Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), so the cliché goes, was created ‘to keep the Russians out, the Americans in and the Germans down’ (quote by Lord Ismay cited in Medcalf 2005: 3). This blunt (and probably apocryphal) characterisation conveys, nonetheless, an important meaning. NATO’s overt purpose, to defend against a known adversary, has necessarily entailed transatlantic support and the co-option of continental Europe’s major power. In other words, as with all alliances, NATO’s strength is in numbers. What is striking is by how much that number has increased. NATO has grown from an original twelve members to twenty-eight (likely to become twenty-nine in 2017). Growth, moreover, has occurred in the midst of other profound changes. Since the termination of the Cold War, the alliance has acquired a range of new functions. Collective defence has remained significant, but equal standing has also been given to two other ‘core tasks’: ‘crisis management’ and ‘cooperative security’ (NATO 2010: para. 4). NATO has thus seen action in places as far apart as the Balkans, Libya, and Afghanistan. All this, moreover, has been accompanied by an ongoing process of institutionalisation (standardisation, defence planning, and command coordination), an emphasis on political solidarity, and creative efforts in the realm of doctrinal and strategic thinking.

None of this is to idealise NATO’s recent (or, indeed, longer) history. The alliance has been troubled by internal division during all six decades of its existence. Questions have been regularly posed about the wisdom and efficacy of its operations, as well as the structural weakness occasioned by European dependency on American military power. NATO, nonetheless, has confounded expectations that its demise is imminent (Thies 2009: 1–24). Prognostications of collapse (or, at least, irrelevance) following the end of the Cold War, 9/11, or the 2003 Iraq crisis do not bear scrutiny when set against the reorientation of NATO purpose each of these historical watersheds occasioned. And while a certain scepticism of NATO’s roles in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Libya, and Afghanistan may be justified, here NATO’s defenders can still point to the alliance’s resilience in the face of demanding security challenges (Webber 2013: 28–29). If, as Tetrais (2004; 139) has argued, ‘permanent multinational alliances appear increasingly to belong to the past’, then it is clear that NATO has bucked the trend. NATO has outlived its Cold War contemporaries (the Warsaw Pact, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, ANZUS, and the Western European Union), and has provided a framework of cooperative effort much more
substantial than its putative post–Cold War rivals (the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation, for instance).

Enlargement was emblematic of NATO’s ‘reinvention’ in the years immediately after the Cold War (Asmus 2005); an exercise in NATO’s repurposing as well as Europe’s reordering. It played with the rhetoric of the time – of creating ‘a Europe whole and free’, in partnership not competition with post-Soviet Russia, in accordance with America’s continued engagement in the continent, and in alignment with a unified Germany’s new eastern agenda. During the 1990s, enlargement, therefore, promised much. But even then it competed with NATO’s other more urgent priority of managing conflict in the Balkans. Order, in other words, was as much about operational deployment and reconfiguration as it was adding new members. This was much more the case with NATO’s post-9/11 involvement in Afghanistan (outside of Europe and detached entirely from the enlargement agenda). With the Crimean and Ukraine crises of 2014, meanwhile, NATO has been required to refocus on Europe and so pay greater attention to the security interests of its new eastern members.

NATO enlargement is considered in this chapter with this background in mind. The premise of the chapter is that the consequences of enlargement for post-communist Europe are inseparable from how the policy has affected NATO. That interaction informs the chapter’s structure. The first two sections are largely descriptive, offering a short chronological account and an overview of enlargement’s geographic scope. The chapter then moves to an analysis of the reasoning (and debates) behind the policy and the attendant scholarly explanations. This is followed by consideration of enlargement’s consequences and then some reflections on its future course.

A short history of enlargement

Formed in April 1949, NATO was first established with twelve members. Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty made possible a future expansion of alliance membership, but the scope of enlargement was necessarily constrained by the geopolitical reality of the emerging Cold War. This ruled out membership for East European countries then under Soviet occupation (the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 put paid to any notion that East European states enjoyed latitude in their security policy) as well as for independent socialist states such Albania and Yugoslavia. Over the subsequent four decades, NATO enlargement conformed to Europe’s bipolar division. Greece and Turkey obtained membership in 1952 – these countries’ strategic significance outweighing the reservations held by some in NATO on their democratic credentials (Smith 2000: 62–95). Geopolitical logic was starker still in the case of Germany. Accession of the Federal Republic of Germany to NATO in 1955 was intended to accommodate German rearmament and to subordinate the West German military to a multilateral (but US-led) defence framework. It also entrenched Germany and Europe’s division. The formation of the Warsaw Pact, incorporating the German Democratic Republic (GDR) alongside the Soviet Union and six other Eastern European states, was announced less than two weeks after West Germany’s move into the alliance. Following these events, NATO membership remained static for nearly three decades. Spain joined the alliance in 1982 and this proved to be the last enlargement of the Cold War period.

Although these instances were significant, NATO expended little political energy on enlargement. During the period of détente in the late 1960s and early 1970s, NATO did favour ‘eliminating the [. . .] unnatural barriers between Eastern and Western Europe’ in service of a ‘just and lasting peaceful order’ on the continent (NATO 1967a: para. 1; NATO 1967b: para. 7). How such an achievement would affect NATO’s core functions and size remained, however,
unspecified (and unexplored) as the exigencies of coping with ongoing East-West competition remained uppermost in NATO priorities. This state of affairs changed dramatically between 1989 and 1991. German unification in 1990 brought the territory of the former GDR into NATO. NATO’s London Declaration of July 1990, meanwhile, extended a ‘hand of friendship’ to ‘the countries of the East’ and, in parallel, called for a declaration of non-aggression with the Warsaw Pact (NATO 1990). The November 1991 ‘New Strategic Concept’ (replacing a document which had stood since 1968) made clear that amid uncertainty in Europe, NATO had an ongoing purpose – to guard against emerging, ‘multi-faceted [. . .] and multi-directional’ risks (NATO 1991a: para. 8). This meant a reconfiguration of NATO’s military tasks, as well an elevation of its political role; addressing new challenges would require dialogue and cooperation with the still extant Soviet Union and former Warsaw Pact countries. In a groundbreaking move, NATO thus established the North Atlantic Cooperation Council ushering in what it suggested was ‘a new era of partnership’ (NATO 1991b: para. 11).

With the exception of GDR (which was an unusual case), several years would elapse before NATO’s openness to former communist countries translated into membership. That this process took so long ought not to be a surprise given how drawn out enlargement had been in previous decades. Explanations of enlargement will be considered below, but at this point it is worth noting its contextual circumstances. In the 1990s, Goldgeier (1999: 1) noted that the policy of extending NATO membership was ‘highly controversial, and [. . .] by no means inevitable.’ It enjoyed no natural constituency within the alliance and was opposed by Russia. In that light, the story of how enlargement came to policy prominence has been told largely in reference to the US’s conversion to the cause. But American advocacy alone did not determine the outcome. The institutional ‘architecture’ of European security in the 1990s and early 2000s seemed predisposed to NATO enlargement in that no other body (be that the EU or the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) had, after the Cold War, developed the combined functions of collective defence, conflict management, and coercive power (Croft 2000). The demand for membership was thus considerable, and in order to manage it NATO developed a variety of mechanisms – Partnership for Peace, and Membership Action Plans (MAP) being the best known – aimed at moving aspiring members towards NATO military (and perhaps less obviously, political) standards. Sometimes criticised for being overly bureaucratic, these arrangements (with some notable exceptions considered later in this chapter) have not impeded the alliance’s enlargement. In 1999, NATO took in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland; it went on in 2004 to incorporate seven further states – Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Following that wave, Albania and Croatia acceded to NATO in 2009; Montenegro concluded accession talks in May 2016 and was expected to join the Alliance in 2017.

The limits of enlargement

NATO enlargement, it was noted earlier, has been determined by geopolitical constraints. Equally important has been a geographic delimitation. Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty allows for accession by European states only. During the Cold War, such a position reflected NATO’s focus on European defence. As operations moved ‘out-of-area’ from the 1990s, so this operational pre-occupation underwent revision. After 9/11, commentators thus began to talk seriously of a ‘global NATO’. Australia, Japan, South Korea, Brazil, India, and South Africa were all considered to be in the frame for membership. By this point, NATO had already constructed an expansive network of partnerships stretching across North Africa, the Gulf Region, and the Asia-Pacific. Elevating those states with the more developed of these partnerships did not seem inconsistent with a vision of a ‘truly global alliance’ able to ‘address the global challenges of the day’ (Daalder
and Goldgeier 2006). Enlarging NATO in this manner did not, however, obtain traction among NATO’s existing members (Hallams 2009), and talk of an extra-European enlargement faded once NATO had made clear from 2012 that it was to scale down its mission in Afghanistan.

The geographic boundary of enlargement has thus remained intact. Enlargement has taken in states from Northern Europe (the Baltics), East Central Europe, and the Balkans. Significantly, every one of NATO’s new entrants since 1990 has been a former communist state – once part, in most cases, of the dissolved communist federations of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. This redrawing of Europe’s geopolitical map is not complete. But while there remain areas of Europe where NATO membership is hypothetical, these are often highly problematic.

The most obvious instance in this regard is Russia. As we shall see, Moscow has been a strident critic of enlargement, but it is worth recalling that NATO membership for Russia itself has been a subject of periodic attention. The high point here was the so-called honeymoon period of NATO-Russia relations of the early 1990s (Smith 2002: 59–60). The leadership of President Boris Yeltsin alluded on more than one occasion to the possibility of Russian accession, part of a hoped-for association with the Atlantic world that would break Russia’s connection to its Soviet past, give Moscow a greater say in pan-European security matters, and affirm its modern (as opposed to Asiatic and economically underdeveloped) identity (Webber 2007: 151). This position chimed with official American thinking. The concept of enlargement held by the Clinton administration was one which, according to Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott (2002: 131–132), ‘always included [. . .] the idea of Russia’s eventual eligibility and indeed its entry.’ As Talbott argued, to rule the country out as a matter of principle would be both a ‘gratuitous insult to Russia and would belie [any] claim that NATO enlargement served the larger cause of inclusive integration.’

Further, as former US Secretary of State James Baker (2002: 99) pointed out, incorporating Russia was in keeping with NATO’s character as a ‘coalition of former adversaries’, such as France and Germany, and Greece and Turkey. In a similar vein, Russia would now be added and would sit alongside its erstwhile Cold War adversaries. Here, however, was the rub. The process of reconciliation that NATO membership would bring about required Russian commitment to NATO’s conditions of membership (stable democracy, harmonious relations with neighbours, conformity to NATO military standards, and a willingness to submit to NATO’s internal decision-making process), something it was unable or unwilling to effect. It also meant a parallel acceptance that membership ought to be open to other former communist countries as well – something Moscow increasingly regarded as unwelcome. Squaring this circle meant, on Russia’s part, that membership was only agreeable if NATO was somehow transformed and Russia was given a privileged position in the revamped body. But objections to this within the alliance rendered Russian accession less and less likely. As relations soured between NATO and Russia on other matters (the 1999 Kosovo war, differing interpretations of the Conventional Forces in Europe [CFE] Treaty, and US/NATO missile defence deployment), then so the possibility receded still further. Moscow’s antipathy to NATO’s enlargements of 1999 and 2004 effectively put paid to the idea of Russian membership. Thereafter, the leadership tandem of Vladimir Putin and Dimitri Medvedev in Moscow came to see NATO in largely negative terms with its vision of European security governance now involving a subordination of the alliance to a pan-European security treaty (Nopens 2009). A growing discord was also evident on the NATO side with Russia being cited as culpable in the 2008 war with Georgia and, following the annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014, for the destabilisation of Ukraine. NATO’s position on these matters, led by the US, was also shaped by the new East European members, some of whom (Poland most obviously) had imported into NATO a distinct scepticism of Russian behaviour.

Wherever blame may lie for the deterioration of NATO-Russia relations (Forsberg and Herd 2014), Russia’s absence from the alliance rendered a reversion to a posture of collective defence
and mutual suspicion increasingly likely on both sides. Moscow had since the late 1990s regarded enlargement as directed against Russia. NATO’s reassurances to the contrary along with a significant effort towards institutional partnership has failed to overcome the view that enlargement is a tool of US influence building (Antonenko and Giegerich 2009: 14). This position has been conditioned by a feeling of mistrust. Russia has argued that understandings reached between the Western powers and Moscow at the time of German unification in 1990 obliged NATO to refrain from enlargement. The weight of published evidence does not seem to support this contention (Kramer 2009), but it is the perception (or misperception) that matters. That such a pledge might have been broken has reinforced a view among Russia’s political elite that their country has been treated ‘as an adversary and an outsider’ (Wolff 2015: 1106).

Enlargement has thus become a major bone of contention between NATO and Russia. The dangers which follow have been clearly evident in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. Of these two states, Georgia has been the most forthright in its claim to NATO membership. Accession has been an explicit objective of its foreign policy since the early 2000s. To that end, Tbilisi has made itself a valuable NATO partner, providing a significant number of troops to NATO’s missions in Afghanistan, hosting NATO exercises, and participating in rotations of the NATO Response Force. Georgia has not, however, been rewarded with a clear path to membership. At its 2008 summit in Bucharest, NATO stated that Georgia would become a member but demurred from granting it a MAP, the concrete mechanism by which accession would be achieved (NATO 2008: para. 23). In the years since, Georgia has been the beneficiary of various NATO initiatives (the NATO-Georgia Commission established in 2008, and a ‘substantial package’ of measures agreed at NATO’s 2014 summit in Wales), but a MAP has proven elusive. The progress of political and military reform has been less important in the eyes of NATO members than considerations of Georgia’s geopolitical vulnerability. The Russo-Georgian war of 2008 and the subsequent decoupling of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the jurisdiction of the government in Tbilisi have made clear that a Georgia in NATO would be highly provocative to Russia. Indeed, according to some (Asmus 2010: 221), Russia provoked the war precisely to deter Georgia from seeking membership and to prevent NATO from offering it. Such a strategy appears to have worked. Georgia’s cause has been supported by some new NATO members but not by the states which matter in pushing through NATO decisions. The patronage which Georgia enjoyed under the Bush administration lapsed under Obama. France and Germany, meanwhile, had been wary of Georgia’s credentials from the outset. NATO has formally stuck to its commitment to Georgian membership, but officials, not least in the US, have publicly acknowledged that any decision must not antagonise Russia (Babayan 2016: 14). Georgia has, in short, been ‘knocking on a closed door’ (German 2015: 613).

NATO’s qualified commitment to Georgia has been repeated in the case of Ukraine (it too was mentioned in the Bucharest Declaration). Kiev, unlike Tbilisi, has however, been inconsistent in its own claims to membership. President Leonid Kuchma raised the possibility in 2002, but in practice he steered towards a close relationship with Moscow. His star, in any case, quickly waned with the US and the NATO allies owing to allegations of Ukrainian arms transfers to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Following Ukraine’s Orange Revolution in late 2004, new President Viktor Yushchenko pursued a more overtly pro-NATO position and made a bid paralleling that of Georgia for access to a MAP. This position was, however, reversed by Yushchenko’s successor, Viktor Yanukovych, who in 2010 signed a law requiring Ukraine’s ‘non-participation in military-political alliances’ (Pop 2010). The Euromaidan protests which ousted Yanukovych from power in February 2014 then triggered Russia’s annexation of Crimea and subsequent support of Ukrainian separatism in the Donbass region. The newly installed Ukrainian government revived its ambition to join NATO in response. In December 2014, the Ukrainian parliament repealed
the legal commitment to non-alignment. Both President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseny Yatsenyuk came out in support of NATO membership as a means of countering Russian military destabilisation. The alliance offered some limited material support to the Ukrainian military, but enlargement has remained off the agenda. This is, in part, because of Ukraine’s chronic political instability, but it has flowed also from geopolitical realities. To begin the accession process would mean having to face the possibility that at some future point NATO would be called upon to defend a new ally in the face of Russian military preponderance.1

NATO enlargement, seemingly expansive in scope, has been delimited on two occasions – by the retreat from globalism and by the buffer put up by Russia in Georgia and Ukraine. The first of these hardly compromises the enlargement project as there had never been any serious expectation that membership would be extended beyond Europe (with the exception of a few voices in the Bush administration, this was a cause supported more by think tanks than policy makers). Georgia and Ukraine are different because here NATO had raised expectations, only to backtrack in the face of internal division and Russian bellicosity. NATO’s level of ambition has been curtailed accordingly. Within NATO, enlargement is now only seriously considered in relation to Finland and Sweden (two easy cases from the point of view of preparedness) and the Balkans – although progress is likely to be slow in the region following Montenegro’s accession. Macedonian entry is opposed by Greece; Bosnia and Herzegovina has languished for years in various NATO partnership schemes; and Serbia lacks the political desire to orientate itself towards the alliance (Wolff 2015).

Explaining enlargement

Played out on more than one occasion over many years, enlargement has come to be seen as the outcome of a series of complex, diplomatic, and political interactions involving allies, aspirants, interested third parties (whether hostile such as Russia or friendly such as the EU) and influential opinion formers in the press, think-tanks and domestic politics.

NATO’s first post–Cold War enlargement, given its unique and precedent-setting character, was the subject of greatest debate. The invitation extended to the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland balanced a number of considerations. First, it took account of the position of Germany, the first NATO state to advocate enlargement, and the ally most acutely concerned at possible instability to its east (Hyde-Price 2000: 149–151). Second, it reflected the view of the Clinton administration that NATO remained the best means of projecting stability in Europe. Enlargement also demonstrated the ability of the US to exercise transatlantic leadership, and allowed Washington an ongoing influence in Europe at a time when the EU was beginning to develop a security competence (Goldgeier 1999: 9). France and the UK, meanwhile, had initially been lukewarm on enlargement (the former fearing it would entrench US dominance, the latter that it would dilute NATO’s military purpose and drag the organisation into unwanted disputes), but fell in line behind the German and US positions (Brown 1999: 21–22, 31–33). As for the choice of new members, across the alliance there was strong support for the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. These three states all viewed NATO membership as a means of guarding against regional instability, orienting their foreign policies and political development westwards, and pre-empting the re-emergence of a threat from Russia (Transitions 1997). Slovakia, Romania, and Slovenia were favoured by some, but not all allies, and so fell afoul of NATO’s consensus rule. NATO’s internal discussions ran in parallel to an external diplomatic track. NATO delayed its decision on enlargement in order to work out a settlement with Russia. The 1997 NATO summit in Madrid thus saw the unveiling of the NATO–Russia Founding Act, which, while it did not remove Moscow’s objections, temporarily blunted them.
A similar interplay of factors helps to account for enlargement in the mid-2000s. A process which resulted in seven states acceding in 2004 hardly seemed likely just four years earlier when enlargement was becalmed by the task of digesting new members. The demand for entry to NATO had not, however, gone away. The limited enlargement of 1999 seemed sound at the time. The three entrants were, in post-communist terms, politically and socially stable, economically well-off, and enjoyed high domestic levels of elite and public support for NATO membership (Šedivý 2001: 4). A differentiation of candidates had thus occurred in the late 1990s. Entry had been determined by the level of compatibility with NATO’s existing members, something which had fortuitously corresponded to the states in question occupying a strategically important space in East Central Europe. NATO could well have stopped (or at least delayed) enlargement at that point. As the large group of remaining aspirants pointed out, however, the alliance’s own rhetorical claim to inclusivity (the so-called open-door policy) required that the process continue. In this they found an enthusiastic ally in the US. President Bush was much less worried about Russian sensitivities on the issue than Clinton and, following 9/11, his administration openly promoted an extensive enlargement. For the US, the logic of the ‘war on terror’ meant gathering together ‘all the potential allies it could get, regardless of their deficiencies’ (Barany 2006: 172). NATO’s European members, meanwhile, were largely in accord and saw NATO enlargement on this occasion as corresponding to an equally ambitious enlargement of the EU (Yost 2014: 284–285).

The political and diplomatic energy which propelled NATO’s first two post–Cold War waves of enlargement applies much less to the Balkan enlargements of 2009 and 2016. The entry of Albania, Croatia, and Montenegro is not without significance to the region but, in one sense, is merely a belated extension of earlier policy (Albania and Croatia had been granted MAPs as early as 1999 and 2002). In fact, these cases notwithstanding, since 2004, enlargement has largely slipped off NATO’s agenda. The US under President Obama did not provide leadership on the issue, being less concerned with European affairs than preceding administrations. Among European Allies, political will has also dwindled as shoring up the EU has taken priority over further efforts to enlarge NATO (Simakovsky 2013: 9–13).

This account views NATO enlargement as a subject of contemporary history with analysis focused on the short-term factors (American leadership, for instance) behind big decisions. Though good on detail, such an approach is less useful when it comes to generalisation – that is, how we explain enlargement by reference to the structural circumstances of power, institutionalisation, and norms. These broader conditions are the concern of theory.

Three theoretical approaches have exerted greatest influence on mainstream International Relations (IR) in the post–Cold War period – neo-realism, institutionalism, and social constructivism. Applied to NATO, each proceeds from a different starting point, but none alone provides a satisfactory explanation of enlargement. Neo-realism – with its emphasis on how alliances balance against power or threat – persuasively identifies why some (but not all) states have an interest in joining NATO (to guard against a resurgent Russia), but is less useful in explaining why NATO has been willing to offer membership. For existing members, the 1999 enlargement was not a case of balancing Russia (which at that point was a prostrate power) or, indeed, any other possible adversary in Europe (Schimmelfennig 2003: 40–51). Institutionalism might appear better suited to explaining enlargement. Its emphasis on institutional adaptation and task differentiation accords with NATO’s recent and ongoing transformation. Here, enlargement is part of NATO’s response to a changed threat environment involving a shift from the narrowly defined purpose of collective defence to a broader preoccupation with collective security and conflict management (Schimmelfennig 2016). Yet institutionalism is still subject to a certain indeterminacy; its assumptions could equally apply to a state of affairs in which NATO had not enlarged (where such a course would have delivered greater gains to a smaller number of states) (Skålnes
NA TO enlargement and the post-communist states

1998: 69). Social constructivism has been seen as a convincing in explaining both why NATO offered enlargement (in order to extend the community of values and norms embedded within the alliance) and why some states have taken up the offer (because of their affinity with those same values and norms) (Schimmelfennig 2003: 152). Yet, while this approach has merit in relation to events of the 1990s, it is much less useful beyond given the political variation of the states which have acceded to NATO and the diminishing emphasis the accession states and the alliance itself have given to values in justifying enlargement. The problems of single-theory accounts have led some to adopt a more pluralist approach. Here, enlargement is viewed as conditioned by a range of factors – reflective, in turn, of NATO’s multifaceted character as simultaneously alliance, institution, and community (Webber 2013: 35).

The consequences of enlargement

The scholarly attention paid to NATO enlargement has been motivated, in part, by a desire to address the puzzle at its heart. The reasons why states in post-communist Europe have sought membership are readily understandable given the assumed gains to be had in the realms of security – as well as the more abstract (but nonetheless important) realms of political and institutional identity. The gains to NATO are less clear. Indeed, the costs of enlargement, it has been argued, could well outstrip the benefits. Theory aside, these are issues of policy as well as academic relevance. This section briefly surveys the effects enlargement has had, both on its new members and on NATO more broadly.

A useful place to start in this discussion is NATO’s own study on enlargement published in 1995. This listed a set of commitments new members would be expected to meet. In that list, adherence to the ‘basic principles’ of the North Atlantic Treaty – ‘democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law’ – was positioned first (NATO 1995: para. 70). How far this requirement has facilitated democracy among NATO’s new members is, however, a moot point. One can argue in favour of indirect consequences – NATO membership when clustered among groups of states creates a permissive regional environment of stability and peace within which democracy can progress. More direct effects, however, are harder to establish. Certainly, in many cases, there is a correlation between acceding to NATO and subsequent democratic consolidation (Melnykovska and Schweickert 2011). But that political trajectory owes as much (if not more) to EU conditionality and, as Reiter (2001: 59) has argued, the societies and elites in states with NATO ambitions ‘were committed to democracy anyway’ as a consequence of their domestic, post-communist transition. The record of consolidation is also imperfect, and that too adds to the causal imprecision. Does the rise of ‘illiberal democracy’ in Hungary and Poland (Kauffmann 2016) lead one to conclude that NATO’s democratising influence is weak after all? Or does it suggest that the influence NATO can bring to bear is stronger in the period leading up to and shortly after accession, rather than many years later when fewer mechanisms exist to influence domestic politics?

A more precise (and stronger) claim to NATO’s democratic effect relates to the transformation of the armed forces in post-communist states. The militarisation of communist societies had been seen as a baleful legacy for democratic transition. Yet democratic oversight of the armed forces has been a common feature of post-communist Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The reasons often cited for this shift (Cottee et al. 2005: 12–13) – a more permissive external security environment and the professionalisation of armed forces – do not apply in equal measure (the security situation of Balkans, for instance, has worsened since the end of the Cold War). One constant, however, has been NATO involvement. The leverage of membership conditions relating to civil-military relations along with the provision of technical advice and the ‘propagation [of] democratic norms of behaviour’ (Edmunds 2003: 151) has meant the alliance has had a determining effect on the
political evolution of post-communist militaries (Boonstra 2007). That influence has varied in line with the domestic setting in the target state. The legacies of military culture coupled with differing levels of military professionalisation, autonomy, and cohesion help explain why NATO’s admonitions have been better received in Poland and the Baltic states than in Romania or Bulgaria (Epstein 2005).

As well as affecting domestic developments, NATO membership has meant the reorientation of foreign and defence policies. Following both the 1999 and 2004 enlargements, new members were encouraged to develop armed forces and military doctrines that aligned with NATO’s (and the Americans’) preference for force projection and expeditionary operations. Policies have not, however, been uniform across the new members. Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Estonia, and Latvia (as well as NATO aspirant Georgia), for instance, have made a significant commitment to NATO’s mission in Afghanistan. Hungary and Slovakia, by contrast, have played a negligible role. A similar observation can be made of defence expenditure. NATO’s 2 per cent of GDP target is met by only a handful of members (both established and new alike). But since the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the Poles and the Baltic states appear exceptional, being responsible (in percentage terms) for some of the largest defence budget increases across the alliance. Conformity to NATO policy is not simply about being socialised into what is expected of new members but also reflects respective national interests. Baltic and Polish enthusiasm for the Afghan mission, for instance, is a means of building up American goodwill, something to be cashed in closer to home in the form of US backing (deemed urgent in light of Russian behaviour) of NATO’s more traditional mission of collective defence (Ringsmose 2016: 213–214).

Membership has thus had a variable effect on NATO’s new members, but what of NATO as an organisation? Over the years, several objections have been levelled at enlargement: that it would antagonize Russia (see earlier), make consensus within NATO more difficult, dilute American leadership, exacerbate burden-sharing disputes, and divert the organisation from new endeavours, in particular the need to address ‘growing threats from the South’ (Binnendijk and Kugler 1999: 128–130). In short, it has been argued, enlargement would constrain rather than facilitate NATO’s development. These concerns appear to have been largely misplaced. Enlargement has not prevented other major initiatives, be that far-flung operational deployments, command reform or cyber-defence. Neither has it been a major problem in consensus-building. Internal NATO diplomacy is rendered more time-consuming by an increased membership, but the main dissenters tend still to be established members (Greece, Turkey, and France), not new ones. Few, meanwhile, would doubt that the US is still NATO’s leading power; if anything, the Atlanticist sentiment of many new members has increased American influence in the alliance, not diminished it. As for burden-sharing, low defence spending and operational deployments are indicative of an ongoing problem of free-riding among many new members (Sandler and Shimizu 2010: 59), but such behaviour is not out of line with that of many other members. Free-riding, in other words, has not gotten worse with enlargement (Hillison 2014: 153). Further, as Poland and the Baltic states have demonstrated, when their interests are directly affected, new members have borne a significant cost for their own defence. They have not simply shifted that cost to the US and other NATO powers (Lanoszka 2015: 140–143).

Looking at NATO’s recent history, it is increasingly clear that the need to defend and reassure its eastern members is the most far-reaching, albeit belated, effect of enlargement. The Ukraine crisis triggered what Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (cited in Kanter 2014) labelled ‘the biggest reinforcement of [NATO’s] collective defence since the end of the Cold War.’ Reinforcement measures focused on Poland, the Baltic states, Romania, and Bulgaria would be hard to imagine in the absence of enlargement as the alliance would have been under no obligation to defend these states and less persuaded by the need to deter Russia. This strategic shift has, however, posed
two major dilemmas for NATO. The first is of long standing – how to reconcile partnership with Russia with a commitment to new allies? Since 2014, that dilemma at least appears to have been resolved, as NATO suspended all practical relations with Moscow. The second relates to NATO’s geographic focus. The warning that enlargement would shift NATO’s attention away from its southern flank now appears prescient. The Syrian civil war (which developed in parallel with the Ukraine crisis) has required NATO to both support long-standing member Turkey and think through the consequences of instability in the eastern Mediterranean (in the spring of 2016 it launched a naval mission in the Aegean Sea). The alliance, as a result, has had to develop simultaneously two, sometimes competing, strategies – an eastern one focused on the needs of its new east European members and a southern one that accords more with the priorities of established allies Italy, Greece, and Turkey, as well as some of the new Balkan members. Competing regionalism of this sort has posed a major dilemma for NATO’s major powers (the US, France, Germany, and the UK) who have had to straddle both directions of policy.

The end of enlargement

As already noted, the limits of enlargement as a strategic project have now been reached. Montenegro’s accession may not be the last time NATO welcomes a new member, but since the late 2000s no constituency of note within the alliance regards enlargement as a priority. But just as the limits to growth are clear, so too are those of retreat. Unlike the EU, NATO has not been troubled by the prospect of reverse enlargement. Public support for the alliance may have declined in some new NATO members (Slovakia and Slovenia, for example), but there has been no demand among governing political parties to exit NATO and no ally has ever used Article 13 of the North Atlantic Treaty to renounce its membership. NATO also lacks a mechanism by which a member can be expelled. Further, the existential problems which have attended the EU (the Eurozone and migration crises along with the possibility of destabilisation in the event of British withdrawal) have led many new allies to appraise NATO membership even more positively. Support for the alliance in Poland, a 2015 poll found, was higher than in any other NATO state surveyed (Pew Research Centre 2015); Polish support for the EU, by contrast, was subject to the steepest decline of all states in the Union (European Commission 2015: 7–8).

Critics have argued that NATO has failed to provide a proper rationale for this consolidationist turn. Indeed, by retaining the rhetoric of the ‘open door’ (NATO 2015), the impression is given that the alliance still aspires to integrate states such as Georgia and Ukraine whose prospects for entry are remote. To renounce enlargement, however, carries risks of its own. Although alleviating the longest-running dispute in NATO-Russia relations, it would be construed among some new members as a loss of resolve on NATO’s part. Faith in NATO’s ability to stand up to Russian demands closer to home (a particular concern in the Baltic states) could thus be fatally compromised (Machnikowski 2015). Reconciling these two approaches to enlargement has not been easy and since the Ukraine crisis NATO has taken a middle course – supporting enlargement in principle, but doing as little as possible to promote it.

If enlargement is no longer important for NATO and its leading powers, then a reckoning on European order will need to be made. The limits of enlargement have always been vague, necessarily so in order to avoid the impression that NATO was an exclusionary organisation. Does, therefore, a lowering of ambition imply the falling of a ‘new Iron Curtain’ with countries such as Georgia left outside? Or could it rather be part of a refashioned geopolitical project, one which still forsakes membership for countries in the ‘shared neighbourhood’ but does so in service of a deconflicted ‘relationship with Russia based on balance of power and strategic discernment’ (Wolff 2015: 1121)?
Notes

1 This calculation, it could be argued, also applied when the three Baltic states were being considered for membership. The difference, however, is that unlike Ukraine (and Georgia), these states had not been subject to Russian military intervention up to the point that membership was being negotiated. NATO did not, therefore, have to actively prepare for their defence at the moment of entry.

2 A term usually reserved for EU-Russia relations, it is used here by reference to NATO and includes the post-Soviet states of Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

References

NATO enlargement and the post-communist states


