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Routing

Cracks in the Foundation *NATO's New Troubles*

by Stanley Kober

Executive Summary

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is beginning to fracture. Its members, sharing the triumphalism that underpinned U.S. foreign policy after the Cold War, took on burdens that have proved more difficult than expected. Increasingly, they are failing to meet the challenges confronting them.

The principal problem is Afghanistan. After the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001, NATO for the first time invoked Article V, its pledge that an attack against one member country would be considered an attack against all. But NATO's forces are being relentlessly attacked by the Taliban, and among NATO countries popular support for maintaining troops there is fading. If NATO fails in Afghanistan, the consequences could be as damaging for its survival as the Vietnam War was for the now defunct Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.

There are a number of other problems, which may not reach the importance of Afghanistan, but which nevertheless pose serious complications. These include the proposed deployment of anti-ballistic missiles in Poland and the Czech Republic; a potential flashpoint in Kosovo, where the Albanian majority's insistence on independence could divide alliance members; and the growing tension between Russia and some of its neighbors. NATO's inability to deter a cyber attack that virtually paralyzed NATO member Estonia's access to the internet—an attack evidently launched from Russia but without any clear link to the Russian government—raises questions about the alliance's ability to protect its newest members.

In short, NATO is facing new challenges, and the future of the alliance is unclear. The United States should begin discussions with our allies about what a post-NATO world would look like.

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Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the bedrock of American foreign policy since the Second World War, is showing signs of severe stress. The members of the alliance, sharing the triumphalism that underpinned U.S. foreign policy after the Cold War, have taken on an assortment of problematic obligations, and increasingly they are failing to meet the resulting challenges.

This situation is a result of lessons drawn from the end of the Cold War, which was widely thought to be a product of the West's superior strength. To be sure, that was part of the story, but only part. The Cold War ended when the Soviets concluded that Communism didn't work. "The U.S. did not win a Cold War against the USSR," explains Russian commentator Pyotr Romanov. "The USSR lost it to the U.S." Communism didn't bury us because it couldn't, since it was a system of economic mismanagement. "Decay and inefficiency were genetically programmed into the Communist system. For this reason, its disintegration started at birth."¹

Nevertheless, the dominant view in the West is that we won the Cold War through our superior strength, especially military strength. That assumption has had three important consequences. First, NATO assumed additional burdens by taking in new members from the former Soviet bloc. The idea was to provide them the protection the European members of NATO had enjoyed during the Cold War. "Anxieties among Russia's neighbors about how Moscow will handle its relations with them have only grown in the last several months," Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott told a conference at Stanford University in November 1998. He urged Russia to reject "a sphere of influence" policy.²

But all countries have more influence in their own neighborhood than in remote areas of the world, and as long as power prevails over law in international relations, great powers will have spheres of influence. "Poor Mexico," a popular saying goes. "So far from

God; so close to the United States." Russia's neighbors have even more cause to lament. Geography is a reality, and as NATO gets closer geographically to Russia, its power wanes while Russia's increases. In the 1990s, when Russia was prostrate, the disparity in power was so great that this factor was not appreciated, but with Russia regaining its strength while NATO's power is focused in other regions, one wonders how NATO could make good on its guarantees if challenged.

Second, NATO's expansion antagonized Russia, which thought its goodwill in ending the Cold War had not been reciprocated. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov referred to this sentiment when he wrote that "various attempts are being made to contain Russia, including through the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in violation of previous assurances given to Moscow."³

What were these assurances? Russians, with some American support, insist that when the Cold War ended and they agreed to the reunification of Germany within NATO, they received verbal assurances that NATO would not expand further. "Any extension of the zone of NATO is unacceptable," Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev told Secretary of State James Baker in 1990. "I agree," Baker replied.⁴ But there is some confusion about what the discussions actually meant, especially since positions changed over time. The Russians were furious they had been careless or, worse, misled. "The current collision between Russia and NATO could have been avoided if the Soviet leadership had at that time . . . codified [American and German] intentions not to expand NATO," observed foreign affairs analyst Alexei Pushkov. "The Russian leadership is saying that it will not be fooled again."⁵

Third, by focusing on consolidating its Cold War victory, NATO neglected the new threats that were emerging. NATO is living with the consequences of that attitude, as its forces fight in Afghanistan. If NATO does not succeed, it is possible that Afghanistan will be its undoing just as failure in Vietnam destroyed another American-led alliance, the

Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

When the Cold War ended, that failure was largely forgotten. The idea that NATO could disappear, like SEATO before it, was not even considered. NATO, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during her January 1997 confirmation hearings, is “a permanent alliance.”⁶ And so NATO expanded and took on new missions, most notably in Afghanistan. But the victory in that country that appeared imminent at the end of 2001 now is increasingly in jeopardy, and now other tensions are beginning to weigh on alliance unity. Is it possible that NATO could go the way of SEATO?

The Mounting Troubles in Afghanistan

When the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001, NATO invoked Article V—its pledge that an attack against one is an attack against all—for the first time in its history. The U.S. government decided, however, that the military response should be primarily an American, rather than an alliance, matter. Quite simply, the U.S. ability to project power to remote Afghanistan far surpassed the capabilities of other members of the alliance. In addition, coordination is essential; if troops have not trained together for their missions in peacetime, the danger of friendly fire incidents is vastly increased if they fight together in war.

The extraordinary success of the initial military operation in Afghanistan justified that decision, but in retrospect, it appears that success led to overconfidence. The mastermind of the September 11 attack, Osama bin Laden, escaped with a core of supporters, which led to questions of whether sufficient forces were devoted to capturing him. Even worse, the Bush administration, evidently convinced that the situation in Afghanistan was under control, diverted resources to Iraq.

After a Promising Start, the Alliance Stumbles

For years, as the situation in Iraq deteriorated,

Afghanistan was regarded as the success story. “We are in the south to help and protect the Afghan people [as they] construct their own democracy,” British defense secretary John Reid said in April 2006. “We would be perfectly happy to leave in three years and without firing one shot because our job is to protect the reconstruction.”⁷

To be sure, Reid did acknowledge the possibility that force might have to be used, for that was the reason soldiers were being sent. It is evident, however, that the British government failed to anticipate the intensity of combat its troops would encounter. Indeed, in testimony before the House of Commons defense committee, the chief of the defense staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, admitted the battle in Afghanistan “would have been lost” in 2006 in the absence of effective close air support.⁸

Reliance on air support comes at a cost, however, since there is a heightened risk of innocent casualties, which in turn prompts increased Afghan resentment of NATO forces. After U.S. special forces called in air strikes in a valley in western Afghanistan in late April 2007, Afghan officials claimed that approximately 100 civilians had been killed and wounded. “Five years on, it is very difficult for us to continue accepting civilian casualties,” President Hamid Karzai told a news conference. “It is becoming heavy for us; it is not understandable anymore.”⁹

“Caveats” and Other Problems

Ideally, NATO members could provide more ground forces, but for the most part they have been reluctant to do so. In August 2003, NATO took command of the International Security Assistance Force, which had been established pursuant to a UN Security Council peace-enforcement mandate. ISAF has never seen itself as a war-fighting force; rather, it was designed to provide assistance to the developing Afghan army and to facilitate the reconstruction of Afghanistan following what was thought to be the defeat of the Taliban. “To sell their new missions at home, British, Dutch and Canadian officials portrayed deployments

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to Afghanistan as safe, and better than sending troops to Iraq,” the *New York Times* reported in summarizing the history of the conflict. “Germany and Italy prevented their forces from being sent on combat missions in volatile areas. Those regions were to be left to the Americans, Canadians, British and Dutch.”¹⁰

Those limits on deployments are among the many “caveats” complicating the war-fighting capability of NATO in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Other caveats include different rules of engagement, restrictions on how aircraft can be used, and even operational limitations on the use of riot control agents.¹¹ In October 2006, NATO’s Supreme Commander, Gen. James Jones, criticized Turkey for not allowing its forces to operate outside of Kabul.¹² And in March 2007, the German Defense Minister, Franz-Josef Jung, bluntly stated that “there will be no shifting of our troops from north to south,” where most of the fighting is taking place in Afghanistan.¹³ As then-secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld told a NATO meeting in September 2005, “Clearly, if you’re a NATO commander in command of an operation where there are different rules of engagement and different restrictions on national forces, it makes it enormously difficult for him to command that force.”¹⁴

Calls for additional troops or for lifting the “caveats” have met with modest responses, provoking complaints of unfair burden sharing. “When you go on an operation as complex and dangerous as this, where some NATO nations are not playing a full part,” there is “huge resentment” among troops putting their lives on the line while “others are not,” complained Lord Inge, commander of the British armed forces in the 1990s.¹⁵ Indeed, the House of Commons Select Committee on Defense has bluntly stated that it “remain[s] deeply concerned that the reluctance of some NATO members to provide troops for the ISAF mission is undermining NATO’s credibility and ISAF operations.”¹⁶

The Resurgence of the Taliban

On this side of the Atlantic, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has warned that

Afghanistan “could come back to haunt us” if NATO failed and the Taliban came to power again.¹⁷ That possibility, which seemed unthinkable six years ago, can no longer be excluded. Even Kabul is now experiencing bombings. “Every month there’s a 20 to 25 percent increase in offensive activity,” reports Nic Lee, director of the Afghanistan NGO safety office, a project funded by the European Commission. Lee claimed that attacks in June and July 2007 were 80–90 percent higher than in the same period last year.¹⁸ A suicide attack in November killed six legislators—a sign that the Taliban is adopting tactics such as roadside bombs and suicide bombers that have proved so effective and difficult to counter in Iraq.¹⁹ Poppy cultivation has soared, providing the Taliban with a lucrative source of income and presenting NATO with a terrible dilemma: attempt to eradicate the poppy and thereby alienate the farmers who grow it, or allow the poppy to flourish and the Taliban to profit. Efforts to find alternative crops have so far proved of limited success, so the dilemma continues. And as Lord Inge told the House of Lords last July, “if we fail in Afghanistan then Pakistan goes down.”²⁰

But if Afghanistan affects the stability of Pakistan, the situation in Pakistan, especially in its border areas, also affects the security situation in Afghanistan. As the United States discovered in Southeast Asia in the 1960s, insurgencies with secure sanctuaries are extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to defeat. The existence of such a sanctuary in Pakistan is the focus of NATO’s concern. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, General Jones called Quetta, the capital of Pakistan’s Balochistan province, the headquarters of the Taliban.²¹ Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has acknowledged the threat. “There is no doubt Afghan militants are supported from Pakistan soil,” he admitted while visiting Kabul in August 2007. “The problem that you have in your region is because support is provided from our side.”²²

The question now is what the Pakistani government can do. Deals made with the Taliban appear to be backfiring, and “far

from achieving peace in the tribal areas or in Afghanistan, it seems these deals now threaten peace in Pakistan itself.”²³ Pakistani commentators wonder aloud about the ability of the state to impose control, as religious extremists defy government authority even in the capital, Islamabad. On November 3, 2007, President Pervez Musharraf declared an emergency and suspended the constitution. “Pakistan is on the verge of destabilization,” he warned. “Inaction at this moment is suicide for Pakistan and I cannot allow this country to commit suicide.”²⁴

The deteriorating situation in Pakistan represents a grave threat to NATO operations in Afghanistan. Supply lines in Pakistan are coming under attack: in one incident in May 2007, as many as 10 trucks transporting fuel to coalition forces were destroyed. According to a report in the *Frontier Post* (Peshawar), these attacks are becoming “a routine business.”²⁵ If such a situation continues, NATO will have to look for other supply routes. Given the poor relations with Iran, that means looking to Afghanistan’s northern border, which means increased reliance on Russia.

Ironically, the success of NATO’s mission in Afghanistan could thus rest in Moscow’s hands. After September 11, Vladimir Putin’s government cooperated with the United States against the Taliban, but the relatively good relations that prevailed at that time have frayed significantly. Although Russia still would have an incentive to cooperate, because it also views the Taliban as an enemy, it presumably would exact a price related to some of its other disputes with the United States and NATO. Unfortunately, the relationship has now become burdened with a number of issues, of which the most important are missile defense, Kosovo, and Estonia.²⁶

Missile Defense Creates New Tensions

In December 2001, President Bush announced that the United States was withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty that

had been in effect for almost 30 years. He argued that the treaty was a relic of the Cold War and that missile defenses were now necessary to deal with threats from terrorists and rogue states. In reply, President Putin acknowledged that the U.S. withdrawal from the treaty did not threaten Russia’s security, but he nevertheless regarded the decision as a “mistake.”²⁷

That judgment has hardened since the United States announced it wanted to deploy anti-missile facilities in the Czech Republic and Poland to provide protection against Iranian missiles. The Russian government has ridiculed that rationale, denouncing the proposed deployment as designed to counter Russian missiles and rejecting proposals for cooperation. According to Russian foreign minister Lavrov, “any unilateral steps, especially those taken in haste, are effectively setting the stage for a new division of Europe.”²⁸

The warning about a new division of Europe evokes images of a return to the Cold War. Moscow has warned that it will increase its offensive missile capabilities to offset any defensive deployments, and it has suspended participation in the treaty on conventional forces in Europe. “Some European countries are flagrantly violating CFE [Conventional Forces in Europe] provisions, whereas Russia has fewer weapons in its treaty zone than it is allowed to have,” claims Russian commentator Pyotr Goncharov. Linking the two disputes, he adds that “it would make sense for European countries to heed Russia’s grievances over the ABM issue.”²⁹

Intra-Alliance Tensions

Russia is not alone in voicing concerns. NATO’s secretary general has warned that by approaching Poland and the Czech Republic to safeguard its own security, the United States risks creating two levels of security within NATO itself. “For me the indivisibility of security is key,” Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has stressed. “When it comes to missile defense, there shouldn’t be an A-league and a B-league within NATO.”³⁰ Some NATO members, notably in “old” Europe, have also voiced objections.

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German officials, in particular, have expressed nervousness about where the U.S. policy might lead. “Our top priority remains disarmament and not an arms buildup,” Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has written. “We don’t want a new arms race in Europe.”³¹

In addition, although the top leaders of the Czech Republic and Poland have expressed support for the ABM system, uneasiness is bubbling beneath the surface. “Almost every public survey conducted in recent months has shown around 60 percent of Czechs opposed to the radar base,” the BBC reports. “According to the country’s leading polling agency STEM, those ‘strongly against’ far outweigh those ‘strongly in favor.’”³² Similarly, a majority of respondents to a poll in Poland opposed the deployment.³³ The manner in which the U.S. government pushed the ABM system provoked an outraged reaction from the Polish defense minister, who resigned. “Some genius at the State Department or the Pentagon sent the first official note describing possible placement of the facility with a draft reply attached,” Radek Sikorski wrote in a stinging article in the *Washington Post*. “If the Bush administration expects Poles and Czechs to jump for joy and agree to whatever is proposed, it’s going to face a mighty crash with reality.”³⁴

In short, the ABM proposal is already dividing NATO, and Putin is exploiting those divisions with his proposal to base the ABM radar in Azerbaijan rather than the Czech Republic. As a report in the *Hindu* stressed, Putin’s proposal, which also included basing interceptor missiles closer to Iran, was designed to facilitate a cooperative European approach to European security. “A missile shield built near the Iranian borders would cover all of Europe, rather than just a part of it as would be the case with missiles deployed in Poland under the U.S. plan,” Vladimir Radyuhin wrote from Moscow. “The wreckage of missiles intercepted in the early stages after launch from Iran would fall into the sea, rather than on the heads of Europeans.”³⁵

In other words, Putin is telling the Europeans, “The Americans are designing a

system for themselves, not for you, but my plan would protect you.” The question is whether the United States will be able to hold its allies in line, or whether Putin will be successful in sowing division.

The New Kosovo Crisis

In 1999, following NATO’s war against Serbia (Yugoslavia), the UN Security Council adopted a resolution authorizing the establishment of an international civil and security presence under UN auspices in Kosovo. “Reaffirming the commitment of all Member States to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia,” Resolution 1244 specified that the UN presence was intended “to provide an interim administration for Kosovo under which the people of Kosovo can enjoy substantial autonomy within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.”³⁶

Reneging on a Commitment

Nevertheless, in March 2007 Marti Ahtisaari, the UN secretary general’s special envoy for Kosovo, recommended that Kosovo be put on a path for supervised independence. Further negotiation, he had concluded, was pointless. “Both parties have reaffirmed their categorical, diametrically opposed positions,” he explained, and the Kosovars would not agree to remain within Serbia. “This is a reality one cannot deny; it is irreversible.”³⁷

The proposal immediately ran into opposition from Russia, which urged further negotiation to achieve an outcome agreeable to both sides. Commenting on the Ahtisaari plan, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Mikhail Kamynin said in March 2007 that “it is important to continue impartial consultations and to steadily expand the sphere of agreement between the negotiating parties in the interests of finding solutions to the problems on the basis of Resolution No. 1244 of the U.N. Security Council and principles of international law.”³⁸

Two questions arise here. First, what does international law require? According to

Kosovo's prime minister, Agim Ceku, "the UN Charter and all other relevant statements of international law underline the pre-eminence of self-determination."³⁹ But if that is the case, how can self-determination be denied to other peoples who might demand it? Already, Russia is arguing that Kosovo would set a precedent for other independence movements, and Ceku's interpretation of international law would appear to reinforce that contention.

Second, who decides what international law is relevant in such a matter? The Russians are saying that the United Nations, and especially the Security Council, decide on these issues. It would appear the United States agreed with that view, for otherwise why did it turn to the Security Council following the war in Kosovo? But now the U.S. government is arguing that if the Security Council cannot reach agreement, it can be ignored. "When does the process end?" President Bush asked rhetorically during a visit to Albania last June, answering, "The time is now. . . We're going to have to move. Independence is the goal, and that's what the people of Kosovo need to know."⁴⁰

Thus, the question here concerns a fundamental issue of the post-Cold War order. "We're now in sight of a United Nations that performs as envisioned by its founders," President George H. W. Bush famously told Congress on the eve of the 1991 Gulf War.⁴¹ The hope was that the end of the Cold War divisions would lead to a world based on the rule of law. The corresponding fear was that a failure of the rule of law could lead to new divisions and tensions, including some that Americans did not expect.

Russia—and Others—Cite International Law

The Russian emphasis on law might appear to some as insincere, but it defines a fundamental issue: if we are not governed by the rule of law, in which all are equal before the law, then might makes right. When NATO ignored the requirement for a UN Security Council Resolution authorizing its bombing

campaign in Kosovo, arguing that the moral imperative to prevent genocide overrode the language of the UN Charter, the Russians were unhappy, but they agreed to support Resolution 1244. If that resolution is now disregarded, they will likely conclude that the Western countries follow the law when it suits their interests, and ignore it when it doesn't.

And they will not be the only ones. Last February, as Ahtisaari was preparing to present his plan, the foreign ministers of Russia, China, and India met in New Delhi. They "expressed their conviction that democratization of international relations is the key to building an increasingly multi-polar world order that would be based on principles of equality of nations—big or small, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries, international law and mutual respect," according to the official communiqué. "The Ministers acknowledged that the UN is an appropriate instrument for promoting and attaining such a world order."⁴²

Although that communiqué was all but ignored in the West, its language suggests that China and India share Russia's concerns. Indeed, in China's case, that is to be expected. Just as Resolution 1244 is the test of American sincerity regarding Kosovo, the Shanghai communiqué negotiated between U.S. and Chinese leaders on the occasion of President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 is the test of American sincerity regarding the ambiguous relationship between China and Taiwan.⁴³ It would hardly be surprising if the Chinese were watching this issue and thinking to themselves: If the Americans disregard a Security Council resolution, why should we believe they won't disregard the Shanghai communiqué?

The Indian perspective is more surprising given the upturn in U.S.-India relations, a priority of the Bush administration. The key here may be found in the term "mutual respect." Although the Indians are keen to improve their relationship with the United States, they are sensitive to any action that appears disrespectful: for example, they have sharply rejected Washington's objections to

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New Delhi's plans for a pipeline with Iran.⁴⁴ Consequently, they might be watching Kosovo and thinking: If this is the lack of respect the United States shows Russia, a permanent member of the Security Council, how will Washington treat us if it becomes too powerful?

In short, the New Delhi communiqué suggests that the repercussions of bypassing Resolution 1244 could reverberate well beyond the Balkans. Moscow could argue that by disregarding the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, which both set forth principles concerning state sovereignty and respect for human rights, the United States and its allies have shown they consider themselves to be too powerful to be restrained by mere legal constraints.⁴⁵

NATO and the Prospect of New Violence in the Balkans

Would NATO members line up behind the United States in the face of this challenge? The answer is not clear, especially if violence breaks out in Kosovo. NATO is caught in the middle of a dilemma between the possibility of Albanian violence if independence is not granted, or Serbian violence if it is. It is questionable whether Serbia would meekly accept Kosovo's independence. "If this plan happens, it will only give the Albanian terrorists a chance to finish the ethnic cleansing job against Serbs in Kosovo that has been going on for the past seven years," Bishop Artemije, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, warned in Washington last February. "Serbia will react as any democratic country would do to the loss of its territory, and Serbs in Kosovo will react as any occupied people would do."⁴⁶

NATO, it should be remembered, is not the force it was in 1999; it is now heavily involved elsewhere. Would it be capable of handling renewed violence? Leaders may give assurances that the alliance can and would do so, but the major question concerns the willingness of the populations of the member states to become engaged in the Balkans once again. Already facing foreign challenges beyond what

they expected, the outbreak of violence in the Balkans—in a conflict thought to be all but settled—could make them wonder about the competence of their leaders. If so, the prospects for effective action—indeed, for the future of the alliance itself—could be bleak.

Estonia and the Perils of Security Guarantees

Another issue that is challenging NATO is the tense relationship between alliance member Estonia and Russia. Earlier this year, the Estonian government moved a Soviet-era war memorial, which included the interred bodies of Russian soldiers who had died in the Second World War, from the center of Tallinn to a military cemetery. That action provoked outrage in Russia. The Estonian ambassador in Moscow had to flee a gang of young thugs who interrupted a press briefing she was giving. In addition, computer networks in Estonia soon were besieged by "denial of service" attacks, which Estonia (and others) claimed were originating in Russia. "Russian Web forums posted explicit instructions on how to overload Estonian Web sites," the *Chicago Tribune* reported. "Let Estonia know that Russia will never leave its compatriots in trouble," it quoted from one Russian site. "Take revenge at these Estonian government addresses."⁴⁷

The attacks provoked a response from NATO, which sent a team to investigate. "This is an operational security issue, something we're taking very seriously," an official at its headquarters in Brussels said. "It goes to the heart of the alliance's modus operandi."⁴⁸

There are two issues to be considered here. The first is the issue of cyber warfare. Estonia, it turns out, is especially vulnerable because so much of its business activity is connected to the internet. According to the Estonian defense minister, the effect of the attacks was like having ports blockaded.⁴⁹ Yet it is difficult to prove responsibility. Even if the attacks are traced to Russia, that does not by itself prove government responsibility. "None of the sources we have analyzed from around the world show a

clear line from Moscow to Tallinn,” observed Jose Nazario, a senior security engineer with Arbor Networks. “We see signs of Russian nationalism at work here, but no Russian government connection.”⁵⁰

The second is what NATO can do. That issue goes beyond the specifics of cyber warfare. Supposedly, once Estonia was included in NATO, its security would be assured. The cyber attacks indicate that argument must now be questioned. At the very least, the cyber attacks suggest there are ways of indirectly challenging NATO. In other words, the logic of deterrence must now be reexamined. As the *Economist* has succinctly put it, “though [the Baltic states] shelter in theory under the alliance’s nuclear umbrella, in practice NATO offers little more than moral support.”⁵¹

Athens and America

The predicament confronting Estonia, and other small states that are located near a much larger power, is a recurring theme in history. Perhaps its most famous expression is the Melian dialogue from Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The Melians, confronted by the might of Athens, hoped their position as a colony of Lacedaemon (Sparta) would protect them. Their hopes were in vain, as the Athenians knew the realities of the balance of power. In their ultimatum, the Athenians bluntly told the Melians that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”⁵²

During the Cold War, both sides largely recognized these realities. The United States let the Soviet Union build the Berlin Wall. It never recognized the incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union, but it also never considered using military force to free them.

But empires do not last forever; the Athenian empire crumbled, and so did the Soviet. It is understandable that the Estonians, and others, who suffered terribly during the 20th century should seek assurances of security, and Americans can only be flattered by the trust they repose in us. It would be wonderful if we could be worthy of that trust. But ultimately the question must be asked, whether

the security of small states is guaranteed better by alliances than by a respected system of international law. Both have their risks, but the history of the 20th century underlines the danger small states assume by placing their hopes for security in the promises of larger countries.

The Balance of Power

In a speech to the 2002 graduating class of West Point, President Bush unveiled a vision of American military hegemony that would, he argued, lead to a more peaceful world. “America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge,” he proclaimed, “thereby, making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.”⁵³ Elaborating on this idea, then-national security adviser Condoleezza Rice derided the idea of multipolarity. “Multi-polarity is a theory of rivalry; of competing interests—and at its worst—competing values,” she told the International Institute of Strategic Studies in June 2003. “Power in the service of freedom is to be welcomed, and powers that share a commitment to freedom can—and must—make common cause against freedom’s enemies.”⁵⁴

However beguiling this idea, it runs counter to the founding principle of the United States that unchecked power is bound to be abused. Our system of checks and balances is simply the domestic application of the international concept of the balance of power. Just as Americans would not feel safe if their rights were guaranteed by a dictator, so people in other countries will not trust their rights and freedoms to the protection of a single, unchallenged hegemon. In such a situation, the world will divide between those who see their protection in alignment with the superpower, and those who feel that whatever protection might be offered in the short run is likely to be sacrificed in the long run.

Alliances Lead to Counteralliances

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Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria, and Italy provoked the formation of the countervailing Triple Entente of Britain, France, and Russia. As Sir Edward Grey, Britain's foreign secretary at the time, explained in his memoirs:

It seemed incredible that [the Germans] should not realize that, if Germany had alliances, other countries must have them too. . . . After the Triple Alliance was formed Russia was isolated, France was isolated, Britain was not only isolated, but in constant danger of war with France or Russia. German statesmen cannot seriously have thought that this situation could last. France and Russia found some comfort in an Alliance, and at last Britain found it in an Entente.⁵⁵

But it appears the Germans did not realize the obligations the members of the Entente felt toward each other. Concerned that Berlin had misconstrued a statement he gave in answer to a parliamentary inquiry, Grey "gave the [German] Ambassador a warning that my reply in the House of Commons must be taken as meaning just what it said, and that it did not preclude some intimacy on our part with France and Russia that was *like that of Allies*."⁵⁶ The warning was not heeded, and within a few months the Triple Entente was at war with the Triple Alliance.

History may not repeat itself exactly, but the parallel with the post-Cold War world provides an opportunity for reflection. When the Cold War ended and the Warsaw Pact dissolved, Russia agreed to live with NATO—even with a NATO that expanded to include a united Germany. But a triumphant alliance decided it should expand and take in new members. Incredibly, like Germany's leaders a century before, American leaders (and their foreign allies) did not appreciate that alliances provoke the formation of counter-alliances.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Response to NATO

But as NATO has expanded, Russia's relations with China, in particular, have grown

apace, leading initially to the formation of the Shanghai Five and then to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes—in addition to Russia and China—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as full members, and India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan as observer members.

In other words, just as the Triple Entente gradually emerged in opposition to the Triple Alliance, so the SCO seems to be emerging in response to NATO expansion. And just as the Triple Entente insisted, at least in public, that it was not an alliance, so do the members of the SCO. But the membership of the SCO does not overlap with NATO, just as the membership of the Triple Alliance did not overlap with the Triple Entente, and SCO members conduct military exercises together just as NATO countries do.⁵⁷ In short, the world is in danger of dividing just as Europe divided a century ago—a process that should have been foreseen by those who naively thought other countries would not respond to NATO expansion by taking their own corresponding measures.

The Guarantor's Responsibility

In his memoirs, Secretary of State Dean Rusk described how uneasy he felt about the creation of SEATO. "I was amazed, even dismayed, by the casual way the Senate ratified the SEATO Treaty," he recalled. "With massive retaliation backing up our treaty obligations, we may have entered SEATO 'on the cheap,' without fully recognizing the price we might have to pay to back up our treaty pledges."⁵⁸

SEATO was a precursor to the post-Cold War efforts to expand NATO, since it was based on the same premise that an American security guarantee would provide protection. "SEATO was a comprehensive pledge, accepting responsibility for the security of the protocol states," Rusk explained. "When the United States signed that treaty, SEATO became the law of the land and linked South

Vietnam to the general structure of collective security.”⁵⁹

The parallels with the situation today are troubling. When NATO’s members invoked Article 5 following the September 11 attack, they could hardly have imagined their military operations would encounter so much difficulty. After all, the greatest military power the world had ever seen headed their alliance, and Afghanistan was a poor and weak country.

But the war was not taken seriously, and now NATO is in difficulty. “The situation in Afghanistan is much worse than many people recognize,” Lord Inge told the House of Lords on July 11, 2007. “We need to face up to that issue, the consequences of strategic failure in Afghanistan and what that would mean for NATO.” Another member of the House agreed. “When I was at NATO 18 months ago, I found myself talking to a succession of people in SHAPE who said that the future of NATO now depends on success in Afghanistan,” stressed Lord Wallace of Saltaire. “If that is the case, we have some real questions to ask about the future of NATO.”⁶⁰

Nor are such warnings confined to Britain. “NATO has now had to face an existential crisis of sorts,” Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns told the Atlantic Council last February, accusing some NATO members of shirking their obligations. “Too many of our allies have said that they’re quite willing to be garrison troops in the northern and western parts of the country that are relatively quiet and peaceful, but not willing to come down to where the Taliban is crossing the border in great numbers and where al Qaeda is also taking on the American, Afghan, and those NATO allied forces” from Britain, Canada, Estonia, the Netherlands, and Romania. “We need to see that effort from the Europeans. We need to see more European soldiers in Afghanistan, more European money devoted to the task of rebuilding the country.” At the same time, however, he insisted that “NATO will continue to grow. We will continue to add members to the NATO Alliance.”⁶¹

But is it responsible to add new members if the fate of the alliance itself has come into question? Our experience with SEATO demonstrates why we must ask hard questions before, not after, we have extended security guarantees. The fate of the Vietnamese and the Cambodians is on our conscience, and the Iraqis and Afghans may soon be, as well. This is a moral issue of the highest order: *we should not make promises of protection we might not be able to honor.*

And what kind of alliance are we asking these countries to enter? As Secretary Burns made clear, it is an alliance that will ask its members to send their soldiers to Afghanistan. But that is not why the new members wanted to join the alliance. A poll by the Pew research group released last June revealed that 45 percent of Czech respondents and 63 percent of Polish respondents favored removing troops from Afghanistan. Indeed, in seven of twelve NATO members surveyed, majorities “say troops should be withdrawn from Afghanistan as soon as possible.”⁶²

In short, the alliance is fraying, a development that should have been foreseen. To be sure, the demise of NATO has been predicted almost from its inception. But the moral of the story of the boy who cries wolf is that people become complacent and therefore are caught off guard when the wolf eventually appears.

Just such complacency has been evident since the Cold War ended. The triumphalism that characterized American diplomacy was not only unrealistic; it was a contradiction of the guidance of this country’s Founders. “The rulers of the most powerful nation in the world,” Alexander Hamilton warned, “will forever aim at an undue empire over other nations.” Power unconstrained would lead to excess, arousing the suspicion and opposition of other countries. “The spirit of moderation in a state of overbearing power is a phenomenon which has not yet appeared, and which no wise man will ever expect to see,” Hamilton explained, referring to France. “Twere therefore contrary to our true interest to assist in building up this colossus to the enormous size

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at which she aims. 'Twere a policy as short-sighted as mean to seek safety in a subservience to her views as the price of her clemency."⁶³

What was true for the United States vis-à-vis France is now true of other countries vis-à-vis the United States. And again, this was predicted by our Founders. No less a figure than George Washington advised the American people in his Farewell Address to avoid the temptation of permanent alliances, noting the likelihood that they would lead to permanent confrontation. Now we wonder whether the Cold War is returning and note with concern the support of the Russian people for President Putin's more confrontational policy. It is not the world we expected when the Berlin Wall fell; and it remains to be seen whether the challenges confronting NATO, including Kosovo, missile defense, and especially Afghanistan, can be surmounted.

If they are not, then NATO will, indeed, confront an existential crisis. Failure in Afghanistan, in particular, is likely to bring recriminations as members of the alliance attempt to shift the blame. Weakening alliance solidarity will be reinforced by problems in staffing the armed forces: the U.S. Army, for example, began the current recruiting year with the fewest number of candidates signed up for basic training since the inception of the all-volunteer force in 1973.⁶⁴ The reality of American overstretch is already being recognized in NATO members who looked to the U.S. as their protector. "Our American colleagues say not to worry, that NATO will protect us, but rhetorical assurances are too easy," Poland's former defense minister Sikorski explained in the *Washington Post*. "Poland is haunted by the memory of fighting Hitler alone in 1939 while our allies stood by."⁶⁵

The tragedy of Poland in 1939 occurred when Britain and France casually extended defense guarantees without taking seriously the accompanying responsibilities. Describing the security arrangements reached at the October 1925 Locarno conference, Winston Churchill wrote that "although the proposal seemed dangerous in theory—pledging us in

fact to take part on one side or the other in any Franco-German war that might arise—there was little likelihood of such a disaster ever coming to pass; and this was the best means of preventing it."⁶⁶ Churchill at the time was himself so confident of the stability of peace in Europe that when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1928, he advised his colleagues "that it should now be laid down as a standing assumption that at any given date there will be no major war for ten years from that date."⁶⁷

The Locarno arrangements did not prevent the Second World War, and they did not survive it. That is the typical fate of security guarantees that prove ineffective. If NATO fails to meet its current challenges, its survival should not be taken for granted. Given the difficulties the alliance is confronting, it is not too early to begin discussions with our allies about what a post-NATO world would look like. They have put their trust in us, and we have an obligation to them, and to ourselves, to face the world honestly.

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