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ARTICLE



## Eastbound and down: The United States, NATO enlargement, and suppressing the Soviet and Western European alternatives, 1990–1992

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### ABSTRACT

When and why did the United States first contemplate NATO's enlargement into Eastern Europe? Existing research generally portrays U.S. backing for NATO enlargement as a product of the policy debates and particular beliefs inside the William Clinton administration (1993–2001) starting in the mid-1990s. New evidence, however, shows that U.S. backing for enlargement began earlier, under the preceding George H.W. Bush administration (1989–1993). Moreover, the Bush administration favored enlargement for fundamentally realpolitik reasons, viewing it as a way of sustaining U.S. preeminence and suppressing challengers in post-Cold War Europe. The results carry implications for historiography, foreign policy, and international relations theory.

**KEYWORDS** NATO; United States; Eastern Europe; Russia; European Union

### Introduction

NATO's enlargement into Eastern Europe was among the preeminent features of European security affairs after the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> It was also among the most controversial. Proponents of the policy argued that expanding the alliance would facilitate the spread of democratic capitalism to former members of the Soviet bloc, and prevent a security vacuum in Eastern Europe. Critics countered, however, that enlargement would require NATO to defend Eastern European states of questionable strategic value.<sup>2</sup> Given, too, claims by Soviet and Russian

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<sup>1</sup>I use the terms 'NATO enlargement' and 'NATO expansion' interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup>For arguments favoring enlargement, see Ronald Asmus, Richard Kugler, and Stephen Flanagan, 'Building a New NATO', *Foreign Affairs* 72/4 (October 1993), 28–40; Stephen Flanagan, 'NATO and Central and Eastern Europe: From Liaison to Security Partnership', *The Washington Quarterly* 15/2 (June 1992), 141–51; Igor Lukes, 'Central Europe Has Joined NATO: The Continuing Search for a More Perfect Habsburg Empire', *SAIS Review* 19/2 (July 1999), 47–59; major critiques include Michael Brown, 'The Flawed Logic of NATO Expansion',

policymakers that NATO enlargement violated non-expansion assurances advanced by U.S. policymakers during the 1990 debates over German reunification, NATO's eastward march – in critics' eyes – risked undermining relations with Moscow.<sup>3</sup>

Left understudied in this debate are the timeline and strategy deliberations by which the United States, as the principal proponent of NATO enlargement, decided to support the alliance's expansion. To be sure, work by James Goldgeier, Ronald Asmus, and others illustrates how 'policy entrepreneurs,' reinforced by calls from Eastern European states themselves, succeeded in committing the United States to NATO enlargement from the mid-1990s despite substantial allied and US domestic opposition.<sup>4</sup> These studies, however, focus almost entirely on the choices of the William Clinton administration (1993–2001), portraying enlargement as stemming from the particular attitudes and ideas influencing Clinton and his advisors.<sup>5</sup> Extending this argument, many analysts contend that U.S. interest in NATO enlargement was virtually non-existent before 1994–1995. Mary Sarotte, for instance, argues enlargement unfolded over three stages in the early-mid 1990s while asserting that the United States broadly ignored European security between 1990 and the initial Clinton years.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, former Ambassador William Hill avers that the preceding George H.W. Bush administration (1989–1993) 'took no position on enlarging NATO membership,'<sup>7</sup> while Kimberly Marten – aptly summarizing this reasoning –

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*Survival* 37/1 (March 1995), 34–52; Kenneth Waltz, 'NATO Expansion: A Realist's View', *Contemporary Security Policy* 21/2 (August 2000), 23–38; Dan Reiter, 'Why NATO Enlargement Does Not Spread Democracy', *International Security* 25/4 (April 2001), 41–67; Michael McGwire, 'NATO Expansion: "A Policy Error of Historic Importance,"' *Review of International Studies* 24/1 (January 1998), 23–42.

<sup>3</sup>On the non-expansion pledge, see Joshua Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, 'Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion', *International Security* 40/4 (Spring 2016), 7–44; Mary Elise Sarotte, 'A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion', *Foreign Affairs* 93/5 (October 2014), 90–97; Mark Kramer, 'The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia', *The Washington Quarterly* 32/2 (2009), 39–61.

<sup>4</sup>James Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1999); Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); William Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions Since 1989* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup>Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 110; Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When*, 14; Vojtech Mastny, 'Eastern Europe and the Early Prospects for EC/EU and NATO Membership', *Cold War History* 9/2 (May 2009), 216–17.

<sup>6</sup>Mary Sarotte, 'The Convincing Call from Central Europe: Let Us Into NATO', *Foreign Affairs Snapshot*, 12 March 2019, 13. Elsewhere, Sarotte elaborates that 'even as the final stages of German reunification took place, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait had reoriented U.S. priorities away from Europe. The Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union dominated U.S. foreign-policy making in 1991 and early 1992, and the U.S. presidential election then took priority for the remainder of 1992. The Bush team's time was up when Bill Clinton won'; Sarotte, 'The Convincing Call from Central Europe: Let Us Into NATO.'

<sup>7</sup>Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 110. Other analysts argue that NATO members rejected enlargement as 'totally unrealistic' before 1993; that the United States 'resisted calls for an early expansion' of NATO membership into 1992; and that through 1992 'the prospect of NATO enlargement still appeared distant' due to US opposition; see, respectively, Trine Flockhart, 'The Dynamics of Expansion: NATO, WEU, and EU', *European Security* 5/2 (June 1996), 200; Kori Schake, 'NATO after the Cold War, 1991–1995: Institutional Competition and the Collapse of the French Alternative', *Contemporary European History* 7/3 (November 1998), 394; Mastny, 'Eastern Europe and the Early Prospects for EC/EU and NATO Membership', 216.

concludes that ‘questions about the future of the alliance did not receive much US attention either in the last two years of George W. H. Bush’s presidency, or in the early months of Bill Clinton’s presidency.’<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, treating the mid-1990s as the start of U.S. interest in NATO expansion into Eastern Europe is increasingly problematic. After all, studies by Jeffrey Engel and Timothy Sayle show that the Bush administration fixed on preserving NATO after the Cold War as a way of sustaining U.S. oversight of European security affairs; as such, it would be surprising if U.S. strategists attuned to European security issues gave no thought to NATO enlargement before 1993!<sup>9</sup> And, indeed, recent findings by Joshua Shiffrinson, Sarotte, and others demonstrate that enlargement was under discussion by senior U.S. policymakers as early as 1990 in parallel to efforts to reunify Germany within NATO.<sup>10</sup> Yet because even Sarotte and Shiffrinson stop their studies in 1990 following German reunification, analysts confront a gap with regard to U.S. policy towards enlargement. Ultimately, scholars know that U.S. elites discussed NATO expansion by 1990 and that expansion took off in earnest around 1994 largely due to U.S. policy, but we have little insight into the intervening U.S. deliberations.<sup>11</sup> Still missing is a systematic assessment of the United States’ evaluation of NATO enlargement into Eastern Europe in the critical 1990–1992 window during which Germany reunified, the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union collapsed, and the United States remained engaged in European security affairs absent a great power threat.<sup>12</sup>

This article fills this gap by examining U.S. debates surrounding NATO enlargement from mid-1990 through the end of the Bush administration.<sup>13</sup> Building on existing research, it asks three questions. First, how did the United

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<sup>8</sup>Kimberly Marten, ‘Reconsidering NATO Expansion: A Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s’, *European Journal of International Security* 3/2 (June 2018), 140.

<sup>9</sup>Jeffrey Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017); Timothy Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca New York: Cornell University Press, 2019), chap. 10.

<sup>10</sup>Mary Elise Sarotte, ‘Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence: The 1990 Deals to “Bribe the Soviets Out” and Move NATO In’, *International Security* 35/1 (Summer 2010), 115–19; Shiffrinson, ‘Deal or No Deal?’ 37–39; Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, 233.

<sup>11</sup>This situation is changing; see Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, 235–240. Where, however, Sayle discusses NATO’s post-Cold War expansion as part of a broader post-war history of NATO, this study specifically examines the evolution of U.S. arguments surrounding NATO enlargement in 1990–1992.

<sup>12</sup>Even projects expressly focused on American foreign policy at and after the Cold War’s end jump over this period, focusing largely on efforts to manage the Revolutions of 1989 and the 1991 Gulf War, and the post-1993 shifts in U.S. policy under Clinton; see Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*; Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11: The Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror*, (New York: BBS PublicAffairs, 2008), chaps. 1–3.

<sup>13</sup>Although I was unaware of the work when composing this article, Liviu Horovitz has recently advanced an argument similar to the one here, concluding, ‘During Bush’s final year in office, a consensus appears to have slowly emerged: Washington should offer the Central Europeans the perspective [sic] of joining NATO.’ Horovitz’s thesis is correct, but – as elaborated below – does not go far enough. In fact, the Bush administration had endorsed NATO enlargement by 1992 and was taking steps to enact this policy; Liviu Horovitz, ‘The George H.W. Bush Administration’s Policies Vis-à-Vis Central Europe: From Cautious Encouragement to Cracking Open NATO’s Door’, in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, ed. Daniel Hamilton and Kristina Spohr (Washington: Foreign Policy Institute and Henry Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, 2019), 71–94. Horovitz’s essay was published in the summer of 2019, at which time an earlier version of this article was already under review.

States' thinking over NATO enlargement into the Eastern European states that were previously allies of the Soviet Union evolve over the course of 1990–1992? Second, what drove this process – why did American policy-makers become interested in NATO's eastern enlargement? Finally, what can this process tell us about the United States' post-Cold War engagement in Europe, and international relations theory more generally?

Recently declassified materials from the George Bush Presidential Library, Freedom of Information Act releases by the U.S. Department of State, and Secretary of State James Baker's papers at Princeton University help address these questions. Particularly important are records of key national security actors such as the National Security Council (NSC) staff and the European Strategy Steering Group (ESSG) – a Deputies-level inter-agency group initially organized under the chairmanship of Deputy National Security Advisor Robert Gates that included the closest advisors to Baker, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, and other foreign policy principals,<sup>14</sup> and which formulated the United States' European policy for final vetting by Bush and other decision-makers.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on these and other documents, I advance two inter-related arguments. First, and more than existing research indicates, recently released archival documents show that the United States began to seriously consider expanding NATO beginning in 1990. By April 1992 – approximately two years earlier than previously claimed – the Bush administration had decided to seek NATO enlargement and developed a logic to guide this process. Although Bush's defeat in the 1992 presidential election put this plan on hold, the result means that the Clinton administration's subsequent

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<sup>14</sup>The ESSG's composition changed over time. Illustrating the seniority of the group, a partial list of members at mid-1991 included Undersecretary of State Reginald Bartholomew, Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Director of Strategic Plans for the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lieutenant General Edwin Leland, Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Richard Kerr, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency Director Ronald Lehmann, State Department Policy Planning Director Dennis Ross, State Department Counselor Robert Zoellick, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Europe James Dobbins, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy Stephen Hadley, Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lieutenant General Howard Graves, and NSC Senior Directors Arnold Kanter and David Gompert; see Arnold Kanter and David Gompert to Reginald Bartholomew et al., 'European Strategy Review', 23 May 1991, folder 'NATO – Future [2] [2]', CF00293, Wilson Files, George Bush Presidential Library, College Station, Texas (hereafter GBPL).

<sup>15</sup>Noting the ESSG's importance, Gates later recalled that it 'included the closest and most trusted advisers of Baker, Cheney, Powell, Scowcroft, and [CIA Director William] Webster [...] and provided a mechanism for translating the ideas of Zoellick, Blackwill, and their colleagues into government policy'; Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 493–94. For details on the ESSG, see Robert Hutchings, *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War: An Insider's Account of U.S. Policy in Europe, 1989–1992* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997), 155; Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 238, 442n99; Interview with Robert M. Gates, University of Virginia Miller Defense for Public Affairs, interview by Timothy Naftali and Tarek Masoud, 23 May 2000, 66.

debate over expansion 'relitigated' what the Bush administration already covered.<sup>16</sup>

Second, the United States' decision to back expansion of its keystone alliance is indicative of the United States' shifting priorities amid Europe's changing security landscape. When American discussion of possible NATO expansion first began in early-mid 1990, relations with the Soviet Union occupied top priority in U.S. strategic calculations. In turn, worries of the Soviet Union's potentially negative reaction to NATO enlargement and the dangers this posed to U.S. security in Europe led Bush and his team to decline to embrace expansion later into 1991.<sup>17</sup>

That said, the fragmentation and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union eliminated the constraint imposed on U.S. policy by another superpower, and American strategic horizons quickly expanded. At a time when the United States faced few meaningful external checks on its geopolitical influence, the mid-1992 decision to (as one study put it) 'open the question of NATO membership' was heavily driven by a desire to foreclose a Russian resurgence while simultaneously ensuring NATO remained the focal point of European security.<sup>18</sup> Though not the only factor, the latter was of particular concern to U.S. planners given efforts among many of the United States' West European allies to foster an independent European security identity anchored on the European Community (EC); despite close American ties to Western Europe, U.S. policymakers saw the push for European security independence as posing a long-term challenge to U.S. influence over European security and political affairs.<sup>19</sup> Seeking to forestall diminution of U.S. dominance – an idea more broadly reflected in the controversial 1992 Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) promulgated in the same period – U.S. policymakers fixed on NATO enlargement.<sup>20</sup> Baldly stated, U.S. support for NATO expansion emerged as American concerns

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<sup>16</sup>Stephen Flanagan, 'NATO From Liaison to Enlargement: A Perspective from the State Department and the National Security Council 1990–1999', in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, ed. Daniel Hamilton and Kristina Spohr (Washington: Foreign Policy Institute and Henry Kissinger Defense for Global Affairs, 2019), 94.

<sup>17</sup>U.S. policymakers worried throughout 1990–1991 that Soviet quiescence to their loss of influence in Eastern Europe would soon end; James Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 472–76; Joshua Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 139–41, 155.

<sup>18</sup>No author, 'Objectives in Upcoming Consultations', undated [included in Briefing Packet sent to National Security Council Principals on 13 April 1992], folder 'ESSG: European Security Policy Documents – [13 April 1992]', CF01527, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>19</sup>For background on European security ambitions and U.S. concerns, see Charles Krupnick, 'Not What They Wanted: American Policy and the European Security and Defense Identity', in *Disconcerted Europe: The Search for a New Security Architecture*, ed. Alexander Moens and Christopher Anstis (Boulder: Westview, 1994), 115–34; Schake, 'NATO after the Cold War, 1991–1995'; Robert Art, 'Why Western Europe Needs the United States and NATO', *Political Science Quarterly* 111/(1996), 1–39. Here, I connect U.S. concerns to the previously unappreciated early 1990s drive to enlarge NATO.

<sup>20</sup>The 1992 Defense Planning Guidance called for the United States to prevent the emergence of new peer competitors including, if necessary, through unilateral means. Although its argument for unilateral action was challenged, the emphasis on sustaining U.S. dominance enjoyed wide support in the Bush administration; Eric Edelman, 'The Strange Career of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance', in *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy After the Berlin Wall and 9/11*, ed. Melvyn Leffler and Jeffrey Legro (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 63–77; Chollet and Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars*, 50–51. Several of the individuals who formulated the DPG also served on the ESSG.

shifted from containing the Soviet Union, to suppressing future challenges from both Russia and Western Europe to the United States' post-Cold War preeminence.

The implications of this work are stark. For historiography, finding that a broad decision to expand NATO – vetted by both the senior U.S. leadership and at lower policymaking levels – emerged over the course of 1990–1992 resets the clock on NATO enlargement. In showcasing how U.S. fears of future Russian and Western European challenges drove this choice, it also highlights the existence of a competitive impulse akin to that enunciated in the 1992 DPG throughout much of the Bush administration; although the 1992 DPG itself may have been controversial, the underlying premise of sustaining U.S. preeminence – to include keeping allies from developing into independent centers of power – was not. As importantly, it challenges scholarship portraying NATO expansion as a particular product of Eastern European lobbying and the unique beliefs in the Clinton administration. Instead, the findings illustrate how even the foreign policy 'realists' inhabiting the Bush administration embraced a logic for NATO's eastward move.<sup>21</sup> For sure, expansion occurred on Clinton's watch and it is impossible to resolve whether Bush would have pursued enlargement had he been re-elected in 1992. Nevertheless, this new evidence showcases that Bush may well have been inclined in a similar direction as Clinton. A policy consensus and logic for enlargement was in place by mid-1992, such that there are grounds to believe different U.S. leaders would have pursued similar choices under similar strategic circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

For international relations theory, meanwhile, the transformation of the United States' NATO efforts from hedging against Soviet aggression to suppressing potential challengers highlights the incentives states face to structure their future security environments by stopping prospective competitors before they take shape. Moreover, that this policy emerged with the end of the Cold War shows the rapidity with which the United States' pursuit of 'primacy' – maintaining the United States' dominant international position – took root in U.S. circles.<sup>23</sup> Along the way, the American effort further showcases that international institutions, often portrayed as venues through which states can achieve cooperative outcomes, can be used to compete with real or anticipated rivals. I return to these themes in the Conclusion.

The remainder of this paper proceeds in five sections. Following this introduction, I use recently released archival sources to discuss the origins

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<sup>21</sup>On the realist Bush administration, see Chollett and Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars*.

<sup>22</sup>In this sense, the findings extend the structural realist claim that 'similarity of behavior is expected from similarly situated states,' implying that a state experiencing a leadership change but facing near-identical systemic conditions tends to behave similarly; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 122. They also indirectly pose problems for arguments that leaders' ideas play a dispositive role affecting a state's foreign policy.

<sup>23</sup>On primacy, see Barry Posen and Andrew Ross, 'Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy', *International Security* 21/3 (Winter 1996–1997), 32–43.

of the United States' interest in NATO enlargement over the course of 1990 and early 1991 – a period including the diplomacy of German reunification and growing worries over the future of Soviet foreign policy. Next, I discuss how these preliminary deliberations evolved in late 1991 and early 1992 into growing momentum for exploring NATO enlargement, driven heavily by concerns over the United States' post-Cold War role in European security, fears of Russian revisionism, and worries that growing Western European security cooperation could undercut NATO. From there, I illustrate how these trends created an increasingly firm logic and policy consensus favoring NATO enlargement that, by mid-1992, translated into a decision to expand NATO eastward. Finally, I conclude by detailing the implications of these findings for history, theory, and policy.

### **Preliminary debates over enlargement, March 1990-March 1991**

American discussion of NATO enlargement did not emerge from the ether. Even as the 1989 Revolutions hollowed out Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, U.S. policymakers on the NSC staff, in the State and Defense Departments, and at the highest decision-making levels saw a growing need for U.S. involvement in the area. Scowcroft's analysis is telling, writing Bush that, 'the virtual collapse of Communist rule in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR [i.e., East Germany]' presented 'both risks [...] and opportunities for a much more robust and constructive U.S. role in the center of Europe.' These opportunities, however, could 'only be exploited if we follow through systematically on your policy goals,' including keeping NATO 'vital in these new circumstances.'<sup>24</sup> Scowcroft continued with this theme in early 1990, offering Bush in January as the diplomacy of German reunification began in earnest that the United States' 'central and overriding objective in 1990 should be to facilitate the [...] withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Eastern Europe.' However, because Soviet-German enmity could upset this process, the United States needed to find a way to help the USSR and Germany 'manage their relationship.'<sup>25</sup> To this end, analysts such as the NSC's Robert Hutchings began emphasizing that the United States needed to 'stand between German and Russia in central Europe.'<sup>26</sup> More directly, Scowcroft was soon asking his staff, 'What is the E. Europe

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<sup>24</sup>Scowcroft to The President, 'U.S. Diplomacy for the New Europe', 22 December 1989, folder 'German Unification (December 1989)', 91116, Scowcroft Files, GBPL.

<sup>25</sup>Brent Scowcroft to the President, 'Objectives in U.S.-Soviet Relations for 1990', 13 January 1990, folder 'Gorbachev (Dobrynin) Sensitive 1989 -June 1990 [Copy Set] [5]', 91127, Scowcroft Files, GBPL. Given the style and tone, Rice appears to have authored this document.

<sup>26</sup>Brent Scowcroft to The President, 'U.S. Policy in Eastern Europe in 1990', undated, enclosed with Robert Hutchings to Brent Scowcroft, 'U.S. Policy in Eastern Europe in 1990', 10 January 1990, folder 'Soviet Power Collapse in Eastern Europe (December 1989-January 1990)', 91125, Scowcroft Files, GBPL.



[sic] we eventually see?’ and ‘How do we get between [West Germany] and USSR?’<sup>27</sup>

Still, it was only as American policymakers considered the future shape of European security as Germany’s reunification within NATO was resolved that NATO enlargement beyond the former East Germany entered the conversation. By February 1990, Eastern European officials started calling for the United States to expand NATO into Eastern Europe with, for example, Hungary’s foreign minister telling Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger that ‘a new NATO could provide a political umbrella for Central Europe.’ Other Hungarian, Polish, and Czechoslovakian leaders followed suit.<sup>28</sup> At a time when U.S. policymakers fretted that the United States was at a ‘strategic crossroads’ and needed to find some way to remain relevant to Europe’s new security situation, these calls prompted American policymakers to look east.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, State Department planners wrote State Department Counselor Robert Zoellick and Baker in March that the United States could offer Eastern European states ‘a choice of more than a Russian domination or a German domination’ by fostering ‘an “active buffer” between the two’ and ‘organizing’ the region via NATO.<sup>30</sup>

Senior U.S. officials were not yet contemplating NATO’s direct involvement in Eastern Europe. Still, wheels were turning. In late March 1990, for instance, NSC Counselor Peter Rodman wrote Scowcroft of the need to address ‘what to do with the Warsaw Pact orphans now looking for a home.’ His recommendation of reconstituting the Western European Union (WEU) as an ‘European caucus within NATO’ and encouraging it to ‘throw some kind of umbrella over the East Europeans’ amounted to a call for some kind of NATO role in Eastern Europe.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, June 1990 saw Baker deflect a reporter’s question over whether ‘NATO might be open to membership by others.’<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Baker’s private comments indicate that the Secretary of State was

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<sup>27</sup>Scowcroft hand annotations on Scowcroft, ‘U.S. Policy in Eastern Europe in 1990.’

<sup>28</sup>Quotes from Lawrence Eagleburger, ‘Impressions from Hungary, Poland, Austria, and Yugoslavia’, 1 March 1990, folder ‘Soviet Power Collapse in Eastern Europe (February–March 1990)’, 91125, Scowcroft Files, GBPL. See also Mary Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 139–40.

<sup>29</sup>Scowcroft, ‘U.S. Diplomacy for the New Europe.’ For related concerns see Dennis Ross, [untitled paper], undated, enclosed with Reg Bartholomew, ‘Memorandum for the Thursday Group’, 12 March 1990, folder ‘NATO – Future [1][6]’, CF00293, Wilson Files, GBPL. Ross’ paper was blunt in arguing that NATO was the ‘organization which anchors unambiguously the U.S. military commitment to the Continent’ but now needed to ‘compete with other security arrangements.’

<sup>30</sup>Harvey Sicherman to Dennis Ross and Robert Zoellick, ‘Our European Strategy: Next Steps’, 12 March 1990, folder 14, box 176, BP/SMML.

<sup>31</sup>Peter Rodman to Brent Scowcroft, ‘NATO as a “Political” Organization,’ 26 March 1990, supplied directly to author by GBPL. The WEU was established after World War Two as the Western Union. Renamed the WEU in the 1950s, NATO’s role in European security left the WEU moribund for much of the Cold War. With, however, Western European states seeking greater influence over NATO policy, the 1980s witnessed growing discussion over reactivating the WEU as a European grouping within NATO.

<sup>32</sup>‘Press Briefing by James Baker, Enroute ANDREWS AFB to Shannon, Ireland’, 4 June 1990, folder 16, box 163, BP/SMML.

indeed considering NATO's enlargement, arguing at a July 1990 meeting of Bush's foreign policy team that the United States needed to craft a "half-way house" for governments who want out of the Warsaw Pact and CEMA but can't join NATO and EC (yet).<sup>33</sup> Nor was Baker alone. In fact, Cheney alluded to potential NATO expansion at the July 1990 NATO London Summit, offering, 'Whether or not some kind of observer status would be arranged for [Eastern European states], or some kind of associate status would ultimately be appropriate is something the Alliance is going to have to address.'<sup>34</sup>

By the early fall of 1990, and with German reunification mostly resolved, debate crystallized further. In August, U.S. documents prepared for a review of NATO's post-Cold War strategy declared that NATO should 'link East/Central European security and stability into NATO's security structural framework.' This was no small conceptual change, considering Eastern European leaders such as Czechoslovak President Václav Havel were again calling for alliance membership.<sup>35</sup> Late October 1990 – barely three weeks after Germany's formal reunification – then saw the first open discussion over possible NATO enlargement among senior U.S. officials, as members of the ESSG debated whether 'the U.S. and NATO' should 'now signal to the new democracies of Eastern Europe NATO's readiness to contemplate their future membership.'<sup>36</sup> The minutes of the resulting discussion remain classified. The ESSG's preparatory papers, however, highlight that interest in NATO enlargement was pervasive among U.S. strategists. As the State Department elaborated in its framing report, although 'there is clearly no support for [Eastern European] membership now,' the U.S. 'must not present NATO as a closed club.'<sup>37</sup> Instead, as the NSC's summary briefing for Gates explained, participants simply agreed 'that East European governments should not be invited to join NATO anytime in the immediate future.'<sup>38</sup>

At the time, reluctance to back enlargement was heavily colored by ongoing worries with the Soviet Union. Despite Soviet quiescence during Germany's reunification earlier in 1990, Soviet domestic and foreign policy could – in the U.S. assessment – be negatively affected by NATO expansion, with deleterious consequences for the United States. As the State Department emphasized, including Eastern European states in NATO 'would be perceived very negatively

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<sup>33</sup>James A. Baker III, 'CSCE,' part of 'JAB Notes from 7/4–5/90G-24 Ministerial Mtg., Brussels, Belgium & 7/5–6/90 Economic Summit, London, UK', folder 3, box 109, BP/SMML.

<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Gerald Solomon, *The NATO Enlargement Debate, 1990–1997: Blessings of Liberty* (Westport: Greenwood, 1998), 10.

<sup>35</sup>Briefing Book, 'NATO Strategy Review', 3 August 1990, folder 'NATO Strategy Review [6]', CF00293, Wilson Files, GBPL. On Eastern European membership requests, see Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, 233.

<sup>36</sup>David Gompert, 'Agenda for Meeting of the European Strategy Steering Group on Monday, October 29, 3:00–5:00 PM', folder 'NATO Strategy Review #1[1]', CF01468, Zelikow Files, GBPL.

<sup>37</sup>James Dobbins to David Gompert, 'NATO Strategy Review Paper for October 29 Discussion', folder 'NATO Strategy Review #1[3]', CF01468, Zelikow Files, GBPL.

<sup>38</sup>Philip Zelikow to Robert Gates, 'Your Meeting of the European Strategy Steering Group on Monday, October 29, 3:00 to 5:00 PM', folder 'NATO – Strategy [4]', CF00293, Wilson Files, GBPL.

by the Soviets' and could 'lead to a reversal of current positive trends in Eastern Europe and the USSR.'<sup>39</sup> This was no mean issue given the deterioration of Soviet domestic and political life by late 1990: U.S. analysts appreciated that Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's domestic position was under duress, and it was possible that Gorbachev could be removed from office or pushed towards a hardline course.<sup>40</sup> At a time when, as Scowcroft recorded elsewhere, the U.S. was close to attaining major 'geostrategic goals' including 'the withdrawal of Soviet forces from East-Central Europe,' avoiding steps that could push the Soviets to change course and/or roil U.S.-Soviet relations carried a clear logic.<sup>41</sup> Considering, too, that the United States was not 'in a position to guarantee the security of [Eastern European] countries vis-à-vis the Soviets,' the U.S. would be risking a lot by opening a conversation on NATO expansion. It was ultimately unclear whether 'membership of these countries in NATO is consistent with U.S. interests.'<sup>42</sup>

Still, some senior Bush administration officials remained interested in exploring changes in NATO's relationship with Eastern Europe. As Gates' ESSG materials from late October 1990 elaborated, 'OSD [the Office of the Secretary of Defense] and State's Policy Planning Staff (and possibly Zoellick) would like to keep the door ajar and not give the East Europeans the impression that NATO is forever a closed club.' Given these divisions, the ESSG recommended the United States dodge the enlargement issue, concluding 'there is no need to consider the issue of East European membership in NATO in connection with the current NATO strategy review ... [or] indulge in speculation about what our policy might be under different circumstances in the future.'<sup>43</sup> As this language implied, policymakers were not foregoing possible NATO enlargement – the United States was simply not engaging the matter for now. Indeed, considering ESSG members decided one month later (November 1990) that one of NATO's 'core security functions' should include dissuading the Soviet Union from 'seeking [...] to reimpose hegemony over Central/Eastern Europe through the threat or use of force,' the potential existed that future developments might draw the United States and NATO into the area.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>No author, 'NATO's Future Political Track of the Strategy Review.'

<sup>40</sup>Condoleezza Rice to Brent Scowcroft, 'Whither the Soviet Union', 23 November 1990, folder 'USSR – Gorbachev', CF00719, Rice Files, GBPL; CIA, 'Gorbachev's Position and the Soviet Domestic Scene,' 4 September 1990, folder 'Master Chron Log for USSR – January 1990 – December 1990 [1]', CF00715, Rice Files, GBPL.

<sup>41</sup>Brent Scowcroft to the President, 'Turmoil in the Soviet Union and U.S. Policy', 18 August 1990, folder 'USSR Collapse: U.S.-Soviet Relations Thru 1991 (August 1990)', 91118, Scowcroft Files, GBPL.

<sup>42</sup>No author, 'NATO's Future Political Track of the Strategy Review.'

<sup>43</sup>Zelikow, 'Your Meeting of the European Strategy Steering Group on Monday, October 29.'

<sup>44</sup>David Gompert to Reginald Bartholomew et al., 'Revised Final Summary of Conclusions from European Strategy Steering Group Meetings, November 29–30', 4 December 1990, folder 'European Strategy [Steering] Group (ESSG)', CF01301, Gompert Files, GBPL.

In lieu of enlargement, the United States instead turned to building NATO 'liaison' programmes with former members of the Warsaw Pact. These programmes were first floated as a possibility during German reunification negotiations in the late spring of 1990, and formally proposed following NATO's July 1990 London Summit.<sup>45</sup> When announced, their avowed mission was to have Warsaw Pact members 'see our [NATO's] work' and to 'have their voices heard' in NATO deliberations.<sup>46</sup> Senior U.S. analysts were enthusiastic about the potential for this outreach.<sup>47</sup> In fact, shortly before the ESSG met to discuss NATO expansion in October, a separate ESSG report elaborated that the liaisons could be 'modelled on the relationship of the [NATO] Allies with neutrals whose territorial integrity is important to the Alliance' such as Sweden. Accordingly, the initiative could evolve into an arrangement that would 'increase East European understanding of NATO defense policies,' facilitate NATO-compatible supply and intelligence relationships, foster amenable Defense postures, and help prevent crises from emerging in the area.<sup>48</sup> Though not expressly stated, the further implication of the liaisons seems clear: encouraging reforms would make Eastern European states more attractive allies if the U.S. decided to push enlargement while providing leverage over their behavior in the meantime.

The emphasis on liaison missions rather than NATO membership continued into early 1991. Through March, the ESSG agreed that 'current Eastern European efforts to seek Western security guarantees or some form of membership in NATO will be counterproductive.' Instead, Bush and other policymakers strove to give 'content to the liaison relationships' while making the initiative visible and salient.<sup>49</sup> Meeting with Polish President Lech Walesa in late March 1991, for instance, Baker argued that the U.S. was addressing Polish security by 'suggesting changes in security architecture in Europe,' including advocating 'NATO liaison with the new democracies';<sup>50</sup> this followed a conversation with French leaders in which Bush similarly sought French backing for the

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<sup>45</sup>NATO, 'London Declaration on a Transformed Alliance', July 5–6, 1990, <https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c900706a.htm>.

<sup>46</sup>SecState to All Diplomatic Posts, 'Results of NATO Summit', 8 July 1990, folder 'NATO Summit, July 1990 [3 of 3]', CF00290, Wilson Files, GBPL.

<sup>47</sup>Philip Zelikow, Mike Fry, and Heather Wilson to Robert Gates, 'The Meeting of the European Strategy Steering Group (ESG) on Monday, July 16, at 9:30 a.m.', 14 July 1990, folder 'NATO – Future[2][7]', CF00293, Wilson Files, GBPL.

<sup>48</sup>No author [likely State Department], 'Enhancing NATO's Political Role in Support of Security', 5 October 1990, folder 'NATO – Strategy[6]', CF00293, Wilson Files, GBPL.

<sup>49</sup>No author, 'America's Postwar Agenda in Europe', enclosed with David Gompert to Reginald Bartholomew et al., 'Meetings of European Strategy Steering Group Meetings [sic], March 11–12', 6 March 1991, folder 'ESSG: ESSG Papers for March 10 & 11 Meetings – [6 March 1991]', CF01527, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>50</sup>Memcon, 'Expanded Meeting with Lech Walesa, President of Poland', 20 March 1991, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1991-03-20-Walesa.pdf>.

liaison effort.<sup>51</sup> In short, and as an ESSG strategy document delivered to Bush and other principals in March 1991 emphasized, although the United States sought 'to establish that Eastern Europe falls within the core security concerns of NATO,' the liaison programme was key as 'membership in NATO' remained 'premature.'<sup>52</sup>

That said, 'premature' was not the same thing as impossible, and the U.S. debate over NATO enlargement continued. In mid-March 1991, Scowcroft wrote Bush that NATO remained 'indispensable' as 'a source of reassurance to the new democracies of Central Europe.'<sup>53</sup> This paralleled an ESSG finding that an American presence via NATO was needed to help dissuade 'any Soviet reentry into Central and Eastern Europe or coercion or intimidation of that region.'<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, senior Defense Department officials pressed the ESSG to reconsider U.S. policy towards NATO's role east of Germany. As NSC staff summarized for Gates, 'OSD [the Office of the Secretary of Defence ...] wants to lean further forward in allowing stronger ties to Eastern Europe to be characterized as relationships in the security field. They want the Soviets to notice that characterization.' For their part, the Joint Chiefs of Staff sought to caveat that Eastern European efforts to join NATO would be counterproductive only 'at this time' so as to 'provoke discussion of how our security commitments to Eastern Europe might evolve.'<sup>55</sup>

As in October 1990, the ESSG suppressed the March 1991 drive to directly engage possible NATO enlargement. The reasoning, too, echoed the earlier rationale, with policymakers concluding that 'too much USG speculation now about what we might do later could easily evolve into a concrete anticipation of a future security commitment – and the internal chatter would sooner or later be communicated to the East Europeans, and promptly amplified by them in ways that would be certain to increase Moscow's anxieties.' This, in turn, would jeopardize 'the complete end of Soviet hegemony' in Eastern Europe by 'poking xenophobic Soviet hardliners with a sharp stick.'<sup>56</sup> Still, pressure for enlargement among U.S. policymakers was growing.

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<sup>51</sup>Memcon, 'Meeting with Francois Mitterrand, President of France', 14 March 1991, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1991-03-14-Mitterrand.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup>No author, 'Draft Summary of Conclusions: European Strategy Steering Group, March 11–12, 1991', included with David Gompert to Robert Gates, 'Meeting of Principals on European Pillar, March 27, 5:00 p.m.', 26 March 1991, folder 'European Steering Group – March 1991', CF01035, Gordon Files, GBPL.

<sup>53</sup>Brent Scowcroft to The President, 'NATO and European Integration', 11 March 1991, folder 'European Steering Group – March 1991', CF01035, Gordon Files, GBPL.

<sup>54</sup>No author 'America's Postwar Agenda in Europe', no date, folder 'European Steering Group – March 1991', enclosed with Philip Zelikow for Robert Gates, 'Your Meetings of the European Strategy Steering Group on March 11 at 3:00 pm and March 12 at 2:00 pm', 9 March 1991, CF01035, Gordon Files, GBPL.

<sup>55</sup>Zelikow 'Your Meetings of the European Strategy Steering Group on March 11 at 3:00 pm'; No author, 'America's Postwar Agenda.'

<sup>56</sup>Zelikow, 'Your Meetings of the European Strategy Steering Group on March 11.'

## Toward opening NATO's door, March 1991 – early 1992

By mid-1991, however, facilitating the Soviet Union's retreat from Eastern Europe was no longer the United States' primary objective in European security. After all, the Soviet Union's growing dissolution meant that the Soviet threat could 'no longer be used as primary justification for the existence of NATO'<sup>57</sup> – let alone its enlargement. With Europe's security landscape transforming as Cold War-era bipolarity faded, the Bush administration was instead increasingly concerned with the EC's efforts to expand the scope of its activities in foreign policy and security affairs. Of course, concerns with the EC's ambitions were present in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>58</sup> By 1991, however, the problem was growing: following Germany's October 1990 reunification, major Western European states (especially France and Germany) began exploring ways to accelerate EC integration, deepen responsibilities in foreign policy and Defense affairs, and calling for development of a common EC security policy as an alternative to NATO.<sup>59</sup>

This issue remained a latent rather than proximate challenge as European integration remained years away.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, absent a Soviet threat, American policymakers feared that further Western European Defense and foreign policy cooperation could imperil NATO's post-Cold War viability as (1) European states turned elsewhere for their security, and (2) U.S. voters questioned the rationale for peacetime alliance commitments if Europe looked able to protect itself. Europe – so the argument ran – might then lose one of the core mechanisms that had stabilized the region since 1945.<sup>61</sup> More importantly, the United States' position as a 'European power' could be harmed, hindering what one report developed for Bush and his senior leadership called the United States' ability to 'harness European power in support of our broader "alliance of values" and global interests.'<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup>No author [paper prepared for ESSG meeting], 'The Rome Summit and NATO's Mission', undated [circulated to ESSG circa 19 September 1991], folder 'ESSG: ESSG Meeting – 23 September 1991', CF01527, Lowenkron Files, GBPL. On Soviet problems, see Serhii Plokhyy, *The Last Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

<sup>58</sup>Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, 183–190, 223–224.

<sup>59</sup>For details, see Frédéric Bozo, 'Mitterrand's France, the End of the Cold War, and German Unification: A Reappraisal', *Cold War History* 7/4 (2007), 466–68; Alexander Moens, 'Behind Complementarity and Transparency: The Politics of the European Security and Defense Identity,' *Journal of European Integration* 16/1 (September 1992), 29–48.

<sup>60</sup>CIA, 'The Dynamics and Momentum in Europe for the Organization of a European Security Identity', 15 March 1991, enclosed with David Gompert to Robert Gates, 'Meeting of Principals on European Pillar, March 27, 5:00 p.m.', 26 March 1991, folder 'NATO [4]', CF01329, Rostow Files, GBPL.

<sup>61</sup>Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, 234.

<sup>62</sup>No author, 'Framework for Discussion of U.S. Strategy Toward Organization of a European Defense Identity', undated, enclosed with Gompert to Gates, 'Meeting of Principals on European Pillar, March 27, 5:00 p.m.' A separate ESSG analysis similarly averred that European interest in a common security policy presented 'a principal challenge' to American interests; No author, 'America's Postwar Agenda.'

Recognizing the challenge to American prerogatives, the second half of 1990 had already witnessed U.S. policymakers scramble to keep NATO 'the central pillar of Europe's security architecture.'<sup>63</sup> This effort was pervasive, involving coordination with allies (especially Britain) skeptical of reinforcing the EC's charter, pressuring states such as France and Germany to pursue European integration in a manner that did not rival NATO, and forestalling any European initiatives that might undercut NATO's preeminence.<sup>64</sup> As senior NSC official David Gompert elaborated in an October 1990 memorandum to Scowcroft, 'the European "integration thing" is real: we should capture its energy within NATO or watch it take an independent course.' If successful, such 'capture' would 'put behind us current doubts about NATO's survival and our long-term role in Europe.'<sup>65</sup> Likewise, ESSG conclusions circulated throughout the U.S. government in December 1990 underlined that the United States' 'overall goal' remained a 'strong and viable' NATO that constituted 'the foundation for Atlantic cooperation in addressing political and security concerns and [maintained] the United States as a European power.' The U.S. therefore needed to anticipate 'European trends in order to shape them to NATO's advantage.'<sup>66</sup> By March 1991, meanwhile, the consensus in favor of sustaining NATO against Western European alternatives was sufficiently strong that Scowcroft wrote Bush of the need to avoid 'an independent European defense identity' that could 'harm the credibility and effectiveness of NATO, reduce our influence in Europe, and weaken domestic support for our European presence.'<sup>67</sup> As the NSC staff offered Gates that month, it therefore fell to the United States to decide 'what limits [...] to place on the development of a common European foreign and security policy in order to preserve a vital North Atlantic Alliance.'<sup>68</sup>

Nor were these just internal conversations, as U.S. diplomacy reflected the consensus against Western European aspirations. For sure, the need to sustain allied support during the Persian Gulf Crisis (August 1990-February 1991) limited the intensity with which

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<sup>63</sup>No author, 'NATO's Future Political Track of the Strategy Review: Questions to Ask Ourselves', 22 October 1990, folder 'NATO - Strategy [5]', Wilson Files, GBPL.

<sup>64</sup>Schake, 'NATO After the Cold War', 383-384; Moens, 'Behind Complementarity.'

<sup>65</sup>David Gompert to Brent Scowcroft, 'Thoughts on the Future of the Alliance', 9 October 1990, folder 'NATO [5]', CF01329, Rostow Files, GBPL.

<sup>66</sup>No author, 'Summary of Conclusions: European Strategy Steering Group, November 29-30, 1990', enclosed with David Gompert for Brent Scowcroft, 'US Policy on the "European Pillar"', 1 December 1990, folder 'NATO Strategy Review #2[1]', CF01468, Zelikow Files, GBPL.

<sup>67</sup>Scowcroft, 'NATO and European Integration.' March 1991 also saw revised guidance delivered to Bush underlining that the United States was 'ready to support arrangements [...] for] a common European foreign, security, and defense policy' provided NATO remained 'the principal venue for consultation and the forum for agreement on all policies bearing on the security and defense commitments of its members'; No author, 'Minutes of Principals' Meeting on European Pillar, March 27 [1991]', folder 'ESSG: ESSG Meeting of European Pillar - [27 March 1991]', CF01527, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>68</sup>Zelikow, 'Your Meetings of the European Strategy Steering Group on March 11.'

U.S. policymakers could initially push their agenda.<sup>69</sup> Still, Bush administration officials stressed the basic approach by cautioning its Western European allies that, while European integration in general was acceptable, security developments that threatened to sideline NATO were not. Baker, for one, highlighted the point at a December 1990 meeting of the North Atlantic Council when telling the assembled delegates that the United States welcomed ‘sustaining the transatlantic partnership on security affairs with a more confident and united Europe – a partnership consonant with the North Atlantic Treaty.’<sup>70</sup> And, once the Gulf Crisis ended in February 1991, U.S. policy intensified. Later that month, for instance, the State Department sent a pointed demarche to European capitals warning against a separate European security identity that could weaken NATO’s role in European security.<sup>71</sup> Bush also pressed the issue, telling French President François Mitterrand in mid-March that ‘we view NATO as the prime security guarantor [in Europe], but we have no problem with European integration.’<sup>72</sup>

Still, as calls for NATO enlargement mounted inside the U.S. government, debates over NATO’s presence east of Germany became wrapped up in debates over NATO’s role vis-à-vis alternative Western European security arrangements. By mid-March 1991, the ESSG’s call to ensure that NATO remain ‘the principal forum’ for members’ security and defense commitments’ irrespective of their other (e.g., EC) security ties was coupled with a determination that NATO would have to become the primary forum for ‘issues of stability and security in Eastern Europe [emphasis in original].’<sup>73</sup> The implication – that a separate European security grouping might make inroads in Eastern Europe to NATO’s detriment – was obvious.<sup>74</sup> Neither was growing interest in Eastern Europe just a matter of internal speculation.

<sup>69</sup> Jeffrey Engel, ed., *Into the Desert: Reflections on the Gulf War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>70</sup> Baker quoted in SecState to All Capitals, ‘Guidance on NATO Strategy Review – European Security Identity and Related Issues’, 21 February 1991, folder ‘Six Power Conference [1]’, CF01354, Zelikow Files, GBPL.

<sup>71</sup> Moens, ‘Behind Complementarity’, 40–41; Krupnick, ‘Not What They Wanted’, 124–126. The demarche has never been declassified, but releases from British files cover the substance; Christopher Prentice, ‘European Security’, 27 February 1991, PREM 19/3326, The National Archives, Kew, London (hereafter NA); Anthony Acland, ‘NATO and European Security’, 17 February 1991, PREM 19/3326, NA.

<sup>72</sup> Memcon, ‘Meeting with Francois Mitterrand, President of France’, 14 March 1991, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1991-03-14-Mitterrand.pdf>. By the end of 1991, American pressure became more overt, culminating in Bush telling allied heads of state at the November 1991 Rome Summit that ‘Our premise is that the American role in the Defense and affairs of Europe will not be made superfluous by European union. If our premise is wrong, if, my friends, your ultimate aim is to provide independently for your own Defense, the time to tell us is today,’ quoted in Krupnick, ‘Not What They Wanted’, 130.

<sup>73</sup> No author, ‘Draft Summary of Conclusions: European Strategy Steering Group, March 11–12, 1991.’

<sup>74</sup> Earlier in March, an ESSG paper argued that NATO needed to have primary responsibility – irrespective of Western European ambitions – in creating ‘a security environment in which no country would be able to intimidate or coerce any nation or to impose hegemony,’ elaborating that this included protecting NATO’s prerogative to address ‘stability and security in Eastern Europe.’ No author, ‘America’s Postwar Agenda.’



A few days after the ESSG delivered guidance emphasizing NATO's central role in Western and Eastern European security for circulation throughout the U.S. government, French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas raised the issue, telling Bush and Baker 'another aspect of European Security [*sic*] is how to deal with the former Warsaw Pact countries. They want to join NATO.'<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, that Eastern European leaders continued seeking NATO commitments throughout the spring of 1991 created a persistent diplomatic chorus demanding enlargement.<sup>76</sup>

With discussions over European integration continuing, and a series of high-level NATO meetings slated for the second half of 1991, U.S. strategists were forced to again debate the alliance's role in Eastern Europe. By mid-May 1991, the ESSG thus turned to consider 'NATO's role vis-à-vis security problems in Eastern Europe.'<sup>77</sup> Of particular concern was whether the U.S should 'do more on NATO liaison and outreach to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.'<sup>78</sup> The problem, as one State Department analyst put it, came in that the U.S. and its allies had 'never really fully considered, or conveyed to liaison governments, what the long-term objectives and parameters' of the liaisons entailed. This increasingly manifested in 'frustrated expectations' among Eastern European governments, and the 'resistance of several NATO members to expanding the programs.'<sup>79</sup> Considering, too, that the United States remained suspicious that continuing Western European efforts to develop a common security policy meant there were plans for a European security identity which might be (as Bush told Kohl) 'separate from or would supersede NATO,' these were no small issues.<sup>80</sup> If the United States and NATO failed to carve a path forward in Eastern Europe, NATO might be undercut by alternative European security arrangements.<sup>81</sup> As an ESSG report elaborated, if the United States was to 'continue to be a European power, notwithstanding the end of the Cold War and the impetus towards European unity,' then it needed

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<sup>75</sup>Memcon, 'Meeting with Mitterrand.'

<sup>76</sup>Flanagan, 'NATO From Liaison to Enlargement', 99–100.

<sup>77</sup>David Gompert to Reginald Bartholomew et al., 'European Strategy Review', 10 May 1991, folder 'ESSG: European Strategy Review – [16 May 1991]', CF01527, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>78</sup>David Gompert to Reginald Bartholomew et al., 'European Strategy Review', 16 May 1991, folder 'ESSG: European Strategy Review – [16 May 1991]', CF01527, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>79</sup>Steve Flanagan, 'NATO Liaison: General Principles for Development', 17 May 1991, folder 'NATO: Eastern Europe', CF01526, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>80</sup>Memorandum of Conversation, 'Meeting with Helmut Kohl, Chancellor of Germany', 20 May 1991, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1991-05-20-Kohl.pdf>; also Scowcroft, 'NATO and European Integration.' On Western European efforts, see No author, 'Framework for Discussion of U.S. Strategy toward Organization [*sic*] of a European Defense Identity', 26 March 1991, folder 'NATO [4]', Rostow Files, GBPL.

<sup>81</sup>As Hutchings later described, 'if NATO had no role in [Eastern Europe], it had no role at all except as an insurance policy [...] NATO would be marginalized as an agent of European security'; Hutchings, *American Diplomacy*, 277.

to 'examine where NATO is headed in its policies toward Eastern Europe.'<sup>82</sup>

Policy-makers therefore began preparing to expand the NATO liaison programmes and, more dramatically, entertaining the idea that the programmes could be a stepping stone to NATO membership.<sup>83</sup> Already in May 1991, State Department Policy Planning Staff Member Stephen Flanagan recommended that revamped liaison missions 'leave open the possibility of membership in NATO.'<sup>84</sup> Concurrently, the United States signaled its mounting commitment to Eastern European security, pushing its allies to embrace expanded liaisons and outreach to the area.<sup>85</sup> The consequences of this pressure became clear that spring when, following NATO's June 1991 Copenhagen Ministerial meeting, the alliance formally declared that its security was 'inseparably linked to that of all other states in Europe';<sup>86</sup> by definition, this involved NATO in Eastern European security. And by late September – with NATO's November 1991 Rome Summit looming – U.S. strategists revisited the liaison concept yet again with an eye towards 'a possible political transformation of the Alliance,' including 'expanding participation in NATO' and embracing 'openness to new, eligible members in the future.'<sup>87</sup>

To be clear, Bush and his team tried to minimize overt discussions of NATO enlargement with foreign officials. Into early October 1991, for instance, U.S. diplomats told French interlocutors that the U.S. wished 'to avoid the issue of membership for these countries [i.e., Eastern Europe] and believe the best way to do so is to provide an alternative' via the liaisons.<sup>88</sup> In other venues and behind the scenes, however, the American position was shifting. A State Department briefing paper that September, for example, only rejected NATO enlargement 'at this point' while arguing that deepened

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<sup>82</sup>No author, 'Transatlantic Relations: The Next Five Months', undated, folder 'European Strategy [Steering] Group (ESSG)', CF01301, Gompert Files, GBPL. Although undated, the content of the report indicates it was written in spring 1991.

<sup>83</sup>Hints of this trajectory came in late May when the ESSG accepted Wolfowitz's suggestion to 'take up the question of the adequacy of our political-security-economic strategy toward the new democracies' in Eastern Europe; David Gompert to Reginald Bartholomew et al., 'European Strategy Steering Group Review, 28 May 1991', folder 'ESSG: ESSG Meeting – 30 May 1991', Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>84</sup>Flanagan, 'NATO Liaison'. Also Stanley Sloan, Catherine Guicherd, and Rosita Thomas, *NATO's Future: A Congressional-Executive Dialogue* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 1992), 19.

<sup>85</sup>Adrian Basora to Robert Gates, 'European Strategy Steering Group Meeting of 30 May 1991, 4:00–5:00 p.m.', 29 May 1991, and enclosure, 'NATO Summit Strategy,' folder 'ESSG: ESSG Meeting – 30 May 1991', CF01527, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>86</sup>NATO, 'Statement Issue by the North Atlantic Council Meeting in Ministerial Session in Copenhagen: Partnership with Countries of Central and Eastern Europe', June 6–7, 1991, <https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c900706a.htm>. Baker included similar language when he briefed Bush before the latter's attendance at NATO's Rome Summit; James A. Baker III to The President, 'Your Visit to the NATO Summit in Rome, November 7–8, 1991', 5 November 1991, folder 'NATO – Summit [2]', CF01436, Chellis Files, GBPL.

<sup>87</sup>No author, 'Rome Summit and NATO's Mission.' This document outlined different conceptions of NATO that might justify expanding the alliance's presence into Eastern Europe (including potential membership).

<sup>88</sup>AmEmbassy Paris to SecState, 'U.S.-France Security Discussions: Rome Summit and Eastern Liaison', 12 October 1991, folder 'NATO – EE/Soviet Liaison [1]', CF01436, Chellis Files, GBPL.

liaison relationships simply deferred 'difficult decisions' on Eastern Europe accession.<sup>89</sup> Likewise, an October meeting between Bush, Czech President Havel, and Scowcroft saw Scowcroft tell the Czech leader that 'we are interested in close relations [between Czechoslovakia and NATO], but there is a debate over how to expand and how fast' – not, however, a question of whether NATO would expand. In fact, Bush himself underlined that the U.S. position was evolving, telling Havel that Eastern European states 'need assurance of U.S. participation and of NATO's being in the forefront of European security.'<sup>90</sup> Nor was Bush alone, as Baker's notes from NATO's November 1991 Rome Summit show that the secretary of state was prepared to present Eastern European membership in NATO as 'premature' – not impossible – while praising NATO's efforts at 'institutionalizing [...] ties' and 'reaching out' to the East.<sup>91</sup> Far from downplaying NATO expansion, senior U.S. officials were beginning to suggest an evolutionary process.

Soon thereafter, American policymakers began considering the practicalities of enlargement. February 1992 saw ESSG members evaluate conditions under which NATO security guarantees would near-automatically extend to Eastern European states. Particular attention focused on a possible Russian attempt to 'reassert its power in Eastern and Central Europe,' with the ESSG explaining that 'we want the Alliance to have the option of extending security guarantees to the new democracies' if faced with Russian aggrandizement.<sup>92</sup> Other analysts, meanwhile, investigated the practicalities of NATO enlargement. NSC staff members, for example, asked in late January 1992, 'if we decide to bring in the northern tier countries (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary), how do we deal with the other East European countries, and with Russia or Ukraine?' With the potential for enlargement in mind, they also began assessing 'where to draw the line on membership' if NATO moved east.<sup>93</sup>

The timing of these deliberations was especially important given NATO's decision to launch the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) at the Rome Summit. Developed from a joint German-American proposal, the NACC was originally viewed as a way of invigorating and structuring the liaison programmes.<sup>94</sup> The first NACC meeting, however, occurred in December 1991 concurrent with the USSR's formal demise and the emergence of additional states seeking entrée to the NACC and liaison missions of their own. As 1992 began, U.S. policymakers therefore faced the issue of how the NACC would

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<sup>89</sup>Stephen Flanagan, 'New Directions for NATO Liaison: Building an Effective Partnership with the East', 27 September 1991, folder 'NATO – NATO Summit [2]', CF01301, Gompert Files, GBPL.

<sup>90</sup>Memcon, 'Meeting with Vaclav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia', 22 October 1991.

<sup>91</sup>Baker notes on 'Possible Questions for Press Briefing, Rome, Italy', 7 November 1991, folder 4, box 289, BP.

<sup>92</sup>No author, 'US National Security Interests in Europe Beyond the NATO Area', undated, enclosed with David Gompert to Robert Zoellick et al., 'ESSG Meeting, Monday, 10 February 1992, 3:00–4:00 p.m., Situation Room', 7 February 1992, folder 'European Strategy [Steering] Group (ESSG)', CF01301, Gompert Files, GBPL.

<sup>93</sup>Untitled and undated list of questions, delivered under note by Barry Lowenkron to Jane Holl and dated 22 January 1992, no folder, CF01398, Holl Files, GBPL.

<sup>94</sup>SecState to European Political Collective, 'October 2 Baker-Genscher Statement', 3 October 1991, folder 'NATO – EE/Soviet Liaison [1]', CF01436, Chellis Files, GBPL.

manage relations with a larger pool of countries even as pressure continued from many Eastern European states for NATO membership.<sup>95</sup> The problem – as the ESSG discussed – was that although the NACC ‘was created to deflect pressure for membership, the very expansion of the NACC may propel some of the new democracies to seek membership in NATO proper if only to differentiate themselves from their fellow NACC members.’<sup>96</sup> The question thus became whether the NACC would ‘remain the embodiment of the liaison program [...] or become a way station on the road to Alliance membership?’<sup>97</sup> As the ESSG summarized the problem:

Given the large number of NACC members, how do we implement a policy of differentiation toward the new democracies in Eastern and Central Europe? What steps can we take bilaterally to reinforce our desire to have these countries drawn closer to NATO? How do we respond to requests from these, and other NACC members, for NATO membership?<sup>98</sup>

Accordingly – as the NSC staff wrote Scowcroft in January 1992 – the U.S. needed to assess ‘the ramifications of NACC expansion’ alongside ‘the possibility of expanded NATO membership.’<sup>99</sup>

On these issues, however, trend lines were clear. As before, American policymakers fixed on ensuring NATO’s relevance and preventing Western European security efforts from undercutting the alliance. After all, and as the CIA reported, momentum for a more assertive European Community in security and Defense was building, just as (per the NSC staff) intra-European discussions over what an European security identity could do – including taking on a security role separate from NATO – were expected to continue.<sup>100</sup> Against this backdrop, keeping the NACC a liaison programme risked (per an ESSG report) pushing Eastern Europe’s

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<sup>95</sup>Hutchings, *American Diplomacy*, 289–292.

<sup>96</sup>No author [likely NSC], ‘NATO and the East: Key Issues’, undated, folder ‘ESSG: ESSG Meeting – 3 February 1992’, Lowenkron Files, GBPL. This paper was used to frame the discussion at a 3 February 1992 ESSG meeting; David Gompert to Robert Zoellick et al., ‘Papers for 3 February 1992 ESSG Meeting in the Situation Room, 3:00–4:00 P.M.’, undated, folder ‘European Strategy [Steering] Group (ESSG)’, CF01301, Gompert Files, GBPL.

<sup>97</sup>No author, ‘NATO and the East.’

<sup>98</sup>No author, ‘U.S. Security and Institutional Interests in Europe and Eurasia in the Post-Cold War Era’, undated, enclosed with David Gompert to Robert Zoellick et al., ‘21 February 1992 ESSG Meeting, Situation Room, 10:00–11:00 A.M.’, 19 February 1992, folder ‘European Strategy [Steering] Group (ESSG)’, CF01301, Gompert Files, GBPL.

<sup>99</sup>Barry Lowenkron to Brent Scowcroft, ‘Inclusion of Independent States of Former Soviet Union in the NACC’, 10 January 1992, folder ‘NATO [1]’, CF01329, Rostow Files, GBPL.

<sup>100</sup>Barry Lowenkron to Brent Scowcroft, ‘Follow-Up to NATO Summit’, 15 November 1991, folder ‘NATO [1]’, CF01329, Rostow Files, GBPL; CIA, ‘The United States in Europe’, 29 January 1992, folder ‘European Strategy Steering Group [ESSG]’, CF01301, Gompert Files, GBPL. The intra-EC debate raises the question of whether American concerns with European security integration were justified given the possibility that intra-European rifts would prove insurmountable. A strong case can certainly be made in this direction. Still, the early 1990s were a highpoint in post-war integration efforts, with growing European political collaboration, the creation of a single European market, and the Maastricht Treaty itself signed in late 1992. This context renders American fears more understandable: European security integration was by no means a proximate challenge but, to the extent strategists sought to prevent a long-term loss of U.S. influence, the United States’ worries were not unwarranted in the abstract.

new democracies ‘to look elsewhere’ for their security, such that continuing ‘NACC as it is could be a recipe for its eventual demise and a weakening of NATO itself.’<sup>101</sup>

Opening the door to NATO expansion, in contrast, might solve these problems. Though the NACC should continue developing the liaisons, the U.S. concluded that it should also pursue ‘special links with the northern tier NACC countries [i.e., Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia].’ Doing so would help with differentiation inside the NACC, ‘better position these countries for eventual membership should we decide to take that route,’ and provide the United States ‘the opportunity – should we decide to do so – to go beyond the word “premature” in discussing the issue of membership.’ The punchline was simple: to ‘ensure pride of place in the new Europe, NATO must evolve eastward’ in line with Europe’s other security structures.<sup>102</sup>

In effect, the United States’ policy on NATO enlargement was hostage to European politics by the spring of 1992. If Western Europe reached out to the East while pursuing a European security identity, if Eastern European states flirted with a separate European security organization, and/or if Russia appeared aggressive, the thrust of American strategy would likely push the United States to embrace NATO’s enlargement. The stage was set for a fundamental policy change.

### Heading East: March – December 1992

The end game began in March 1992. Late that month, the ESSG met to consider the ‘implications for NATO of expanded WEU membership.’ Despite the uncertainty surrounding Western Europe’s security ambitions, the United States had succeeded at NATO’s November 1991 Rome Summit in refashioning the WEU as the official link between NATO and the European Community.<sup>103</sup> The result repurposed the WEU as both the EC’s security arm and a European ‘pillar’ within NATO, even as NATO was designated the primary venue for addressing the security concerns of states with dual EC/WEU and NATO membership.<sup>104</sup> Although useful for protecting NATO’s prerogatives, this formula introduced a potential problem, as any growth in WEU membership would also effectively expand NATO’s roster; it further raised the prospect that NATO members could lose the ability to set the pace of

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<sup>101</sup>No author, ‘NATO and the East.’ The ESSG similarly concluded in February 1992 that if NATO’s scope was limited just to existing member’s territory, then ‘NATO will be irrelevant to the bulk of conflicts likely to arise in Europe and Eurasia’ and ‘would risk marginalizing the Alliance.’ No author, ‘U.S. Security and Institutional Interests in Europe and Eurasia.’

<sup>102</sup>No author, ‘NATO and the East.’

<sup>103</sup>NATO, ‘Rome Declaration on Peace and Security’, 8 November 1991, <https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c900706a.htm>. Also Lowenkron, ‘Follow-Up.’

<sup>104</sup>Krupnick, ‘Not What They Wanted’, 122–131. Background on the EC-WEU-NATO relationship is in J. Michael Lekson to Philip Zelikow, ‘Input for NSC Paper on the NATO Strategy Review and European Security Architecture’, 5 March 1991 and enclosures, folder ‘Six Power Conference’, CF01354, Zelikow Files, GBPL.

expansion if the WEU enlarged based on EC decisions alone. Moreover, if NATO did not appear open to taking on an expanded role, then European states might wonder if NATO remained relevant in meeting their post-Cold War security interests.

Again, these concerns remained more theoretical than of near-term importance.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, contemporary policymakers fully recognized the potential pitfalls. 'WEU expansion to non-allies,' Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Thomas Niles wrote Zoellick in late February 1992, 'will produce uneven security commitments between NATO and the WEU and increase pressure from the East to open NATO in that direction.'<sup>106</sup> An ESSG report one month later was even clearer, explaining that the U.S. faced pressure from two directions to expand NATO's commitments. First, 'the new democracies in the east will continue to press for NATO membership.' Second, 'as WEU extends its security field to encompass non-NATO members, NATO – de facto – finds itself committed to these new countries as well.' Indeed, these two problems were expected to overlap as 'the new democracies follow [...] in planning for membership in the EC and WEU.'<sup>107</sup> Unless NATO followed suit, the U.S. would be faced with 'the worst possible outcome': 'NATO would become marginalized as an expanded EC/WEU becomes the locus' for European security issues even while 'the US would be left with indirect and implied security commitments because of the WEU-NATO overlap.'<sup>108</sup>

In response, U.S. planners began seeking ways to ensure 'convergence between EC/WEU membership and NATO membership.'<sup>109</sup> To do so, however, the United States' reluctance to specify 'conditions under which the moment would be ripe to consider opening up the Alliance to new members,<sup>110</sup> as well as insistence that 'NATO membership [for Eastern European states] is premature,<sup>111</sup> needed to change. Instead, it

<sup>105</sup>CIA, 'NATO's North Atlantic Cooperation Council: Views from Eastern Europe and the CIS States', 17 March 1992, folder 'NATO Volume II', CF01099, Wayne Files, GBPL.

<sup>106</sup>Thomas Niles to Robert Zoellick, 'Security Implications of WEU Enlargement', 27 February 1992, folder 'NATO – Membership', CF01526, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>107</sup>No author, 'Implications for NATO of Expanded WEU Membership', undated, enclosed with David Gompert to Robert Zoellick et al., 'ESSG Meeting, Monday, 30 March 1992, 3:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m., Situation Room', 26 March 1992, folder 'European Strategy [Steering] Group', CF01301, Gompert Files, GBPL.

<sup>108</sup>'Implications for NATO of Expanded WEU Membership.' NSC staffer Barry Lowenkron seems to have authored this report; for a draft, see Barry [Lowenkron] to David [Gompert], 'Implications for NATO of Expanded WEU Membership', 20 March 1992, folder 'NATO – Membership', CF01526, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>109</sup>'Implications for NATO of Expanded WEU Membership.' In addition to the steps described below, U.S. officials sought to slow WEU expansion by promoting the idea that 'NATO membership [would] continue to be an essential qualification for WEU membership' and so giving NATO an implicit veto over WEU membership; James Dobbins 'Memorandum for Under Secretary Zoellick', 3 April 1992, folder 'NATO – Membership', CF01526, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>110</sup>'Implications for NATO of Expanded WEU Membership.'

was incumbent on the United States to ‘articulate the criteria for NATO membership’ – identifying political, economic, and security policies that could make a state eligible for NATO accession. Of course, ‘the ultimate decision’ on enlargement would rest with the Alliance’s current members. Still, opening NATO to new members was increasingly seen as an American interest, and a distinct possibility to be considered and acted upon given increasingly clear criteria.

Shifting course, Bush administration officials began laying the foundation for a push on NATO enlargement. Not all members of the U.S. government supported the new policy, with the State Department’s Bureau of European Affairs especially reticent.<sup>112</sup> Regardless, late March 1992 saw ESSG members recommend that U.S. diplomats tell key Eastern European countries (primarily Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia) that discussion of NATO membership ‘is premature but not excluded as a possibility.’<sup>113</sup> Preparing for a meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Oslo that June, the new American policy came into sharper focus. On one level, U.S. officials discussed terms states would have to meet before being considered for NATO membership; here, the NSC, State Department Policy Planning Staff, and U.S. mission to NATO emphasized the importance of the rule of law and acceptance of NATO’s mutual security provisions.<sup>114</sup> No consensus was reached, but the discussion clarified operational terms to guide the new American policy.

More importantly, policymakers started preparing the diplomatic terrain for an expansion drive. As the ESSG’s guidance paper to the senior U.S. foreign policy leadership before Oslo underscored, it was now an American objective to ‘open the question of NATO membership’ without ‘signalling [*sic*] a major policy change.’<sup>115</sup> Instead, U.S. participants were to underline that ‘NATO has not been and should not be viewed as a closed organization,’ to caution that renewed threats of aggression in Europe could prompt the U.S. to push for enlargement, and to ‘express concern about [...] divergence in NATO and EC/WEU membership.’ Elaborating further, ESSG members drafted language for

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<sup>111</sup>Barry Lowenkron to Jonathan Howe, ‘ESSG Meeting, Monday, 30 March 1992, 2:30 p.m. – 3:30 p.m., Situation Room’, 26 March 1992, folder ‘European Strategy Steering Group (ESSG)’, CF01301, Gompert Files, GBPL.

<sup>112</sup>For State Department reluctance, see Lowenkron, ‘ESSG Meeting, Monday, 30 March 1992.’

<sup>113</sup>No author, ‘Item D: The Central/East European States’, undated, enclosed with David Gompert to Tom Niles et al., ‘NATO/NACC Peacekeeping Role’, 31 March 1992, folder ‘European Strategy [Steering] Group’, CF01301, Gompert Files, GBPL.

<sup>114</sup>Stephen Flanagan to Dennis Ross and Robert Zoellick, ‘Developing Criteria for Future NATO Members: Now is the Time’, 1 May 1992, folder ‘NATO Membership’, CF01526, Lowenkron Files, GBPL; USMission NATO, ‘NATO/EC/WEU and Enlargement – Squaring the Growing Circles’, 8 May 1992, folder ‘NATO Membership’, CF01526, Lowenkron Files, GBPL; Barry Lowenkron to Jonathan Howe, ‘ESSG Meeting, Thursday, 28 May 1992, 2:00 p.m.-3:00 p.m.’, 27 May 1992, folder, ‘ESSG: ESSG Meeting – 28 May 1992’, CF01527, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>115</sup>No author [context indicates NSC], ‘Objectives in Upcoming Consultations’, undated [included in folder with materials dated 13 April 1992], folder ‘ESSG: European Security Policy Documents – [13 April 1992]’, CF01527, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

the communique being prepared for the Oslo Ministerial emphasizing that 'NATO is not a closed alliance' and 'there is no reason to expect NATO to remain static.'<sup>116</sup> In fact, U.S. strategists were sufficiently wedded to enlargement that, if other NATO members vetoed the proposed communique language, NSC staff members advocated pressuring NATO's Secretary General to unilaterally issue a statement endorsing expansion.<sup>117</sup> To reinforce the point, the ESSG further prepared talking points for Deputy Secretary of State Eagleburger's use at Oslo announcing that 'NATO has never been a closed Alliance,' that the alliance needed to 'continue to evolve,' and that 'other countries, at the appropriate time, ought to be given consideration for membership.'<sup>118</sup>

The denouement came in the second half of 1992. As one NSC staffer wrote Scowcroft in early June in an open admission of the revised policy: 'We held thorough discussions in our European Strategy Steering Group on the issue of NATO expansion. Our consensus is that we do want to open up the Alliance to new members.'<sup>119</sup> To this end, and in the first public announcement of the new approach, Eagleburger – representing the United States – used his official remarks at Oslo to announce that the United States wanted NATO enlargement on the agenda, arguing 'we need not [...] mistake alliance stability for inflexibility. Indeed, even the very composition of the alliance may need to expand, at the appropriate time, taking full account of our rigorous democratic standards and the need to preserve the strong fiber of common Defense.'<sup>120</sup> In signaling U.S. support for enlargement, Eagleburger's statement accurately reflected U.S. thinking. The ambiguous timing suggested in Eagleburger's statement, however, was a bit of misdirection to avoid (as the NSC wrote) inaugurating 'a debate in NATO on the eve of [Oslo ...] on the issue of membership.'<sup>121</sup> In actuality, U.S. policy from the spring of 1992 emphasized the merits of enlargement, while taking steps 'aimed at desensitizing allied neuralgia about expansion, [and] signalling to the new democracies that we do not rule out extending membership to them at some point in the future.'<sup>122</sup>

<sup>116</sup>No author [content indicates ESSG], 'Preparing for the June NATO Ministerials', undated, enclosed with David Gompert to Robert Zoellick et al., 'ESSG Meeting Thursday, 28 May 1992, 2–3pm, Situation Room', 27 May 1992, folder 'European Strategy [Steering] Group', CF01301, Gompert Files, GBPL.

<sup>117</sup>Barry Lowenkron to Jonathan Howe, 'ESSG Meeting, Thursday, 28 May 1992, 2:00 p.m.–3:00 p.m.', folder 'European Strategy [Steering] Group: ESSG Meeting – 28 May 1992', Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>118</sup>No author, 'NATO Membership Question', undated, folder 'NATO Membership', CF01526, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>119</sup>Barry Lowenkron to Brent Scowcroft, 'Prime Minister Major and NATO Membership', 5 June 1992, folder 'NATO [1]', CF01329, Rostow Files, GBPL.

<sup>120</sup>AMEmbassy Oslo, 'Statement by Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence S. Eagleburger, North Atlantic Council Ministerial Meeting in Oslo on 4 June 1992', 4 June 1992, folder 'NATO Volume II', CF01099, Wayne Files, GBPL.

<sup>121</sup>No author [interagency report], 'Managing NATO-WEU Expansion', undated [included in folder for July 1992 ESSG briefing materials], folder 'ESSG: ESSG Meeting – 23 July 1992', CF01527, Lowenkron Files, GBPL. See also Lowenkron 'Prime Minister Major.'

<sup>122</sup>No author [interagency report], 'Managing NATO-WEU Expansion', undated, enclosed with David Gompert to Robert Zoellick et al., 'ESSG Meeting Thursday, 23 July 1992, 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon, Situation Room', folder 'NATO (1)', CF01329, Rostow Files, GBPL.



Indeed, having come out in support of expansion at Oslo, American policy became increasingly forthright on the preferred timing and scope of enlargement. One month after Eagleburger's announcement, Ambassador to NATO William Taft clarified U.S. thinking on the timeline involved, elaborating, 'I think membership [for Eastern European states] could come within the next decade, perhaps even sooner.'<sup>123</sup> Likewise, the NSC nearly succeeded in inserting a line emphasizing 'the desirability of NATO's door being open to new members' in a speech Bush delivered in Poland that July.<sup>124</sup> Nor was this just rhetoric. By July-August 1992, U.S. policymakers were coordinating with European officials to ensure NATO and WEU membership expanded in lockstep, and working to identify 'the conditions we want to see met before we consider new applicants to NATO.'<sup>125</sup> Of course, specifying membership criteria was 'not an exercise [to be aired] in public prematurely.' Nevertheless, it was important to review options.<sup>126</sup>

In sum, the question at mid-1992 was not whether nor even when to expand the alliance, but how to implement the policy. Tellingly, by the early fall, U.S. planners preparing for NATO's December 1992 North Atlantic Council meeting clarified that 'we need to follow up on our declared policy of favoring expanding membership by working out a formula' for doing so. This effort was to be pursued quietly, involving consultations with NATO's Secretary General and 'selected key allies.'<sup>127</sup> Nevertheless, the policy was sufficiently advanced that strategists in September even considered ways of framing the initiative to allay concerns that enlargement was intended to contain Russia, arguing 'the political message should be that NATO membership is part of the long-term process of integrating new members into Western institutions.'<sup>128</sup> Thus, when Secretary of Defense Cheney announced that 'we will want to expand NATO and move it to the East' and Eagleburger (now Secretary of State) called for 'transforming the composition of the

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<sup>123</sup>Quoted in Solomon, *NATO Enlargement Debate*, 19.

<sup>124</sup>George Grayson, *Strange Bedfellows: NATO Marches East* (Washington: University Press of America, 1999), 73.

<sup>125</sup>No author, 'Managing NATO-WEU Expansion'. See also Barry Lowenkron to Jonathan Howe, 'ESSG Meeting, Thursday, 23 July 1992, 5:00–6:00 p.m., Situation Room', 22 July 1992, folder 'NATO (1)', CF01329, Rostow Files, GBPL; AmEmbassy London to SecState, 'NATO's Eastward Extension', 16 July 1992, folder 'NATO – EE/Soviet Liaison [3]', CF01436, Chellis Files, GBPL.

<sup>126</sup>William Burns to Frank Wisner, Robert Zoellick, and Thomas Niles, 'Thinking About "Criteria" for NATO Membership', 10 August 1992, folder 'NATO – Membership', CF01526, Lowenkron Files, GBPL.

<sup>127</sup>No author [likely interagency paper], 'Preparing for the December NATO Ministerials', undated [included in folder for a September 1992 ESSG meeting], folder 'ESSG: ESSG Meeting – 18 September 1992', CF01527, Lowenkron, GBPL. Likewise, a paper from this period – bluntly titled 'Expanding Membership in NATO' – highlighted that U.S. strategy favored 'opening up the Alliance to new members'; No author, 'Expanding Membership in NATO', undated, folder 'NATO (1)', CF01329, Rostow Files, GBPL. Though undated, the title matches a document referenced in 18 September 1992 ESSG materials in the Lowenkron Papers.

<sup>128</sup>'Expanding Membership in NATO.'

alliance itself' in November and December 1992 (respectively), they were not stating their personal views.<sup>129</sup> Rather, their positions reflected the evolved consensus inside the Bush administration that NATO enlargement was in the United States' interest and, given efforts to identify conditions under which it could occur, should be pursued sooner rather than later.

Ultimately, as one participant later recalled, the questions 'of whether, why, when, and how NATO should invite any of the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) to join the alliance were examined by the Bush administration during 1991–92 [...] the strategic rationale, political preconditions, and essential military requirements of enlargement had been framed by the time the Clinton administration took office.'<sup>130</sup> Of course, defeat in the November 1992 presidential election halted the Bush administration's own efforts to promote NATO enlargement. Nevertheless, with support for enlargement present even among such senior officials as the National Security Advisor, Secretary of Defense, and Secretary of State, the direction of U.S. policy and desired end-state seem clear. As Zoellick – then out of office – retrospectively described, 'The Bush administration did take steps to prepare NATO for enlargement [...] I have little doubt that, given Bush's inclinations toward Central Europe/East Europe, Baker would have moved Bush on this issue (if he needed moving) early in '93.'<sup>131</sup> Usually portrayed as a novel feature of the Clinton administration's agenda, the Bush foreign policy team had accepted NATO enlargement as a core plank in U.S. foreign policy as Europe's post-Cold War strategic landscape first came into focus.

## Conclusion and implications

To summarize, this article has made two inter-related arguments. First, a growing body of evidence indicates that the United States during the George H.W. Bush administration quietly endorsed NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe during and immediately after the end of the Cold War. It did not, as some contend, avoid a position on enlargement. Rather, and as internal documents and the public declarations by Eagleburger, Taft, Cheney, and others illustrate, policymakers throughout the U.S. government had debated, positively assessed, and begun thinking through operationalization of NATO enlargement. Second, U.S. interest in NATO enlargement came from several sources. Some of

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<sup>129</sup>Cheney and Eagleburger quoted in Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When*, 18.

<sup>130</sup>Flanagan, 'NATO from Liaison to Enlargement.'

<sup>131</sup>Quoted in Grayson, *Strange Bedfellows*, 67.

these, such as lobbying from Eastern European states, have been identified by other scholars writing on the Clinton years.<sup>132</sup> However, this work illustrates that *realpolitik* concerns were especially important in the American calculus. At root, post-Cold War U.S. leaders eager to sustain NATO as a vehicle for U.S. power projection looked east to hedge against (1) Russia's potential resurgence, and – particularly in 1991–1992 – (2) the possibility that Western European states might otherwise find opportunities to craft an alternative European security structure that would undermine NATO and challenge the United States' dominance in European security.

For sure, NATO expansion did not happen on Bush's watch. Still, in showing how the United States embraced the logic of expansion in the early 1990s, the results carry implications for both historiography and international relations theory. Most directly, they challenge a widespread consensus proposing that the push for NATO expansion emerged primarily in the Clinton administration. In fact, U.S. investment in NATO enlargement first resulted from the Bush administration's efforts in 1990–1992 to keep NATO intact as a way of sustaining U.S. preeminence in Europe. This attitude echoed the contemporaneous 1992 Defense Planning Guidance, and showcases that the United States was even willing to compete with long-standing allies to preserve its privileged strategic position. Furthermore, and distinct from seminal research by Goldgeier, Asmus, and others arguing that NATO expansion stemmed largely from the attitudes and ideas inherent in the Clinton administration, this analysis implies that a U.S. push for NATO enlargement might have happened had Bush won a second term in 1992. At root, the course of America's European policy in the early 1990s pointed directly towards NATO enlargement even before Clinton's election.<sup>133</sup>

As for international relations theory, these findings inform understandings of the dynamics of the United States' 'unipolar era,' as well as the nature of international competition in the contemporary world.<sup>134</sup> On one level, scholars have long debated the durability of the United States' unipolar era and its

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<sup>132</sup>That said, the results complicate the salience of Eastern European suasion in shaping American attitudes. After all, and as noted, U.S. officials largely ignoring Eastern European calls for NATO enlargement until it seemed there might be a long-term threat to NATO and, with it, U.S. predominance.

<sup>133</sup>Indeed, when the Clinton administration contemplated NATO enlargement, there are some indications that working-level officials – including carryovers from the Bush administration – built on Bush-era initiatives. These appear to have been especially important with regard to the criteria states might have to meet before NATO accession, and a general consensus that NATO enlargement should happen at some point; see Flanagan, 'NATO From Liaison to Enlargement', 104–106; Jenonne Walker, 'Enlarging NATO: The Initial Clinton Years' in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, ed. Daniel Hamilton and Kristina Spohr (Washington: Foreign Policy Institute and Henry Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, 2019), 268–269; Interview with Jenonne Walker, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, interview by Raymond Ewing, 26 May 2004, 23–26.

<sup>134</sup>Charles Krauthammer, 'The Unipolar Moment', *Foreign Affairs* 70/1 (Winter 1990–1991), 23–33; William Wohlforth, 'The Stability of a Unipolar World', *International Security* 24/1 (Summer 1999), 5–41.

outsized influence in world politics. Powerful claims have been advanced arguing that the United States' material advantages and ability to wield this power in ways that do not threaten prospective rivals play a significant role in extending the United States' lead in global affairs.<sup>135</sup>

In contrast, this study shows that American policymakers at the dawn of U.S. unipolarity were concerned that (1) American material advantages alone would be insufficient to sustain U.S. dominance, and (2) the restrained use of American power – particularly by allowing a Western European security grouping to grow – would be deeply problematic. Instead, decisionmakers felt compelled to use NATO enlargement to preserve American prerogatives by suppressing prospective challengers from emerging and undercutting potential problems before they truly began. Creating and sustaining American unipolarity thus involved efforts to utilize the United States' existing strengths to forestall threats to American dominance long before the threats' actual emergence – subtle pressure and long-term prevention was the name of the game. Indeed, if anything, the new history underlines the incentives existing great powers can face to stifle future challenges from emerging by taking quiet but meaningful actions to stop nascent problems from growing. That this occurred even in the favorable security conditions of the early 1990s highlights the need for additional research on the logic, course, and conduct of such suppressive efforts.

American efforts also suggest under-appreciated aspects of how international institutions affect relations between powerful states. A large social science literature examines the conditions under which international institutions may ameliorate international competition,<sup>136</sup> just as a major subset emphasizes that institutions themselves often reflect the interests of powerful states in the international system.<sup>137</sup> In showing U.S. efforts to preserve NATO against competitors, however, the above history underlines that international institutions can themselves be objects of interstate competition. Although consistent with existing arguments positing a fundamental link between international institutions, state interests, and power politics, the evidence underscores that powerful states may also try to block the

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<sup>135</sup>Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*.

<sup>136</sup>Core works in this literature include Robert Keohane, 'The Demand for International Regimes', *International Organization* 36/2 (April 1982), 325–55; G. John Ikenberry, 'Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of American Postwar Order', *International Security* 23/3 (Winter 1998–1999), 43–78; Alexander Thompson, *Channels of Power: The UN Security Council and US Statecraft in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

<sup>137</sup>G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Lloyd Gruber, *Ruling the World: Power Politics and the Rise of Supranational Institutions* (Princeton University Press, 2000); Anders Wivel and T.V. Paul, eds., *International Institutions and Power Politics: Bridging the Divide* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

emergence of alternative institutions in order to advance their own interests and preserve existing privileges. Future research should explore this possibility.<sup>138</sup>

Ultimately, NATO's enlargement into Eastern Europe altered the shape of European security. Far from emerging due to the peculiarities in the Clinton administration, this paper has shown that the push for enlargement was the subject of substantial discussion in U.S. foreign policy circles even as the Cold War ended. To the extent that NATO's eastward move continues to color U.S. relations with Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and Russia, leaders and citizens alike are living with the legacy of choices made at the dawn of the post-Cold War era.

## Notes on contributor

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<sup>138</sup>This notion of preventive institutional action extends the concept of 'preventive war' – taking military action to stop a rival's continued rise – to cover a state's efforts at suppressing rivals from promoting interests that conflict with one's own via institutions. On preventive war, see Jack Levy, 'Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War', *World Politics* 40/1 (October 1987), 82–107.

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