’s Foreign Ministry. See also Kristina Spohr, “Precluded or Precedent-Setting? The NATO Enlargement Question in the Triangular Bonn–Washington–Moscow Diplomacy of 1990–1991,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* Vol. 14, No. 4 (Fall 2012), pp. 4–54.

Gorbachev had made the decision to accept German unification about two weeks earlier. He had worked on it with East Germany's leader. Their willingness to accept German unity had already been announced to the world the previous week.¹¹ Even though the Soviet and East German conception of German unification was quite different from the emerging West German (and U.S.) conception, both sides had already accepted the principle.

The question of whether a country like Poland should come into NATO was not yet on any leader's mind. Perhaps the best evidence of this is what the prime minister of Poland himself, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, had to say when he came to Washington and met with Bush.

In their first small meeting, on 21 March, the two leaders focused mainly on the Polish–German border issue. When NATO came up, they talked only about the German problem. Mazowiecki worried that “a NATO solution [for Germany] is not acceptable to Gorbachev.” The next morning, the two leaders had another restricted follow-up meeting. Like Genscher, Mazowiecki at the time preferred a pan-European collective security arrangement based on the CSCE.

As for Poland's future security, Mazowiecki's outlook in March 1990 was more nationalist than multilateral:

We are between a unifying Germany and a Soviet Union having a variety of unpredictable processes. I want to ensure that U.S. policy envisages a strong Poland—not on a German or Soviet scale, but as a big stable factor between Germany and the Soviet Union. Poland could serve as a basic factor for a new democratic order in Europe. With American support, this role could grow.

Bush welcomed this statement.¹²

It is not hard to trace when leaders at the level of Bush, Baker, and Scowcroft first felt they had to develop a position on the possibility that Poland and other East European countries would join NATO. Their aides started feeling the need to propose talking points on the subject.

In the case of the State Department, Sarotte persuasively dates this moment to April 1990 (p. 396, n. 23). The April 1990 accelerant was the Soviet

11. See, for example, Marc Fisher, “East German Offers Plan for Unity,” *The Washington Post*, 2 February 1990, p. A5, reporting on the East German-Soviet plan announced on 1 February. On 2 February, Gorbachev had explained this plan in calls with Bush, Kohl, François Mitterrand, and Margaret Thatcher.

12. See the U.S. memoranda of the conversation, prepared by Scowcroft for the meetings on 21 and 22 March 1990, available from the online Memcons and Telcons collection posted by the George Bush Presidential Library in College Station, TX. Aside from the interpreters, only Bush and Scowcroft were present on the U.S. side. Mazowiecki was joined by Ryszard Wojtkowski.

economic blockade against Lithuania, which alarmed the East Europeans and hastened the formal end of the Warsaw Pact.

That dovetails with my experience on the NSC staff, where I began developing a position in early April 1990. This was the position that eventually led to the proposal I put forth with Rice to invite all members of the Warsaw Pact, including the Soviet Union, to set up diplomatic liaison missions at NATO. That proposal eventually gained approval and planted the seeds that grew in 1991 into a North Atlantic Cooperation Council and then evolved, in 1993, to become the Partnership for Peace.¹³

Sarotte’s handling of the subsequent development of this issue is solid. As she moves into the Clinton administration period, she focuses more on the U.S. dimension, with less work in German or Russian sources. She draws on the documentary record and available oral histories, and she has conducted valuable interviews of her own, not all of which are cited in her notes.

As the Bush administration left office in January 1993, lower-level officials had started fostering ideas for NATO enlargement. But these ideas had not yet won over anyone at the top — not Baker, not Scowcroft, and certainly not Bush.

The debate intensified in 1993 and 1994, as Sarotte recounts. Aided by a remarkable archival find, she persuasively dates a secret turning point in the U.S. debate during the last few months of 1994, culminating in a small meeting at the White House on 21 December (pp. 206–207). The reasons seemed to range from moral obligation to countries like Poland to discussions of domestic politics after the Democrats had been badly defeated in the 1994 midterm elections. There is no indication that any major allies of the United States — above all Germany — had put any great pressure on the U.S. government to address this issue.

Knowing most of the people involved in the decision at the time, I think Sarotte may understate the personal factors at work. This was a decision driven by a handful of officials, a list that did not include either the president or the secretary of state. Most important were Anthony Lake, Richard Holbrooke, and Strobe Talbott, and possibly also Vice President Al Gore. These men — especially Lake and Holbrooke (peculiar allies) — were old hands, ambitious

13. I suggested this idea to Rice, who encouraged it, and Blackwill, who was skeptical. I first raised it with Scowcroft on 16 April, and Rice backed it. By mid-May, Blackwill was convinced. The first significant interagency discussion of it was on 11 June. Undersecretary of State Reginald Bartholomew, said, “Wow!” and asked: Would we bring the East Europeans into the alliance structure? Some form of associate relationship? Blackwill replied that the idea was a bold response to Gorbachev’s fear of isolation from the new Europe. Zoellick, emphasizing that he represented Baker’s view, backed the idea. See Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, pp. 304, 307–308, 460 n. 36.

to make a large mark on U.S. foreign policy, something comparable to what the predecessor Bush administration had accomplished. By late 1994, they had experienced nearly two years of failure and frustration.

The moves in the 1990s toward NATO enlargement unnecessarily strained relations with Russia at a very bad time for that country. But this was not the time, or the issue, on which the West “lost Russia.” That decisive breakpoint probably came in the mid-to-late 2000s, for reasons beyond the scope of Sarotte’s book. The NATO issue was also not the worst strain on U.S.–Russia relations in the 1990s.

From a political-military standpoint, the 1999 NATO war against Serbia over Kosovo caused far greater strain and anger. Worse than all of that, though, was the political and economic chaos in Russia itself, the way that chaos discredited “democracy” and “reform,” and the way the United States became associated with the chaos and discredit.

One of the most fateful consequences of the U.S. decision to press NATO enlargement is that it tied the U.S. government more tightly to Boris Yeltsin. The push for NATO enlargement put huge weight on the relationship with Yeltsin as the means to achieve it. The push thus also became the time “when the ‘Bill and Boris Show’ was center stage with its dark and unintended hilarity.”¹⁴

These paired commitments became a strategic misjudgment. Yeltsin’s historic moment to play a constructive part in Soviet and Russian history may already have been passing by late 1993.¹⁵ Those commitments also then compromised the U.S. approach to the vital question of how best to support the post-Communist economic transition in Russia.

The fundamental problem that bedeviled all Russian reform efforts from April 1992, through the first ruble collapse in October 1994, and on through the even greater financial collapse in August 1998, was Russia’s inability to impose and sustain fiscal and monetary discipline. Chinese reformers never lost that discipline. Russia’s rulers during this period never found it.

From 1993 through 1998, the Clinton administration constantly pressed the International Monetary Fund to relax conditionality, accept hollow Russian promises, and keep the money flowing, an approach that fostered the

14. Anders Stephanson, “The Bill and Boris Show,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 June 2002, p. 11, reviewing Strobe Talbott’s memoir.

15. This was my view at the time. “The alternative to the current U.S. policy is not abandonment of Russian reform. It is the articulation of coherent policy goals that transcend internal Russian politics. The adhesion to Yeltsin risks encouraging within Russia exactly the polarized, anti-American tendencies that Washington fears.” See Philip D. Zelikow, “Beyond Boris Yeltsin,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (January/February 1994), pp. 44, 45.

lawless ruin of “partial” reform. For only one among numerous examples, look at the 1996 loans Sarotte describes (p. 247).¹⁶ As she recounts, it is impossible to separate the U.S. commitment to NATO enlargement from these ruinous economic policies to align with and prop up Yeltsin at all costs.

Of course, the standard argument was that Yeltsin’s opponents were former Communists and would-be fascists. But, at that time, there was no possibility of a return to the Soviet Union. If the United States had taken a firm stand refusing to subsidize partial reform, refusing to take sides in Russia’s domestic politics, Yeltsin’s opponents would have faced the same political-economic dilemmas Yeltsin had faced.

But that stance would have placed the United States on firmer ground to pursue a policy of detached respect, sustaining effective programs that had a real impact on Russia’s nuclear and biological weapons legacy. U.S. officials would not have been blamed for subsidizing the misrule of Russia’s drunken ruler while simultaneously expanding NATO and waging war on Serbs over little Kosovo.

Russia’s financial collapse in August 1998 was crucial in facilitating the rise of Putin. After being handed power by Yeltsin at the end of 1999, Putin returned to an outright dictatorship but also established fiscal and monetary discipline that allowed him to receive credit for the economic revival that had begun in Russia during Yeltsin’s final year.

Sarotte does not place NATO enlargement in the context of an overall appraisal of U.S. policies toward Russia in the 1990s. The greatest failure of these policies was not NATO enlargement. The greatest tragedy was the extent to which the United States became associated with Russia’s soul-crushing economic and social collapse.

Commentary by Charles Gati

Mary Sarotte, my distinguished former colleague, has published a censorious book about the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the 1990s. During the initial years of the Clinton administration, I was a senior member of the U.S. Department of State’s Policy Planning Staff, which was a strong proponent of the idea of enlargement. I thought then, and I think today, that it was a worthwhile initiative.

16. See Zelikow and Rice, *To Build a Better World*, pp. 308–315, 328–344. See also the recent reflections of John Odling-Smee, *Towards Market Economies: The IMF and the Economic Transition in Russia and Other Former Soviet Countries* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2022).

By contrast, Sarotte emphasizes three critical points. First, the United States, notably Secretary of State James Baker, misled Soviet/Russian leaders when he promised not to move NATO eastward, not one inch, as the book's title notes. Second, Sarotte accepts the Kremlin's self-serving claim that NATO's enlargement was an existential threat to Russia and therefore unacceptable—a claim voiced by President Boris Yeltsin after he replaced his pro-Western Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev with Evgenii Primakov in the mid-1990s and then, more forcefully and repeatedly, by President Vladimir Putin and his acolytes in the 21st century. Sarotte's third point is that the reversal of fragile democratic trends in Russia in the early 1990s came about because of the U.S. government's push for supposedly rapid enlargement.

As an academic valuing the fine points—the nuances—of policy debates, I see some, but not much, merit in her critical observations.

Yes, Secretary Baker did make an unfortunate remark about the eastern part of Germany early on, suggesting NATO's limited objectives. But the Bush administration was otherwise distinctly mindful of Russia's sensitivities. Recall the administration's successful effort to convince Ukraine to give up its nuclear arsenal—in exchange for the Kremlin's pledge to respect Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity. Recall that, as noted by Sarotte on p. 123, President Bush was harshly criticized after he gave a speech in late July 1991 offering rather patronizing advice to Ukrainians asking them to respect Moscow's needs and preferences.

The Clinton administration was equally careful, assuring the Russians on several occasions that enlargement was going to be a slow, time-consuming process. In this context, Baker's remark was but a sideshow that was subsequently puffed up to make two administrations in Washington—and NATO—appear far more indifferent to Russian concerns than they actually were. After all, it was Washington that suggested to Moscow informally, behind the scenes, that NATO was open to some form of Russian participation, too, and it was Moscow that failed to respond positively to Washington's intimations. (Looking back, it might have been better to have voiced all of these hints and probes publicly, but at that time, domestic political considerations in the United States seemed to preclude that possibility.)

On the second point: throughout Russian history, leaders in the Kremlin have tended to exaggerate foreign threats. To be sure, other countries, including the United States, have done the same. Moreover, in the Russian case, there were times when Western countries did indeed pose a threat—the Napoleonic Wars, the halfhearted U.S. and British intervention in 1918, and the invasion by Nazi Germany. In all other cases, however, Kremlin leaders had domestic political motivations for overstating the outside world's

hostility. They sought to convince the Russian public that defense of the homeland required the maintenance of authoritarian rule. For centuries, Russian political leaders have been attributing all domestic difficulties and failures to foreign malevolence. In 1995, after a long, candid discussion with Foreign Minister Kozyrev in his Moscow apartment, I could see that Russian policymakers regarded Chechnya and economic instability as the only serious threats to Russian security, far outweighing any problem that might arise from the prospect of NATO enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe.

Third, I disagree most of all with Sarotte's suggestion that the United States deserves blame for the end of Russia's short-lived democratic experiment in the early 1990s. The context in the 1990s was totally different from the situation that existed after World War II, when the United States was instrumental in fostering vibrant democratic systems in West Germany and Japan. Three factors were crucial in that earlier success: (1) Germany and Japan were thoroughly defeated in a devastating war, (2) the political elites in those two countries were willing and even eager to give up their militant traditions, and (3) U.S. troops occupied their territory for years (and, indeed, some are still based there today). In the absence of these three circumstances, an external power is bound to encounter formidable difficulty in changing another large country's history and tradition. At best, the external actors can make a small difference at the margins. Despite great efforts, the United States could not turn Vietnam and Cuba into democracies. U.S. policy toward China, from the Nixon administration to the Carter administration and beyond, seemed to rest on the false assumption that trade engagements and other incentives would eventually produce at least a semi-democratic environment in that country. Although occupied by the United States, Iraq certainly has not followed a democratic path. More recently, two of the newer NATO members—Hungary and Poland—have been less than steadfast in their commitment to earlier democratic changes. All in all, then, the United States should not be blamed for Russia's own choice to revert to its autocratic traditions, all the more so because Russia's flirtation with democracy ended in the mid-1990s—several years before NATO enlargement to Central Europe began.

Still, in my view, democracy promotion remains a good idea for countries in which there is at least some chance that the ideals of democracy could take root. Germany and Japan, and their special circumstances after World War II, are prime examples of what can be achieved. The Russian case, despite our early optimism, illustrates the opposite: that democracy could not be successfully transplanted there irrespective of what the United States and its Western allies did or did not do. Elsewhere, as in most countries in Central and

Eastern Europe with at least a modicum of respect for the rule of law and for the rights of minorities—and despite hesitations, improvisations, and mistakes in U.S. foreign policy—enlargement has been rather successful. After all, almost all of the new members seem to value the benefits of pluralist democracy at home and NATO’s protective umbrella against Russian aggression. Note that in recent years, the Russian government has intervened militarily only in such non-NATO countries as Georgia, Moldova, Syria, and Ukraine—but not a single country sheltered by NATO membership.

Commentary by Daniel S. Hamilton

Mary Elise Sarotte breaks new historical ground by tracing the evolution of U.S. policy toward the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) from 1989 to 1999, as the Cold War ended, Germany was reunified, the Soviet Union was disbanded, Yugoslavia disintegrated into warfare, and a new era dawned. The volume is distinguished by Sarotte’s relentless, pioneering work to declassify key documents, particularly from the Bill Clinton Presidential Library. She draws on once-secret papers, interviews with policymakers, and other histories of the period in an effort to explain not only why the United States decided that NATO should enlarge its membership after the Cold War but also how U.S. considerations interacted with developments in Russia. The prose is carefully crafted, highly readable, and often insightful.

Initially, Sarotte tries to thread the needle between the “why” and “how” of NATO enlargement. “The expansion of NATO was a justifiable response to the challenges of the 1990s and to the entreaties of new Central and Eastern European democracies,” she states. “The problem was *how* it happened” (p. 3). Ultimately, however, she decides that the “why” and the “how” were so intertwined that it is “not possible to separate the question of whether enlargement was a good idea from how it happened” (p. 349). She speculates about “feasible alternatives” to the decisions that were made and laments what she believes to have been missed opportunities.

In essence, her argument is that the “how” of enlargement redivided Europe; that the Partnership for Peace (PfP) would have been a better path, with NATO enlargement pushed to an undefined future, beyond the two terms of the Clinton administration; and that even at that point, various forms of qualified NATO membership would have been preferable to granting new allies full and equal status.

Sarotte’s study is largely a tale of two countries. She views NATO’s post-Cold War adaptation and enlargement primarily through a U.S.–Russian lens.

Although she is correct to state that the question of extending NATO’s Article 5 commitment underscored the centrality of U.S. decision-making, the “how” of enlargement — her self-proclaimed focus — was also influenced by other allies and above all by the states of Central and Eastern Europe. She touches on the influence of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, his defense minister Volker Rühle, and various East European leaders, but she largely sticks to the Washington–Moscow axis. This is perhaps in part because some of the German, French, Russian, Polish, and other documents covering these issues remain classified. The UK National Archives has declassified relevant internal documents from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Prime Minister’s Office for the 1990s, revealing some important additional perspectives, but Sarotte did not integrate these into her narrative.¹⁷

Not One Inch

Sarotte sets the stage by offering useful nuances to the ongoing argument about whether the administration of George H. W. Bush made any pledges to limit NATO as the Cold War ended. This is a matter of acute contemporary relevance, inasmuch as Russian President Vladimir Putin and his propagandists have charged that NATO leaders “cheated” Russia, “vehemently, blatantly,” by renegeing on a supposed “promise” not to extend NATO “an inch” into Eastern Europe.¹⁸

Sarotte draws on her archival trove to round out previous accounts of various public and private statements that U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, as well as West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, made in early 1990 as part of initial discussions regarding possible modalities for German unification. Each, in his own way, had suggested potential limitations on NATO activities in the territory of eastern Germany, with Genscher discussing extending those limits to Central and Eastern Europe. “To hell with that,” Bush exclaimed upon hearing of these discussions. He quickly reined in Baker, Genscher, and even Kohl. Although Gorbachev had indicated to Baker in February 1990 that he would prefer a united Germany anchored within NATO (perhaps with some limitations) to one untethered to any alliance commitments, by May he was complaining

17. See, for example, Liviu Horowitz, “A ‘Great Prize,’ But Not the Main Prize: British Internal Deliberations on Not-Losing Russia, 1993–1995,” in Oxana Schmies, ed., *NATO’s Enlargement and Russia* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2021), pp. 117–138.

18. Jonny Tickle, “NATO ‘Cheated’ Russia — Putin,” *RT*, 23 December 2021, broadcast on-line at <https://www.rt.com/russia/544128-nato-cheated-moscow-putin/>

about East European interest in NATO in discussions with French President François Mitterrand and with Baker. He voiced similar concerns to his Warsaw Pact allies in June. He even mused about having the Soviet Union join NATO. He did not, however, press these issues further and told Bush that Moscow stood by the principle it had endorsed in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act giving countries the right to choose their own military alliances—a principle that Moscow endorsed again in the 1990 Charter of Paris, the declaration of the 1999 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Istanbul Summit, and the declaration of the 2010 OSCE Astana Summit. In the end, the Soviet Union signed the 2+4 Treaty on German unification that included eastern Germany within NATO's ambit, covered by the North Atlantic Treaty's crucial Article 5 defense commitment. Foreign armed forces and nuclear weapons or their carriers would not be stationed in that part of Germany or deployed there, although in an important "agreed minute" to the treaty, application of the word "deployed" was to be at united Germany's discretion.¹⁹

Sarotte adds that when the Clinton administration investigated the issue of NATO in the context of German unification again in 1996, the takeaway was emphatic: the agreement addressed NATO's role only in a united Germany and had nothing to do with countries in Eastern Europe. Russian charges were wrong. The State Department told U.S. diplomats they should "pointedly remind the Russians of this basic fact" (pp. 252–254). She expresses greater sympathy for a 1993 assessment by the German Foreign Ministry, which agreed with the U.S. conclusion but added that Russian claims revealed a "political and psychological substance we had to take seriously" (p. 168).

Moving Along Many Tracks

More problematic is Sarotte's misrepresentation of the two-track paradigm sketched initially by the Bush administration and developed more fully by the Clinton administration: one track leading to a larger NATO within a broader process of partnership to consolidate democracy and stability in Central and Eastern Europe; and a second, parallel track exploring strategic partnerships with Russia and Ukraine. Both tracks were to come within a broader

19. See also Peter Baker, "In Ukraine Conflict, Putin Relies on a Promise That Ultimately Wasn't," *The New York Times*, 10 January 2022, p. A6. For the Treaty and its "agreed minute," see United Nations Treaty Series, Vol. 1696, I-29226 (1992), available online at <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201696/volume-1696-I-29226-English.pdf>

effort to retool and realign the entire “architecture” of relations between the United States and Europe, including by boosting European defense capabilities, upgrading U.S.–EU ties, and transforming the principles-based Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe into a far more operational OSCE. Sarotte overplays dynamics surrounding the first track, downplays the importance officials accorded to the second track, and devotes little attention to the broader context in which those efforts, and others, evolved.

With regard to the first track, Sarotte offers useful insights on the genesis of the PFP. She writes enthusiastically about the initial proposals coming out of the Pentagon: “PFP achieved the near impossible: it reconciled competing political imperatives and provided a strategy for the United States to address the challenges and opportunities in the Visegrad states, Russia, and Ukraine” (p. 176). She welcomes the original conception, which saw no particular link between PFP and NATO membership, as providing “useful ambiguity” (p. 174). Its “added bonus,” according to Sarotte, was that it “put potential NATO membership at the end, rather than the beginning, of a long-term process” (p. 176), one that in her view would—and should—extend well into the next century, beyond the tenure of the Clinton administration.

Key players in the White House and the State Department were skeptical. Despite welcoming the PFP on its own merits, they believed it should also contain an identifiable path to NATO membership for the strongest candidates. Internal debates were inconclusive until January 1994, when President Clinton declared that PFP “sets in motion a process that leads to the enlargement of NATO,” and “the question is no longer whether NATO will take on new members but when and how” (p. 184). That same month, Clinton told Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk that NATO would enlarge as the PFP developed and as efforts to build strategic partnerships with Russia and Ukraine continued. He indicated that this would be part of a broader transformation of Europe’s institutional landscape.

During the U.S. interagency and intra-NATO discussions that followed in 1994, the Pentagon’s initial conception was modified so that PFP could offer a path to membership for some as well as closer association for others. As PFP evolved, its real genius was not that it provided an alternative to NATO enlargement or, in Sarotte’s words, a “means of slow enlargement” (p. 209); rather, the key factor was that it offered a broader framework in which enlargement could proceed even as other partnerships could deepen. Unfortunately, Sarotte remains so wedded to the initial conception of PFP that she prefers to tell a tale of heroes and villains, in which PFP’s “opponents” (p. 179) and “enemies” (p. 180) succeed in conspiratorial efforts to “strangle the Partnership for Peace in the cradle” (p. 181).

Although Sarotte acknowledges that the effort to build a new partnership with Russia foundered in part on “Moscow’s own missteps and aggression, most notably in Chechnya” (p. 209), she devotes most attention, and levels most blame, at “enlargement activists” inside and outside the administration who, in her telling, induced Clinton to “abandon the Partnership” (p. 182). This leads her to misconstrue or offer incomplete accounts of critical markers as the PFP evolved and NATO discussions proceeded as part of the broader two-track process. Those markers included a series of additional presidential statements in Paris, Warsaw and Berlin, and again with Yeltsin in Washington; two important National Security Council (NSC) missives in July and October 1994; Vice President Al Gore’s announcement in September 1994 that allies “would begin discussions” on NATO enlargement “this fall”; the role of the U.S. interagency working group responsible for developing the “when” and “how” of enlargement; meetings with allies along the same lines, including at the Seville NATO Defense Ministerial in September 1994 and leading up to the Ministerial meeting of the North Atlantic Council in December 1994; and an important meeting Clinton and Gore held with their closest advisers later that month.

Sarotte’s conclusion that PFP was “abandoned” (p. 342) in 1994 is particularly curious, considering that in 1996 NATO approved a comprehensive package of additional PFP enhancements and upgraded it further in 1997 via the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, an inclusive forum giving PFP members a stronger voice in their cooperative efforts with the alliance. By the end of the Clinton administration, Russia, Ukraine, and 25 other countries were participating with the NATO allies within the Partnership. Even today, PFP continues to thrive as a “partnership for the many,” growing to include partners from across the globe. Reports of its strangulation are highly exaggerated.

Even as Sarotte overplays the dynamics surrounding the first track, she downplays the importance that officials accorded to the second track, the “alliance with the alliance” — the web of cooperation and institutions the United States and its allies were trying to develop with Russia, even as the first track proceeded. Most of the book’s evidence shows that, in fact, two U.S. administrations and their allies made an extraordinary effort to reach out to Russia as a partner — and potentially as an ally — in the 1990s. They injected hundreds of billions of dollars into the Russian economy, and they cajoled international financial institutions into doing even more, keeping Russia afloat and facilitating Yeltsin’s re-election in 1996. The record shows that a post-Cold War order with a prominent place for Russia was always the goal, not an alternative approach that “might have been.” As the 1990s unfolded, the strategy produced some tangible results — even as Yeltsin the “democrat” initiated incursions

into Georgia and Moldova, fanned tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh, shelled the Russian parliament, and launched a brutal war in Chechnya.

Despite many difficulties, Russia and NATO worked within the PfP and signed the NATO–Russia Founding Act and created the NATO–Russia Permanent Joint Council in 1997. Moscow helped negotiate and implement peace arrangements for war-torn Bosnia and Kosovo. It signed a far-reaching Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU, gained admission to the Council of Europe, and joined the Arctic Council with the seven other Arctic states. The United States and Russia signed two landmark strategic arms control treaties and settled on a framework for future treaties. The United States helped Russia and other former Soviet republics secure nuclear, biological, and chemical weapon stockpiles. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine agreed to give up the nuclear weapons stationed on their territory. Military forces were reduced and no longer faced each other across a cold and deadly divide. The Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, its Flank Document, and a further adaptive document were all signed. The Group of 7 (G-7) expanded its political arm to welcome Russia as a member of the G-8 in 1997, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation organization expanded to include Russia in 1998. Some of these elements are discussed; others are mentioned tangentially or not at all.

It was, admittedly, a hedging strategy: how it would all work out was contingent on whether the “good bear” would prevail—a bear that, in Yeltsin’s words, wanted to enjoy its “natural admission” into the “Euro-Atlantic space”—or whether Russian intentions would eventually “turn sour.”²⁰ U.S. and allied considerations depended not only on whether Russia agreed to NATO’s enlargement, but also on whether it wanted to be part of the deep, broad process of change taking place across the European continent. The record shows that Russia did join in elements of that process, even though Russian domestic turmoil and debates, and Moscow’s own sense of its elevated position, made it at most a limited partner and sometimes a spoiler.

20. U.S. DoS-VRR, Case No./Doc No. M-2017-11649 / C06548772, U.S. Del Sec to Sec State, Subj: Secretary’s mtg w/ FMs of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Rep., Jan. 11, 1994, Prague, ambassador’s residence, 1/16/1994; U.S. DoS, Date/Case ID: 08 MAY 2000/200000982, Secretary Christopher’s meeting with President Yeltsin, 10/22/993, Moscow, available in National Security Archive; “NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard,” online compendium posted on 6 March 2018, Doc. 7; and Jeremy Greenstock, “Telegram to Foreign Office: U.S./Russia, 11 February 1994, in The National Archives of the United Kingdom, PREM 19/5113/2. For a review of this approach, see Kristina Spohr and Kaarel Piirimäeb, “With or Without Russia? The Boris, Bill and Helmut Bro-mance and the Harsh Realities of Securing Europe in the Post-Wall World, 1990–1994,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (January 2022), pp. 158–193.

Sarotte ends her narrative of the Clinton years at the moment when Yeltsin abandoned the NATO–Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) in 1999 after the start of NATO’s war with Serbia over Kosovo. She does not mention that a half-year later, and only one month after assuming the Russian presidency, Putin revived the PJC and welcomed the NATO Secretary General to Moscow. Russia’s ties with the United States and its allies also continued to build through the early years of the George W. Bush administration. At a special NATO–Russia Summit in Rome in May 2002, Putin and NATO leaders signed a joint declaration proclaiming a “new quality” to their relationship and established the NATO–Russia Council as an upgraded successor to the PJC.²¹ They launched a series of joint counterterrorism projects and continued to develop their dialogue and cooperation on a range of subjects, including the conflict in Afghanistan, arms control, nuclear proliferation, theater missile defense, and civil emergency planning. Six months later, when allies invited seven additional East-Central European countries, including the Baltic states, to join NATO, Putin maintained pragmatic relations, and both Russia and NATO continued to reduce their military forces.²²

Sarotte argues that Russian leaders’ perceptions of betrayal were a major factor in the subsequent total collapse of democracy in Russia and the further deterioration of relations under Putin. She underscores Russia’s psychological trauma, contending that Western actors may have underestimated the psychological impact on the Russian people of the collapse of the Warsaw Pact in 1989 and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the economic collapse in the 1990s, and the perception that the West no longer saw Russia as an important partner. True or not, this narrative should not lead one to accept the false historical narrative spread by Russian officials that Western actors deliberately took advantage of Russia after the end of the Cold War, seeking to weaken Moscow or allegedly encircling the country with NATO military bases poised for surprise attack.²³

Relations did deteriorate, but the causes were unrelated to NATO and NATO enlargement. Differences over arms control, missile defense, Kosovo,

21. NATO, *NATO–Russia Council Rome Summit 2002* (Brussels: NATO Headquarters, 2002).

22. OSCE Vienna Document data for the Western Military District plus Southern Military District (formerly known as the Leningrad, Moscow, and North Caucasus Military Districts plus the Black Sea Fleet and Caspian Flotilla) show a steep drop in Russian troops and equipment from 2000 to 2010, a further but less precipitous drop from 2010 to 2014, and then an uptick after 2014. Source: NATO International Staff.

23. See Alexander Vershbow, “Present at the Transformation: An Insider’s Reflection on NATO Enlargement, NATO–Russia Relations, and Where We Go from Here,” in Daniel S. Hamilton and Kristina Spohr, eds., *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), pp. 425–448.

the Iraq War, the goals and genesis of the Rose and Orange revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia's second brutal war in Chechnya, and growing repression and authoritarianism in Russia, all caused relations to reach new lows by 2007.

Admittedly, NATO's Bucharest Summit in April 2008 prompted a hostile Russian reaction. But that was largely because allied leaders failed to build on lessons learned in the 1990s—the importance of generating consensus within the alliance before issuing public declarations on further enlargement and complementing that approach with efforts to mitigate Russian concerns. The Bush administration came to Bucharest with allies deeply divided over its proposal to offer Membership Action Plans (MAPs) for Ukraine and Georgia, without having developed a parallel “Russia track.” When the assembled leaders issued an ill-conceived and hastily drafted compromise, in which they denied MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia but declared in the summit communiqué that “these countries will become members of NATO” someday, Putin's hostile reaction was predictable.²⁴ NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011 further inflamed the relationship with Russia, as did Russia's interventions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

Sailing Through Scylla and Charybdis

Sarotte concludes her tale by accusing Clinton of abandoning “incremental partnership” for “maximalist positions” and “aggressive NATO expansion” (p. 345). Yet, the documents show that, far from being “too quick to expand” (p. 346), as Sarotte charges, Clinton and other allied officials were remarkably careful about the pace, especially the need to build consensus within the administration, among allies, and with Congress and other allied legislatures, all while managing expectations among partners, including Russia and Ukraine. Moving too fast along the Central European track could have upset delicate developments in Russia. Moving too slowly could have meant losing the momentum for reform and opening oneself to the charge of sacrificing East-Central European security in the face of Russian pressure. National Security Adviser Sandy Berger said the Clinton administration had to navigate between “Scylla and Charybdis.”²⁵

24. Bucharest Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008.

25. Cited in Hans Binnendijk, *NATO Enlargement: Sailing between Scylla and Charybdis*, Strategic Forum No. 55 (Washington, DC: National Defense University, November 1995). Strobe Talbott called it a Sisyphian task. See Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 224.

During the eight years of the Clinton administration, only three countries actually joined the alliance, even as NATO's door remained open and its partnerships continued to evolve. That is a far cry from "maximalist" or "aggressive" approaches. The documents presented by Sarotte show that the administration had planned to move ahead with enlargement only near the end of its second term (p. 207) and that the move to expand the alliance was made only when Yeltsin started to go badly off track. At that point, Helmut Kohl, as much as Bill Clinton, made the call (pp. 265–266). Even then, efforts along the Russia track continued. What Sarotte calls a "ratchet turn" (p. 342) that shut down other paths was in fact a series of decisions that offered many countries, including Russia, a range of options going forward.

Sarotte asserts that "NATO's long-standing practice of permitting different practical aspects of membership under a broader Article 5 umbrella" was a feasible option that was rejected. Yet, NATO allies did exactly that, declaring in the Founding Act with Russia that they had "no intention, no plan and no reason" to place nuclear weapons on the territory of new member-states, did "not foresee any future need to do so," and "in the current and foreseeable security environment" saw no need for the "permanent stationing of substantial combat forces" on the territory of new members.²⁶ She dismisses these statements as mere political pledges rather than legally binding limitations. Yet, NATO did not move any forces to its new members' territory until after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, and even then, it deployed only minimal tripwire forces to the Baltic states and Poland on a rotational rather than permanent basis. Even now, when Putin's prolonged war against Ukraine has clearly upended "the current and foreseeable security environment," and Russia has repeatedly broken its commitment under the NATO–Russia Founding Act not to threaten or use force against NATO allies and any other state, NATO is trying to avoid renouncing the Founding Act and is debating how it can beef up its military presence on its eastern flanks in ways that are not considered "permanent."

The Bigger Puzzle

Sarotte leaves the impression that enlargement was the driver of U.S. policy, whereas in fact it was just one piece of a much larger puzzle. In a letter to Congressman Benjamin Gilman on 9 May 1996, President Clinton reemphasized that it was essential

26. Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in Paris, France, 27 May 1997.

to place NATO enlargement in the context of a broad, balanced and integrated approach to increasing stability and security throughout the transatlantic area by building a cooperative security structure in Europe. This includes a revitalized NATO, support for enlargement of the European Union, strengthening the OSCE and enhanced cooperation with other states not immediately aspiring to NATO membership of who may not be in the initial group of states invited to begin accession talks with the Alliance. It also includes a strong and productive relationship between the Alliance and Russia, given the key role Russia can play in shaping a stable and secure Europe.²⁷

Despite the importance of this broader context, Sarotte spends little time assessing how NATO's evolution and relations with Russia were connected to these other pieces of the puzzle. She mentions the sensitive issue of closer Baltic association with Western institutions, but she does not explain how that track developed, such as through the U.S. Northern European Initiative, the Baltic Action Plan, and the U.S.–Baltic Charter. Although the OSCE has largely failed to meet the high hopes its member-states once had for it, that deterioration occurred after the events described in Sarotte's book. In fact, by the end of the Clinton administration, William Hill could write that "the OSCE truly flowered . . . perhaps reaching the zenith of its activity and influence."²⁸

Even with regard to NATO, enlargement was but one element of a broader effort to reconfigure the alliance to address new security risks, which allied leaders already in their 1991 Strategic Concept said were "less likely to result from calculated aggression against the territory of the allies [than] from the adverse consequences of instabilities that may arise from the serious economic, social and political difficulties" arising from ethnic and territorial disputes in central and eastern Europe."²⁹ Numerous armed conflicts erupted across that space in the 1990s, claiming upward of 400,000 lives; more Europeans died in the decade after the opening of the Berlin Wall than in four decades of the Cold War. Tensions across Europe's southern and eastern peripheries belied fashionable notions that peace would break out naturally once the Cold War ended. In the first half of the 1990s, U.S. European Command deployed forces 51 times to more than 30 countries in security situations, none of which was related to any security concern emanating from Russia. In

27. Copy in author's possession.

28. William Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions since 1989* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 153.

29. "The Alliance's Strategic Concept," in *NATO Handbook* (Brussels: NATO Headquarters, 1995), p. 235.

short, NATO's adaptation did not evolve in a benign security environment in which decision-makers could be relaxed about the pace of reform. Allies were pressed into such unfamiliar missions as peacekeeping, peace-enforcement, crisis management, and humanitarian assistance, and they looked for ways in which non-NATO partners, including Russia, could work with them.

These missions, especially in Bosnia and Kosovo, underscored the need to enhance European capabilities that were "separable but not separate" from NATO's integrated military structure. Sarotte labels this notion French President Jacques Chirac's "idea" (p. 246), but in fact it was the United States that presented this approach, at the same time it presented Pff, at the NATO Defense Ministerial in Travemünde, Germany in October 1993. The allied governments approved it at the NATO Brussels Summit in January 1994, more than a year before Chirac was elected president.

A First "Second Draft"

First drafts of history are journalistic accounts, memoirs by the players, and early narratives drawing on those sources. Second drafts are based on more thorough archival work. Sarotte's volume is the first significant, if selective, "second draft" of this important story.³⁰ Further drafts, drawing on a wider range of archival materials, with additional insights and refinements and likely some surprises, are still to come.

Commentary by Petr Luňák

After the Cold War ended, a new international security order gradually took shape in Europe. By the late 1990s, it was largely in place, resting on a three-dimensional enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Under the prodding of the liberated countries in East-Central Europe, the alliance eventually brought in new members, doubling its membership by 2024. In response to the urgent need to expand the zone of stability and security through voluntary associations, NATO also began adding partnership schemes, which by now include more than three dozen non-allies and until recently included Russia. Simultaneously, NATO began to launch out-of-area operations, first in the Balkans and then elsewhere in the wake of the

30. On first and second drafts of history, see Kristina Spohr's postscript on "the methodology of a contemporary history" in her *Germany and the Baltic Problem After the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2004).

September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Inevitably, the alliance also expanded functionally by taking up new roles beyond its original mission of territorial defense, adding to the list of its tasks peacekeeping, counterinsurgency, humanitarian interventions, and counterterrorism, to name but a few.

In this new, deeply researched, and highly readable volume, *Not One Inch: America, Russia and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate*, Mary Elise Sarotte, a historian who has published several acclaimed books, offers a thorough account of policies adopted by the George H. W. Bush administration (1989–1993) and continued by Bill Clinton’s administration (1993–2001) leading up to the first post–Cold War enlargement. Although the general course toward a NATO-centered European order—including possible enlargement in the future even to Ukraine and Russia—was pursued starting in the early 1990s, the concrete steps to achieve it remained undefined. Sarotte asks whether there were perhaps better ways to attain the post–Cold War European security system, which disintegrated after Russia embarked on military aggression under Vladimir Putin. Her “alternativist” answers are much less convincing than her thorough and lucid historical narrative.

Sarotte belongs to a group of historians who are at times less than charitable to the “new world order” inaugurated by the Bush administration after the end of the Cold War. In her books, she repeatedly (and not without merit) argues that the new order was not actually all that new. She maintains that, for all practical purposes, the liberal order that prevailed in the West after 1945, with the free and sovereign choice of security arrangements at its core, was simply extended. So were the related institutions, including the transformed NATO as the bedrock of such order.

In a previous book on the early post–Cold War period, *1989: the Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), Sarotte drew a parallel between the travails of architects with those of political leaders in their bid to build a new security structure in Europe. The dilemma was whether to adapt to a situation by building a new, better house, or simply to expand an existing structure by adding another wing or floor. In her view, the Bush administration embarked on the process of German reunification via the easiest route: extending the prefabricated house of the ready-made NATO structure rather than building a new house on fresh ground. Hence, a more ambitious effort to build a potentially more durable and legitimate arrangement was forfeited.

Sarotte’s pithy architectural metaphor is at best incomplete. In addition to adding new parts, the “NATO building” was also significantly being rebuilt into a modern post–Cold War construction and a hub for security

partnerships. The international liberal order with NATO at its center also encompassed important roles for bodies such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and later the European Union. This system had significant legitimacy insofar as it had flourished in the West and was further vindicated by the collapse of the Eastern bloc. “To hell with that. We prevailed and they [Soviet leaders] did not,” Sarotte quotes President Bush in February 1990. “We can’t let the Soviets clutch victory from the jaws of defeat.”³¹ That remark, however, is important to keep in context; in that same conversation, Bush talked mostly about how to support the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and accommodate his concerns. Both Bush and his successor, President Clinton, avoided any sign of public triumphalism and strove to be conciliatory toward Moscow until there was a firm and—to the extent possible—dignified place in the U.S.-led global system as close as possible to NATO.

It should also be borne in mind that if the decision in Western capitals was to adapt NATO to the new realities, the alliance’s legitimacy as a post-Cold War force for good and peaceful change was further bolstered by the desire of the liberated East European societies to cement their cherished freedom, democracy, and security in NATO rather than outside it. They may have initially thought that a new pan-European security organization could prove feasible, but against the backdrop of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia they concluded that NATO must be maintained as a cohesive, powerful alliance. A robust existing organization, they felt, would more effectively serve its members, especially if they respected the rules and each other. This seemed better than relying on the dream of a new, ideal edifice that might never be built or, when built, would not match the virtues of its predecessor.

Of “Promises” and People

Sarotte’s new book is a sequel to *1989* and joins Ronald Asmus’s and James Goldgeier’s earlier books as the most comprehensive treatment of NATO’s enlargement in the late 1990s to encompass the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, paving the way for future enlargements in the 21st century.³² Although Sarotte pays due respect to the skillful diplomacy of the Bush

31. Memorandum of Conversation, President Bush and Chancellor Kohl along with numerous aides, 24 February 1990, in George Bush Presidential Library, College Station, TX, online collection of Memcons and Telcons.

32. Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO’s Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); and James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

administration, which worked to ensure that the united Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) remained fully anchored in NATO, Sarotte contends that the legitimacy and durability of the post–Cold War order were morally eroded. She sticks to her earlier claims that Western countries did this by resorting to “bribery” (in the form of financial aid for the ailing Soviet economy) and by misleading and corrupting Gorbachev.³³

Unfortunately for her readers and herself, Sarotte revives the supposed “original sin” of a putative non-enlargement pledge when she repeats the many-times-told (and no fewer times misinterpreted) story from the February 1990 trip to Moscow by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker. Baker asked Gorbachev a hypothetical question: whether he would agree to a unified Germany in NATO if given assurances that “NATO’s jurisdiction would not shift one inch eastward from its present position.” Gorbachev responded to Baker that any extension of “the zone of NATO” was unacceptable. This tacit understanding was apparently confirmed by West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who embraced the same line in a meeting with Gorbachev the following day. Similar comments were conveyed to Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze at the Ottawa Open Skies Treaty negotiations a few days later.³⁴

The question was posed in the context of the issue on the agenda, German reunification, in particular the deployment of troops under NATO command on East German territory. But the argument made by Sarotte (and others) goes that it could have been implicitly meant and understood as related to any future NATO enlargement.³⁵ She insists that Gorbachev may have concluded that he had been offered something akin to a non-enlargement pledge, which was allegedly broken by Western countries when they later invited Eastern European democracies to join NATO.

In reality, a non-enlargement promise was never offered, and all of this was merely a fleeting moment on the road to German reunification and the post–Cold War settlement. Hypothetical feelers and rhetorical questions raised by Baker were swiftly put to rest by President Bush and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, who felt that the West should not unduly

33. Mary Elise Sarotte, “Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence: The 1990 Deals to ‘Bribe the Soviets Out’ and Move NATO In,” *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1, (Summer 2010), pp. 110–137.

34. Relevant documents from the Moscow February meeting and the Ottawa conference can be found in National Security Archive, “NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard,” on-line compendium posted on 12 December 2017.

35. To do justice to Sarotte, her argumentation is more nuanced than the tendentious analyses by some other analysts, such as Joshua Shiffrin, “Deal or No Deal. The End of the Cold War and the Offer to Limit NATO Expansion,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 2016), pp. 7–44.

constrain its future policies vis-à-vis unified Germany either explicitly or implicitly.³⁶

Gorbachev himself did not ask for a “pledge” or attach any significance to the idea. He was confident that the Warsaw Pact would survive with all the East European allies. Some Western officials, especially West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, believed that the days of the Warsaw Pact were numbered, but Gorbachev himself was an eternal optimist about the future of the Soviet Union and the Eastern alliance, and he believed that he could keep matters under control.³⁷

To be sure, in January 1990, Gorbachev had largely accepted the principle of German unity, which he confirmed to Kohl in February. But he still believed that he could prevent the membership of reunified Germany in NATO. Clinging to the hope that the reformed Communists in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) would win the parliamentary elections in the East scheduled for March 1990 and that East Germany would thereby get a new lease on life, Gorbachev believed that he had a lot more room for maneuver.

The Soviet leader was wrong about the longevity of the GDR. Yet, at no point in February 1990 did Gorbachev raise the issue of NATO enlargement beyond Germany. Not until May 1990 did he mention to French President François Mitterrand what he thought might happen with the other Warsaw Pact countries: “I told Baker: we are aware of your favorable attitude toward the intention expressed by several representatives of East European countries to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact in order to join NATO later.”³⁸ If a no NATO-enlargement pledge had ever been offered, Gorbachev obviously

36. George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), pp. 238–244.

37. For internal Western discussions, see, for example, the memorandum of Genscher’s meeting with the UK Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd on 6 February 1990, where Genscher alluded to the idea of no NATO enlargement “applied to other states besides the GDR. The Russians must have some assurance that if, for example, the Polish government left the Warsaw Pact one day, they would not join NATO *the next*.” Even Genscher, a week after his Tützing speech, was not saying that NATO should never expand. He was merely saying that NATO expansion should not happen *immediately* after the demise of the Warsaw Pact. See Mr. Hurd to Sir C. Mallaby (Bonn). Telegraphic N. 85: Secretary of State’s Call on Herr Genscher: German Unification. 6 February 1990, transcribed in Patrick Salmon, Keith Hamilton, and Stephen Twigge, eds., *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, Series III, Vol. VII: *German Unification, 1989–1990* (London: Routledge 2010). Doc. 02, pp. 261–264. It is important to emphasize that neither at the time nor later did Soviet leaders have any idea what Hurd and Genscher said at this meeting.

38. Anatolii Chernyaev and Aleksandr Galkin, eds., *Mikhail Gorbachev i germanskii vopros. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow: Ves’ Mir, 2006), p. 458.

would have reminded the West of it.³⁹ The fact that he did not bring up the issue at any point during the 1990 negotiations is telling.

Instead of referring to some putative non-enlargement pledge or seeking to put it in writing, Gorbachev in the spring and summer of 1990 was focusing almost exclusively on his bid for greater financial assistance from the FRG. Russian leader Evgenii Primakov's later lamentations over Gorbachev's failure to extract written assurances about NATO was tantamount to crying over milk that was never spilled.⁴⁰

Nor was there anything remotely like a non-enlargement pledge that was even implicitly part of the final deal on German reunification. The only way the deal reflected the contours of the February 1990 discussion was its stipulation that NATO "jurisdiction" would not be extended into the territory of the former GDR until Soviet troops completed their pullout from eastern Germany by the end of 1994. The FRG itself would deploy only territorial defense units on eastern German territory that were not integrated into alliance structures during the interim period.

Was There a Better Alternative?

Although Sarotte does not deny that enlargement was a justified and reasonable policy, she asks whether it could have been achieved without alienating Russia. As she sees it, the issue is not whether the alliance should have enlarged but when and how.

When describing in fascinating detail how both the Bush administration and the Clinton administration paid close attention to Russia's place in the emerging European security system, Sarotte suggests that the idea of creating a post–Cold War settlement that truly included Russia was dropped too soon. In particular, she laments that the potential of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) was not fully exploited. This 1993 Pentagon-designed program was

39. Although Russian officials occasionally intimated that NATO enlargement would violate the "spirit" of agreements, the baseless claim of a secret pledge did not appear until the second half of the 1990s, when Foreign Minister Evgenii Primakov ordered alleged evidence to be collected in Russian archives. See Evgenii Primakov, *Gody v bolsnoi politike* (Moscow: Sovershenno Sekretno, 1999), pp. 231–235. Gorbachev himself wavered on the matter once or twice, but he far more frequently acknowledged that he had never received a secret promise, as in "Michael Gorbachev: I Am against All Walls," Interview, in *Russia beyond the Headlines*, 6 October 2014, p. 3 (also online).

40. Evgenii Primakov, *Gody v bolsnoi politike*, p. 233. For convincing rebuttals of the myth of a non-enlargement pledge, see in particular Mark Kramer, "The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (April 2009), pp. 39–61; Mark Kramer, "NATO Enlargement—Was There a Promise?" *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Summer 2017), pp. 186–192; and Hannes Adomeit, "NATO's Eastward Enlargement: What Western Leaders Said," *Federal Academy for Security Policy Working Paper* No. 3/2018.

created to promote trust between NATO allies and non-member countries by involving them in almost all of NATO's areas of activity, from defense-related work, defense reform, defense policy, and planning, to military-to-military cooperation, exercises, and civil emergency response. The formation of the PFP neither excluded nor guaranteed NATO enlargement within a fixed period. Its main attraction in the political sense, according to Sarotte, was that it could have brought NATO hopefuls closer to the transatlantic family without alienating Russia. But instead of sticking exclusively with the PFP, the Clinton administration decided in 1994 to move forward with enlargement.

This decision was adopted not in a vacuum but against the backdrop of Russia's turbulent and uncertain transformation. In October 1993, Yeltsin ordered the Russian army to bombard the elected Russian parliament, and fourteen months later he followed this up by launching a brutal war in the breakaway republic of Chechnya. These events, and a long series of debilitating setbacks with economic reform in Russia, raised severe doubts about the future of Russia as a Western-style democracy and viable market economy. Domestic politics in the United States also had an impact on the Clinton administration's policy. Influential members of both parties in Congress urged the administration to proceed faster with NATO enlargement.

Sarotte argues in her book that the shift toward NATO enlargement was spurred by a group of savvy officials on the U.S. National Security Council (NSC) staff and in the State Department who convinced Clinton to bring new members into the alliance while the PFP was still in its early stages. Sarotte makes this strategic shift sound like the outcome of a sort of bureaucratic conspiracy encouraged by PFP haters from Eastern Europe. Yet, in fact, the shift was a fully justified policy choice, based on the conviction that ongoing efforts to develop cooperation with Russia should not hamstring U.S. policy toward new democratic societies in Eastern Europe as they pursued wide-ranging changes, particularly with the democratic future and stability of Russia in serious question.

Ultimately, Clinton and his entourage had a better understanding of history and the future than the majority of academics and public intellectuals have had both then and now. Among the egregious examples was George F. Kennan, who argued against enlargement of NATO in the 1990s, just as he had sought in the late 1940s (unsuccessfully) to block the original formation of NATO.

Sarotte's text, alas, betrays certain traits of the all-too-frequent myopia of many in the U.S. academic community who implicitly and sometimes even explicitly promote the view that enlargement was a U.S. or at best Western project. In so doing, she and others ascribe almost no agency to the former

Warsaw Pact countries.⁴¹ But in fact the East Europeans repeatedly urged NATO to “open its doors” to them and pursued enlargement with such vigor that it was nearly impossible for anyone to think about renegeing on a commitment to bring them into the Western fold.⁴² NATO membership for them was not just a security guarantee but also an underpinning of strenuous and even risky domestic reforms and sacrifice and, by extension, political stability.

It is equally important to consider the cost of inaction and postponement, which would have led to a distinctly unappealing situation of a rump NATO in the West, an increasingly uncooperative Russia in the East, and a gray zone in between (an outcome that Germany, as well as the East Europeans, were desperate to avoid). This would have only prolonged the status quo — seen as unacceptable by most in the West and in East-Central Europe — with highly uncertain benefits.

One is also hard-pressed to fathom how enlargement into Eastern Europe, which was seen as anathema by Russia from the beginning, could have been made more palatable to Russian leaders by prolonging the waiting period for Eastern Europeans through the Pfp. The thorn in Moscow’s side was not *when* to enlarge NATO but *whether* to do it at all. This became crystal clear when enlargement occurred in the promising early years of Putin’s tenure, especially in the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks. In 2002, the West elevated its relationship with Russia via the NATO–Russia Rome Declaration and the NATO–Russia Council. At the time, in accepting the offer of a reset, Moscow hoped to be granted veto power over NATO’s policies, including future enlargement — similar to what Yeltsin had sought in the run-up to the 1997 NATO Madrid summit, which extended invitations to the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary. Such a prospect was in fact never on the table. The ensuing 2004 accession of seven new members, including the three Baltic states (a move that extended NATO into former Soviet territory), exposed the fallacy of these misplaced hopes. It is difficult to imagine anything that would have satisfied Moscow short of the abandonment of future enlargement and with it the democratic international liberal order. Hardly an appealing proposition, to say the least.

41. See, for example, James Goldgeier and Joshua Shiffrin, “The United States and NATO After the End of the Cold War: Explaining and Evaluating Enlargement and Its Alternatives,” in Nuno P. Monteiro and Fritz Bartel, eds., *Before and After the Wall: The World Politics and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 265–285.

42. Mark Kramer, “NATO, Russia, and East European Security,” in Kate Martin and Uri Ra’anana, eds., *Russia: A Return to Imperialism?* (Boston: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), pp. 105–161.

Some of Sarotte's ideas about supposed alternatives are far-fetched, to put it mildly. Discussing with Moscow the putative non-enlargement pledge rather than dismissing it out of hand, as she suggests, has been difficult enough in academic circles and would have been nearly impossible in a highly charged political context. It would have turned a non-issue into an actual one.

Equally questionable is the suggestion that NATO should have been re-named something less abhorrent to Russian leaders, most of whom never ceased to see and treat the alliance as a Cold War relic despite its transformation and extensive overtures toward Russia. Apart from the first two years under Yeltsin, Russian officials continued to look on NATO with suspicion and even hostility. Would a name change have achieved more than what NATO's assurances of no deployments of nuclear weapons or substantial multinational combat forces on the territories of new members, as well as all sorts of cooperation through joint bodies and an impressive range of practical cooperation, failed to do?

When considering the cost of enlargement, Sarotte sees it mainly as having contributed to Russia's failure to build democracy and a positive relationship with the West. Yet, she also duly admits that NATO did transform from a Cold War alliance and undertook many steps to forge a genuine partnership with Russia. At the same time, while one can perhaps agree that the failure to build a genuinely democratic pro-Western Russia was not a given, it should also be recognized that the odds were never good, to say the least. Russian democratic backsliding after a decade of Yeltsin's chaotic pluralism, first into repressive authoritarianism and then into the ugly, militaristic totalitarianism that exists today, has little to do with NATO enlargement. The reasons have more to do with the failings of Russia's democratization, marred by the absence of new elites who genuinely understood and valued democracy.

Equally unconvincing is the argument that delaying the first round of enlargement would have allowed democratic institutions to take deeper root in Central Europe. Postponement would have bred feelings of abandonment and reinforced the memories of historical injustices by the liberal West. That some NATO members — whether old or new — at times struggle with democratic standards and even slide into authoritarianism can hardly be attributed to their early or late NATO membership. Although one can agree that EU enlargement into Eastern Europe was too slow, it is questionable whether the EU could have served as a substitute for NATO membership in providing the same degree of security and stability. During most of the 1990s, the EU was focused on deepening ties among current members and was cool to the prospect of admitting further members that had only begun to emerge from the Communist morass.

Another pipe dream entertained by Sarotte is the supposed durability of an alternative model based on a Nordic security association, whereby security needs of young Central European democracies could have been temporarily addressed by creating groupings among themselves and individual NATO countries.

Curiously, Sarotte cites very few sources from the Russian side when making all these far-reaching suggestions about how NATO could have avoided “losing” Russia. This is not primarily her fault, even though her knowledge of Russian is minimal. Unlike for the well-documented period during Gorbachev’s final years, the vast majority of Russian archival sources for the 1990s have not been released. So, inevitably, she relies almost entirely on U.S. sources, which are abundant.

Even without seeing all the trees, it is important not to miss the forest of hardening Russian policy toward NATO writ large and enlargement in particular. Despite Yeltsin’s occasional pronouncements (to be later corrected via explanatory letters), there is precious little to suggest that Russia was ever ready for a full embrace of the principles of international liberal order, much less NATO’s legitimate role in it—unless Moscow was given a veto over alliance decisions, including on enlargement.⁴³

It is therefore surprising to see that Sarotte ascribes so much weight to possible alternative ways of expanding NATO, suggesting that timing rather than the principle of enlargement was of the essence. She as well as other “alternativists” dwell in particular on the conversation between Yeltsin and Clinton’s first secretary of state, Warren Christopher, in Moscow in October 1993. Christopher confirmed to Yeltsin on the eve of launching the Pfp that “partnership rather than membership” would be pursued at this stage. “This is a brilliant idea, it is a stroke of a genius,” the jubilant Yeltsin exclaimed, interrupting Christopher in the middle of the sentence without listening to his explanations that Washington would be “looking at the question of membership as a long-term eventuality.”⁴⁴ Officials in Moscow felt that NATO

43. See, for example, Yeltsin’s unexpected statement, during a visit to Warsaw in August 1993, that Moscow had no objection to Poland’s membership in NATO. The statement was quickly retracted and followed by a revised letter from Yeltsin on 15 September 1993. See “Retranslation of Yeltsin Letter on NATO Enlargement” from U.S. Department of State to all U.S. embassies in NATO countries, 9 October 1993, released for National Security Archive, “NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard,” online compendium, Doc. 4.

44. Various sources differ about whether Christopher made the point explicitly about long-term eventuality as suggested in the U.S. memorandum of conversation from the meeting. Strobe Talbott’s memoirs seem to suggest that the topic was left hanging after Yeltsin’s interjection. But Andrei

expansion was an uncertain, long-term prospect and that, in all probability, it could be postponed forever.

The long term, however, turned out to be shorter than Russian leaders hoped. In September 1994, Clinton informed Yeltsin that NATO would expand, but he added that there was no fixed deadline and that Russia could one day itself become part of NATO. Yeltsin seemed to have understood and accepted this statement, yet three months later he embarrassed the U.S. president at the Budapest Summit of the OSCE by ominously saying that because of NATO expansion “Europe . . . is risking encumbering itself with a cold peace.”⁴⁵

Even then, however, nothing precipitate was done by the Clinton administration, which stuck with a “long-term” approach, much to the frustration of East Europeans who felt their many years in the NATO antechamber would never end. Washington refrained from undertaking any step toward NATO enlargement until after Yeltsin was reelected in mid-1996 in a highly controversial run against the Communist candidate. The 1997 invitation was accompanied by creating a NATO–Russia Permanent Joint Council and invitation to Russia to join what would become the Group of 8 (G-8).

Russia, in the meantime, fully revealed its attitude toward any kind of enlargement irrespective of time and place. In May 1995, Yeltsin saw “nothing but humiliation” for Russia if NATO expanded, labeling it a “new encirclement.” He added: “For me to agree to the borders of NATO expanding toward those of Russia—that would constitute a betrayal on my part of the Russian people.” Such statements do not lend credence to speculation that a different approach might have had a different outcome.⁴⁶

Kozyrev, who was then Russian foreign minister, emphasized that the U.S. officials provided him “with ‘an unabridged’ message: the new policy was not *instead of* but simply a pathway to enlargement.” So, there was no basis for feelings of yet another “broken promise” as suggested by some. See Secretary Christopher’s meeting with President Yeltsin, 22 October 1993, in National Security Archive, “NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard,” on-line compendium, Doc. 7; Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), p.101; Andrei Kozyrev, “Russia and NATO Enlargement: An Insider’s Account,” in Daniel S. Hamilton and Kristina Spohr, eds., *NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Johns Hopkins University, 2019), p. 455; and James Goldgeier, “Promises Made, Promises Broken? What Yeltsin Was Told about NATO in 1993 and Why It Matters,” *War on the Rocks*, 22 July 2016, online at <https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/promises-made-promises-broken-what-yeltsin-was-told-about-nato-in-1993-and-why-it-matters/>

45. Strobe Talbott, “Bill, Boris and NATO,” in Daniel S. Hamilton and Kristina Spohr, eds., *NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security after the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), p. 415.

46. Summary report on One-on-One meeting between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin, 10 May 1995, The Kremlin, in National Security Archive, “NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard,” Doc 19.

Could It Be Different Now?

It is sometimes said that history does not know the subjunctive mood. Still, it is tempting to ask whether the demise of the post–Cold War order and the current crisis could have been avoided if NATO enlargement had been pursued differently, perhaps in line with Sarotte’s suggestions.

Circumstantial evidence is hardly supportive. Under Yeltsin, Russia’s opposition to NATO enlargement, unless conducted on Moscow’s terms, was always more than just a simple policy issue. Under Putin, it became a disingenuous rationalization for Moscow’s violent assault on the post–Cold War liberal order of full sovereignty and choice. So, arguably, none of the alternatives posited by Sarotte, other than non-enlargement and the return to spheres of interest and limited sovereignty, would have been sufficient to satisfy Russia.

Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014 is a case in point. The colonial seizure of Crimea was undertaken at a time when NATO membership was not being actively pursued by the post-Maidan leaders in Ukraine, and only a small minority of Ukrainians at that point were in favor of joining the alliance—something that changed in subsequent years as a direct result of Russia’s aggression. The question of Ukraine’s membership was not of the essence when the Russian invasion began in February 2022. The Russian authorities proceeded with their reckless decision despite the repeated assurances from some Western leaders and the admission by President Volodymyr Zelensky in late 2021 and early 2022 that NATO membership for Ukraine could not be realized in the near future regardless of NATO’s Open Door Policy and Ukraine’s hopes of eventually joining the alliance. For Kremlin leaders, true Ukrainian sovereignty—unless pursued in lockstep unity with Russia, as Putin put it in his infamous “historical” essay in July 2021—is anathema at least to the same degree as NATO moving eastward.⁴⁷

It is difficult to agree with Sarotte’s suggestions regarding when and how NATO should have expanded its membership and the subsequent consequences of the decisions made. Still, we learn a great deal from her volume about the process, the circumstances, and why it happened the way it did.

47. Vladimir Putin, “Ob istoricheskom edinstve russkikh i ukrainsev,” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 21 July 2021 (Moscow), pp. 1–2.