

Missed Opportunities?

NATO's Post-Cold War Enlargement and the Gradual Decline in Relations between Washington and Moscow

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SAROTTE, Mary Elise:

Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate.

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The Russian military attack on Ukraine in February 2022 brought a heated discussion centered not only on the question of whether the aggression by the Putin regime against a neighboring sovereign country could have been anticipated, but also to what extent it may have been prevented. In a wide range of somewhat inspiring or relevant comments, the references to international development after the Cold War and its Western winners' general approach to the defeated side, the Soviet Union, and its biggest successor state, the Russian Federation have been voiced. The debate has been oriented to the past for the reason alone that contemporary Moscow officials, including Vladimir Putin, try to justify the invasion of Ukraine by pointing to history, with the interpretation of events of the last three decades being a part of their narrative. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) expansion into Central and Eastern Europe, including some former Soviet republics, plays an important role in such an argumentation. Moscow has perceived the enlargement of the military-political organization that posed its main potential enemy during the Cold War days as problematic since the

beginning. It is not only Russian leaders and propagandists who are raising again the oft-presented claim that bringing new members into NATO meant breaking the 1990 promise of top Western politicians to Mikhail Gorbachev during the negotiations on Germany's future. They promised that in exchange for Moscow's consent to the unification of the country divided since the end of the Second World War, NATO would expand "not one inch" eastward. The alleged failure to comply with that spoken guarantee – interpretations of which, however, significantly vary – is seen or presented by many as evidence of the key Western powers' disdainful approach to basically legitimate security and geopolitical demands by Moscow, and as a symbol of post-Cold War international order that marginalized Russia on the global stage.

In light of this, the recent book fittingly titled *Not One Inch* by Mary Elise Sarotte, American historian of international relations, was published at the right moment. Despite being completed and released before the outbreak of the biggest armed conflict in Europe since 1945, it deals with the issues of utmost urgency related to NATO's expansion, Ukraine, and the general development of relations between Washington and Moscow after the fall of communist power in the Eastern Bloc. The extensive monograph, over 500 pages long, is based on rich archival research during which Sarotte, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, was able to also study newly declassified documents of US provenience. For this reason alone, the work should come to the attention of all who seek informed answers about the current grim events in Europe, which go beyond speculation, statements taken out of context, or interpretations serving political purposes. After all, Sarotte has long focused on the Cold War, its end, and subsequent international developments,¹ and her profound insight is evident in the book.

Not One Inch is not a mere summary of the post-Cold War enlargement of NATO. The book brings an analysis of the strategic choices the key American and Russian leaders made in that process, although, given her sources' nature, it is particularly useful for understanding the evolution of the thinking behind the foreign policy and security establishment in Washington. Beginning with the contest over the future of divided Germany after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Sarotte claims that the negotiations swiftly turned into a struggle to preserve NATO as well as to shape the character of post-Cold War Europe. One of her main theses is that moves by both the West's and Moscow's representatives in the months and years that followed resulted in a new division of the continent, just with a more easterly placed dividing line compared to the

¹ See for example: SAROTTE, Mary Elise: *Dealing with the Devil: East Germany, Détente, and Ostpolitik, 1969–1973*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press 2001; EADEM: *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe*. Princeton, Princeton University Press 2014; EADEM: *Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall*. New York, Basic Books 2015.

situation before the end of 1989. The main focus of the author is on the reasons why the United States decided to enlarge NATO. Simultaneously, she deals with questions such as to what extent that decision interacted with contemporary Russian choices, and how much of a role it played in the gradual decline of relations between Washington and Moscow. The empirical part ends in 1999, not only with the acceptance of the first former members of the Warsaw Pact in NATO, but also with the Western method of solving the Kosovo crisis, which seemingly terminated the previous attempts by the United States and Russia to find a new *modus vivendi* and common ground in the security area. The second and no less important dimension of the book is the consideration of whether the expansion of NATO and the way it occurred had feasible alternatives, what the cost of the chosen way was, and what the lesson to be learned for the future is.

The incorporation of unified Germany into NATO combined with an expansion of the validity of the fundamental Article V of the Washington Treaty on collective defense beyond the Cold War dividing line in Europe is seen by Sarotte as the major precedent that set the subsequent course of events. Besides announcing the preservation of the existing Western security structures in the post-Cold War reality, the step, as she puts it, encouraged the new political representation in the ex-Soviet allies to strive to join the organization and gain Western security guarantees. In this respect, she does not miss the junior states' influence on the final decision to open NATO's door to former Warsaw Pact members as well as some post-Soviet republics. But she considers the fact that the alliance eventually expanded to more than thirty nations as primarily a major success for Washington strategists. Sarotte concludes that by the end of 1991 at the latest, amid the Soviet Union's collapse, the administration of George H. W. Bush started to reconsider the options for NATO's future. Realizing the West's victory in the Cold War it intended not only to win big but to win bigger in geopolitical terms. According to Sarotte, the non-formal pledge by the United States Secretary of State, James Baker, to Soviet officials in February 1990 that NATO military structures would move "not one inch" eastward quickly acquired a new meaning: "not one inch" of territory beyond the former Iron Curtain should have not been off limits for expanding the alliance (p. 261). And it eventually reached the Russian border before the decade ended.

At the same time, the book reveals the dilemma that the key United States policymakers faced for most of the 1990s: to accommodate the Central and East European countries which had suffered much during the twentieth century and to allow them to link their future with NATO membership regardless of the impact on West-Moscow relations, or to prioritize

cooperation with the nascent, fragile Russian democracy, particularly in nuclear disarmament. Sarotte's research shows that for a long time neither the Bush nor the subsequent Clinton administrations were unanimous on this matter. The result was the compromise Partnership for Peace project, intended to enable East European and post-Soviet countries to gain some experience of security cooperation with the West, potentially opening a way for them to acquire the much-wanted guarantee of Article V in the undefined future. However, as the author explains, the project failed to satisfy not only some United States policymakers but, first and foremost, the top Central and East European representatives; her citation of Lech Wałęsa's criticism that the West was losing an important historic opportunity to "cage the [Russian] bear" is telling in this sense (p. 184).

A contradiction between President Clinton's early conception of security, which was inclusive in nature and sought to draw no new dividing lines in Europe, and the effort by the former Eastern Bloc countries as well as some post-Soviet republics – with abundant support from some influential United States foreign and security policy figures – to join NATO while disregarding the broader geopolitical effects is clearly evident from the book. At the same time, to make the story more complex, it would be helpful for future studies of the issue to include a broader set of documents from the countries in question. Mostly neglected by Sarotte, this source may hint as to what extent the expansion of NATO was the United States' plan from the beginning, as some suggest, or a reaction to various circumstances of the time.

As for the reasons behind the United States' decision to abandon a more restrained conception that took into account Russian interests, Sarotte identifies not only the attempt by some Washington policymakers to turn the result of the Cold War to a maximum strategic advantage and the tireless pressure exerted by aspiring new European NATO members (the effect of which is perhaps downplayed a little in the book). She also reflects on the events in the Soviet Union and Russia respectively, and explains how the idea of deeper cooperation was negatively affected, for example, by the anti-Gorbachev coup in August 1991, the electoral success of extremists, and Yeltsin's decision to disband the parliament two years later, as well as the two major military operations in Chechnya, launched in 1994 and 1999. As the Partnership for Peace began to be seen as inadequate amid these developments, the vision of a post-Cold War Europe with no dividing lines eventually faded. Since that moment, according to Sarotte, the main question was where the line would be drawn and on what side each state would find itself, such as Ukraine with a massive nuclear arsenal on its territory which had

played a very important role in the consideration of the United States since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Sarotte's research offers some valuable findings. One of these is confirmation that policymakers in Washington took into account not only developments in the "old continent": the rapid enlargement of NATO was part of Clinton's aim to refocus the United States defense strategy on Asia and the measure was intended to free up American military resources in Europe for this purpose. The same applies to her finding that NATO membership was in some sense intended to mitigate the former Eastern Bloc countries' frustration over the fact that their integration into European political and economic structures would take much longer than non-communist officials and part of the public had expected during the euphoria of 1989.

Despite the great contribution the book makes, some of its weaker aspects should not be overlooked. As mentioned above, it is based on an impressive set of sources, but predominantly those from the US and German archives, which Sarotte knows well from her previous research. She frequently uses memos by (West) German diplomats and analysts as the main source when explaining the intentions of the countries eastward of the former Iron Curtain. Although such a mediated picture was not universally accurate, the author often interprets it noncritically, particularly information concerning the countries' strategies in the final phases of the Warsaw Pact's dissolution. The impression that her field of expertise is rather the policy of the West than the Eastern area is supported by a few factual mistakes (the former First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia Alexander Dubček is titled as the Czech President, for instance, p. 87) as well as a simplistic perspective on the wars during the breakup of Yugoslavia. Although the book does not present the former Soviet allies and republics as mere passive objects of decision-making by the great powers, some aspects closely related to their path into NATO are not fully reflected upon. This includes particularly the pace, level, and success of internal transformation in those countries that sought membership. Sarotte does not fully explain why the first round of expansion consisted of the Visegrad countries only, although without Slovakia. She mentions in passing both practical and pragmatic reasons (p. 276–280), but these do not seem to be exhaustive.

The interpretation of how much Western policymakers, and notably those in Washington, planned the expansion of NATO ever since the fall of communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe, is also polemical in nature. The author is rather categorical about the Bush administration's intention regarding the alliance at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. One can completely agree with her observation that during the talks on German unification, Washington

sought to block any significant debate on NATO's future. In this regard, American negotiators were never ready to compromise with Moscow. However, the claim that at that stage the Bush administration already perceived the *expanded* alliance as the dominant security organization in the post-Cold War period is questionable. In this respect, Sarotte is not as strict as some other scholars, such as Joshua Shiffrin.² But what is interesting is that the book suggests rather the opposite when read carefully; that the Bush administration did not clearly calculate for NATO's enlargement beyond the collapse of the GDR when negotiating Germany's future. Although some of its figures, led by Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, undoubtedly considered various scenarios, the reader gets the impression that the talks of 1990 focused on the status of the East German territory and that the thoughts for any substantial expansion of NATO did not go beyond internal outlines of possible future development. As such, these ideas did not transfer to the official negotiations with the Soviet side directly, so even Baker's famous words "not one inch" obviously referred to NATO's military jurisdiction within the borders of the former GDR. The existence of internal considerations of diverse scenarios should not be mistaken for an official position or a clearly defined, albeit non-public and non-admitted strategy. Opposing suggestions are not typically based on primary documentation, but rather on memoirs written in hindsight and retrospective testimonies, such as that of Robert Zoellick, one of the main proponents of NATO's rapid enlargement. On the contrary, other parts of the book reveal that a wide discussion on the costs and benefits of such a move took place in Washington even in the last months of Bush's tenure and after Clinton entered the White House.

It is also significant that Moscow's claim that the NATO enlargement by the former Warsaw Pact members precludes the Two Plus Four Agreement (Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany) and the merit of talks on German unification appeared with a considerable time difference, in September 1993. And it took three more years before the argument became heated. At that point, Russia was already desperately looking for any weapon with which to attack an expansion of its Cold War arch enemy, an expansion that was increasingly taking shape. In some sense, this approach can be seen as the result of Moscow rapidly losing any effective leverage that would potentially allow it to influence crucial issues of international politics. As the book well shows, whereas it was unimaginable for the West not

² See SHIFFRINSON, Joshua R.: Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the US Offer to Limit NATO Expansion. In: *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (2016), pp. 7–44; SHIFFRINSON, Joshua R.: Eastbound and Down: The United States, NATO Enlargement, and Suppressing the Soviet and Western European Alternatives, 1990–1992. In: *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 6–7 (2020), pp. 816–846.

to take account of the Kremlin's stance on NATO expansion in the early 1990s, just five years later no real emphasis was put on the Russian position.

Some of the author's reflections on her empirical findings are closely related to the abovementioned issues. NATO kept expanding, as she reminds us, even after Vladimir Putin took over the Kremlin and eventually used military force in Georgia and Ukraine to ensure that "not one inch" more of the soil of Eastern Europe would join the alliance. According to Sarotte, the clashes over NATO's future contributed to the final shape of the post-Cold War international order, which resembled more of a Cold War model than a project of extensive cooperation from Vancouver to Vladivostok. From her perspective, the disputes between Washington and Moscow had reduced the trust and openness both sides needed for such a collaboration before Putin acceded to power. In the upcoming years, much will be written by historians on the question that Sarotte asks: since it must have been obvious that Russia, once it recovered from political and economic collapse, would remain a major player on the international scene because of its size and nuclear arsenal, would it not have been better if Western leaders had foreseen the problem we are facing today, and tried to prevent it by giving Moscow a greater say over, and a berth in the new common security structure? The book's answer is a qualified yes. Projects such as Partnership for Peace are presented as an alternative, with the potential to further reduce tensions between the world's two nuclear superpowers – and thereby tensions in Europe. In this regard, the author quotes, for example, the words of the former US ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul (who can be hardly seen as a Kremlin-leaning figure) that Russia was not destined to return to a confrontational relationship with the West (p. 345).

At this point, the question must be asked: Was NATO's expansion the main reason behind the gradual Russia-West escalation? Or is it just a simplistic and reductive explanation of that process, with the war in Ukraine being one of its tragic effects? It is evident that the alliance's enlargement served Russian "national-imperialists" well. As noted by the world-leading expert on Russian modern history, Vladislav Zubok, it has allowed them to present US policy as an attempt to marginalize and humiliate Russia, which has a natural right to be a great power.³ In this respect, NATO's expansion to the Russian borders clearly empowered this narrative and created another area of friction between Moscow and the West. But was this a

³ ELLISON, James – COX, Michael – HAHNIMÄKI, Jussi – HARRISON, Hope – LUDLOW, Piers – ROMANO, Angela – SPOHR, Kristina – ZUBOK, Vladislav: The War in Ukraine. In: *Cold War History*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2023), p. 200.

really significant factor for the further erosion of a mostly dysfunctional and flawed Russian democracy, as some suggest? One should not lose sight of the fact that the instability in Russia in the 1990s, of which the current Putin regime is a product, had primarily internal roots. On the other hand, the basic principle of *realpolitik*, namely that every state has its security interests and rarely starts to perceive its years-long rival as an ultimately trustworthy partner overnight, ought not to be missed. This certainly applies to Moscow-NATO relations in the first post-Cold War decade.

In her reflections, Sarotte mentions moments when the West might have taken a more generous stance towards post-Soviet Russia. She ponders, for instance, whether debt forgiveness for Russia could have helped the country's nascent democracy, while changing the name of NATO, as Moscow requested at one point, may have deescalated the clash over the organization's expansion. The costs that Washington eventually paid for the chosen way of enlargement advanced American interests less in the long term than it may otherwise have done, Sarotte concludes. At the same time, she admits some nonnegligible benefits of bringing new members to the alliance, for the reason alone that Russia has not invaded any of them. While correlation is not causation, the security guarantees provided by Article V were hardly irrelevant to this outcome. And the events of February 2022 put this observation by the author in a new light.

Certainly, not everybody will agree with Sarotte's final notion that presents the analysed events as a story of the missed opportunities by the West to establish profound cooperation with post-Soviet Russia. Nonetheless, *Not One Inch* is a well-researched monograph based on important sources which makes it a significant contribution to international history after 1989. And we can expect that the provocative question for many as to whether a more generous approach by Washington to Moscow in the 1990s, reminiscent of US policy towards the defeated Axis powers after the Second World War, could have prevented the return of mutual hostility will be an appealing as well as relevant research topic in the years to come.

Keywords:

International Relations; Second World War; Cold War; Eastern Bloc; Post-Cold War; Soviet Union; Russia; United States; NATO; War in Ukraine