Is There Life after NATO?

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On February 10, 2024, former president Donald Trump told a story about how he had gotten the NATO allies to spend more on defense. When he was president, he said, he had warned allied leaders that if their countries did not spend what they were supposed to, the United States would not defend them. The Europeans could scarcely believe what they were hearing. The president of a major NATO ally, as Trump told the story, "stood up and said, 'Well, sir, if we don't pay and we're attacked by Russia, will you protect us?'" "You didn't pay?" he asked. "You're delinquent?" "Yes," the European answered, "let's say that happened." "No," Trump quoted himself as replying, "I would not protect you. In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You gotta pay. You gotta pay your bills. And the money came flowing in!"[1]

This was not the first time the former president had taken that line. He had, in fact, actually suggested from time to time that the United States might withdraw from Europe.[2] But for his many critics that comment about encouraging the Russians "to do whatever the hell they want" was particularly outrageous. Trump had once again thrown a brick into the chicken coop and the reaction was predictable. His comment was "treasonous," former NATO commander Wesley Clark declared.[3] A White House spokesman called his remarks "appalling and unhinged."[4] President Joe Biden himself called the Trump comment "a dangerous and shockingly, frankly, un-American signal to the world." "When America gives its word," he said, "it means something. When we make a commitment, we keep it. And NATO is a sacred commitment."[5]

Biden alluded in this context to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. According to that article, an armed attack against any of the NATO allies would be considered an attack against them all; in the event of such an attack, each of them would take "such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area." "The commitment of the United States to NATO," Biden said, "—and I've said it to you many times; I'll say it again—is absolutely clear. Article Five is a sacred commitment the United States has made. We will defend literally every inch of NATO—every inch of NATO."[6]

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[1] Donald Trump speech to rally in Conway, SC, February 10, 2024 (link to whole speech; passage is at 39:04-40:42).

[2] See Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Trump Warns NATO Allies to Spend More on Defense, or Else," *New York Times*, July 2, 2018 (link); and Eddy Wax, "Trump vowed he'd 'never' help Europe if it's attacked, top EU official says," *Politico*, January 10, 2024 (link)—the meeting in question, with the President of the European Commission at the World Economic Forum in Davos, might have been what Trump was referring to at the rally. See also Nick Robertson, "John Bolton: 'In a second Trump term, we'd almost certainly withdraw from NATO,'" *The Hill*, August 3, 2023 (link); Anne Applebaum, "Trump Will Abandon NATO," *The Atlantic,* January 2024 (link); and Phillip Gordon and Ivo Daalder, "Trump's Biggest Gift to Putin: Qualifying and Conditioning the Notion of NATO's Defense Guarantee is a Major Step on the Path to Abandoning It," *The Atlantic*, July 2018 (link).

[3] "'Treasonous': Former NATO supreme allied commander blasts Trump's NATO remarks" (CNN interview with Clark, February 12, 2024) (link) to video; comment at 1:37).

[4] White House spokesperson Andrew Bates, quoted in Lalee Ibssa and Soo Rin Kim, "Trump says he'd 'encourage' Russia 'to do whatever the hell they want' if a NATO country didn't spend enough on defense," ABCNews, February 11, 2024 (link). See also press briefing by White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, February 14, 2024 (link).

[5] Remarks by President Biden on Senate Passage of the Bipartisan Supplemental Agreement, February 13, 2024 (link).

[6] Remarks by President Biden on Senate Passage of the Bipartisan Supplemental Agreement, February 13, 2024 (link); and Remarks by President Biden Before Meeting with the Leaders of the Bucharest Nine, February 22, 2023 (link).

European leaders reacted in much the same way. "Any suggestion that allies will not defend each other," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said, "undermines all of our security, including that of the U.S., and puts American and European soldiers at increased risk." The German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, called the former president's remarks "irresponsible and dangerous." And Charles Michel, president of the European Council, said that "reckless statements on NATO's security and Art 5 solidarity serve only [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's interest. They do not bring more security or peace to the world."[7] On neither side of the Atlantic, it is fair to say, was the security establishment particularly happy with the former president's remarks.

That reaction was not hard to understand, but as an historian who has been studying the Cold War for nearly half a century now I had to wonder about some of things Trump's critics were saying. I was not sure, first of all, that Article 5 actually required the United States to use military force if a NATO ally was attacked. I also knew that threats of abandonment were often made during the Cold War period. What Trump had said was less anomalous than people seemed to think. Wasn't it possible that ignoring all this made it seem that the United States was more deeply committed to the defense of Europe than it actually was? Didn't those common arguments therefore give the impression that it was somehow improper—maybe even dishonorable—to question that commitment or even consider alternative policies? The effect might be to choke off debate on what was perhaps the most important foreign policy issue the United States will have to face in the years to come.

So my goal here is to look more closely at these issues in the light of the historical evidence. I'll begin by looking at what Article 5 was designed to do and I'll go on to talk about how that commitment has worked in practice—that is, about whether U.S. governments really thought they had a "sacred commitment" to defend every inch of NATO territory, no matter what policies the allies pursued. I'll then deal with the more fundamental assumption that the basic U.S. policy of guaranteeing the security of America's European allies is so obviously in the nation's interest that that core policy should be treated as sacrosanct, and I'll get at that issue by looking at the policy the United States has pursued in this area since 1991. The main conclusion to be drawn from that discussion is that alternative policies are very much worth considering. I'll then deal briefly with the most basic alternative we need to think about: a shift to a system in which the Europeans essentially defend themselves and the United States plays only a peripheral role in European affairs. And I'll conclude by talking a bit about the role historical analysis can and should play as we grapple with these issues.

Interpreting the Article 5 Commitment

Many observers (including Biden himself, as noted above) assume that Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty requires the United States to use military force in the event a NATO ally is attacked, but in reality the commitment that provision establishes was not nearly that strong. The parties to the treaty had, to be sure, agreed that an armed attack against one would be considered an attack against all, but they promised only to take actions which they considered necessary "to restore and maintain international peace and security"; the use of armed force was mentioned as one action they might take, but they were by no means obligated to respond that way. U.S. leaders in 1949, the year the treaty was signed, did not want to make the same mistake they thought Woodrow Wilson had made 30 years earlier. The United States did not join the League of Nations in 1919 because many senators felt that in the League system the use of force would be too automatic. The commitment this time would therefore have to be considerably looser; that was the only way to make sure that the Senate would ratify the treaty, which even in its looser form represented an extraordinary break with the past.

So government officials during the ratification hearings in 1949 stressed the point that under the treaty an act of aggression would *not* necessarily lead to war. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, for example, insisted that Article 5 did "not mean that the United States would automatically be at war if one of the other signatory nations were the victim of an armed attack." "Under our constitution," he pointed out, "the Congress alone has the power to declare war."[8] He made that point repeatedly in his testimony.[9] And when former Under Secretary of State Robert Lovett, who had played

[7] Simone McCarthy (CNN), "NATO chief says Trump's comments on abandoning alliance endangers US and European troops," February 12, 2024 (link).

[8] U.S. Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, *North Atlantic Treaty,* part 1 (Washington: GPO, 1949) (link), p. 11.

[9] Ibid., pp. 20, 28, 78-81.

a key role in negotiating the treaty, was asked whether America would be bound "to consider an attack on London, for instance, the same as an attack on our own country"—that is, whether the United States would be bound "to take such steps as we would take if one of our own cities were attacked"—his answer was very direct. "No sir, it does not," he said. "I think the language is clear on that point, because it draws the sharp rule here that if an attack occurs, we consider that as an attack on us, but the measures that we take in response to that are within the determination of this Government."[10] Those views were in line with prevailing opinion in the Senate at the time. Tom Connally of Texas, the Democrat who chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, declared, for example, that the Americans could not "be Sir Galahads"—they could not "plunge into war" every time they heard a gun fired "and take sides without knowing what we are doing and without knowing the issue involved."[11]

And U.S. leaders often took the line, both in public and in private, that the west European countries would eventually be primarily responsible for their own defense. When Acheson, for example, was asked during the ratification hearings whether the United States would station "substantial numbers of troops" in Europe on a "more or less permanent" basis, his reply was unambiguous: "The answer to that question, Senator," he said, was a "clear and absolute 'No.'"[12] That remained the basic Truman administration position for over two years, even after it was decided at the end of 1950 to send a large American force to Europe and to appoint a very prestigious American general—Dwight Eisenhower—as commander of an integrated NATO force. Acheson, in fact, was still taking the line in June 1951 that in the long run it was "probably neither practical nor in best interests of Europe or US that there should be a US Commander in Europe or substantial numbers of US forces on Continent."[13] He changed his mind on that point a month later, but when Eisenhower came in as president in January 1953, the original policy returned with a vengeance. The new president was determined to build up Europe—and by that he meant continental western Europe—into a "third great power bloc" in world affairs, able to defend itself without direct American support. As Eisenhower put it in early 1951 soon after he went over to Europe to take command of the allied forces, "there is no defense for Western Europe that depends exclusively or even materially upon the existence, in Europe, of strong American units. The spirit must be here [in Europe] and the strength must be produced here. We cannot be a modern Rome guarding the far frontiers with our legions if for no other reason than that these are *not*, politically, *our* frontiers. What we must do is to assist these people [to] regain their confidence and get on their own military feet."[14]

Eisenhower's basic policy as president was, in fact, rooted in that kind of thinking, and it was only in January 1961, after John Kennedy succeeded him, that U.S. policy in this area shifted. As the Kennedy people saw it, the problem with the Eisenhower concept was that—given that a truly federal Europe, a true pooling of sovereignty, was not in the cards—a free-standing Europe would have to include a strong, and that meant a nuclear, West German state, since a non-nuclear Germany could never stand up, on its own, to a great nuclear power like the USSR. Eisenhower's moves in that direction—the former president was *in favor* of Germany acquiring nuclear weapons—had alarmed the Soviets and had

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[10] Ibid., p. 277.

[11] Quoted and discussed in Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1969) (link), p. 282. Connally's remark was widely quoted at the time. See, for example, "Foreign Relations: Taking Sidess," *Time Magazine*, February 28, 1949 (link). The comment was originally made on the floor of the Senate. See *Congressional Record*, Senate, February 14, 1949, p. 1166 (link). The basic point here, that the treaty commitment was rather loose, was understood by informed public opinion at the time. According to one well-regarded poll done in April 1949, of the two-thirds of a sample who had heard or read about the North Atlantic treaty, only 33% thought it required the United States to "go to war, fight, defend them" in the event one of America's treaty partners was attacked. Most of the other respondents believed it only required the country to take lesser measures in such a case. See Thomas W. Graham, *American Public Opinion on NATO, Extended Deterrence, and Use of Nuclear Weapons: Future Fission?* (Cambridge MA: Kennedy School Center for Science and International Affairs, 1989), p. 115.

[12] Quoted in Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (link), p. 85.

[13] Acheson to Bruce, June 28, 1950, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1951, vol. 3, part 2, p. 802 (doc. 437) (link). Text slightly changed to give full rather than abbreviated words.

[14] Eisenhower to Bermingham, February 28, 1951, Louis Galambos et al., eds., *Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, vol. 12 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 76-77. Emphasis in original text. On these issues, see also Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 119-22 and 147-57.

led them to provoke the great Berlin Crisis in November 1958. And a solution to the Berlin problem, Kennedy felt, meant a deal with Russia; a key part of that deal was that the West (meaning essentially the United States) would keep Germany non-nuclear. German power would be contained in a system dominated by the United States. But what that meant was that America had to remain in Europe on a more or less permanent basis, especially since with Germany unable to stand up to Russia on her own, there had to be some other counterweight to Soviet power in Europe, and only the United States could provide it.

So by 1961 the U.S. government found itself committed to the defense of Europe. That system had come into being not because the Americans had suddenly realized they had signed a treaty in 1949 which had created that kind of obligation. It came into being because U.S. leaders had come to see that there could be no purely European solution to the European security problem, and that the Americans were therefore stuck in Europe, whether they wanted to be there or not. But given that they were stuck there, they felt that had the right, in return, to basically set policy for the West as a whole—at least in the areas that really mattered. As McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security advisor, put it: "We are bound to pay the price of leadership. We may as well have some of its advantages."[15]

So it is somewhat misleading to view the U.S. commitment to Europe in essentially legal terms. In fact, from a purely legal point of view there was much more wiggle room within the NATO system than people seem to realize. Trump is often criticized for a comment he made when, as president, Article 5 was explained to him. "You mean," he said, "if Russia attacked Lithuania, we would go to war with Russia? That's crazy!"[16] But during the ratification hearings in 1949 John Foster Dulles, already a major figure in the foreign policy community, seemed to think that a limited military action on the part of the enemy would not necessarily trigger a war. "I would think," he said, "that if 500,000 Soviet troops marched into Norway and if the President were to try to send American troops to Norway to try to drive them out, he ought to have his head examined."[17] It was thus taken for granted when the treaty was adopted that the issue of what each ally would do if another was attacked would have to be dealt with in the light both of military realities and of domestic political realities at the time.

Some remarks Biden made as a senator in 1995 and 1997 are of particular interest in that context. The American people, he felt, just did not understand why the United States was still spending so much to defend Europe, now that the Soviet threat was a thing of the past. People could not understand why the Europeans, given how wealthy they now were, could not defend themselves. "There was difficulty in maintaining support for" NATO, he said, even in its present form. He wondered, therefore (in Senate hearings in 1995), whether his fellow citizens would be willing to take on the additional burden of defending new members in the east:

> Do you think that the American people are ready to guarantee a nuclear umbrella for Budapest? . . . Do you think the American people are willing to use nuclear force to sustain Ukraine if Ukraine and Russia are in a conflict?[18]

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[15] Bundy outline for Kennedy's talk to the NSC, January 17, 1962, U.S. Declassified Documents Online, doc. no. CK2349318930.

[16] Kim Darroch, *Collateral Damage: Britain, America, and Europe in the Age of Trump* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020), p. 201. The Trump people, moreover, are now well aware of the point "that the language in Article 5 is flexible and does not require any member to respond with *military* force." Michael Hirsh, "Trump's Plan for NATO Is Emerging: Trump advisers envision a 'radical reorientation' in which Washington takes a back seat to Europe — and cuts a deal with Putin over Ukraine," *Politico Magazine*, July 2, 2024 (link).

[17] U.S. Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, *North Atlantic Treaty*, part 1 (link), p. 373.

[18] U.S. Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, *NATO's Future: Problems, Threats, and U.S. Interests* (Washington: GPO, 1996), pp. 89-91 (link). That view, incidentally, was in line with what many polls conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations revealed about public feelings on this general issue (link for links to surveys for 1974-2022). At one point (1974) only 39% of respondents favored U.S. military involvement even "if Western Europe were invaded" (link, p. 18). As the editors of the Chicago Council report presenting the results of the 2014 survey noted, since that organization's first survey was conducted in 1974, respondents had "consistently expressed reluctance to use military force to solve international problems"; that skepticism, they added, "persists today, with little public support for military intervention in Ukraine in the event of Russian invasion (30%)" or in other cases. Chicago Council on Global Affairs

His skepticism was palpable. He clearly believed, at least as matters then stood, that the country would not support going to war for eastern Europe, and he also thought that without public support the U.S. government might not be able to use force if one of the countries there was attacked. The lesson he took away from the Vietnam War, he pointed out, was that a foreign policy could not be maintained "without the informed consent of the American people," and as matters now stood the American people as a whole was simply not willing to go to war for the sake of eastern Europe. And popular skepticism about the NATO commitment, in his view, was entirely understandable. People resented the fact that America was spending so much to protect Europe when the Europeans were perfectly capable of providing for their own defense: why couldn't "the Europeans take care of themselves? Their GDP is larger than ours. Their population is larger than ours." "Why do we have to be involved?"[19] The implication was that the United States, in practice, might not be willing to go to war to defend the NATO allies no matter what—especially if they were not seen as carrying their fair share of the defense burden.

The Commitment in Practice

During the Cold War, U.S. presidents certainly did not act as though the country had a "sacred commitment" to defend NATO Europe, no matter what policies the allies pursued. Practically every U.S. administration at that time, in fact, at one point or another threatened not to defend the Europeans, if they did not do what the American government wanted in some particular area. In September 1950, for example, Acheson told America's two most important European allies, Britain and France, that the United States would not send substantial forces to Europe—that is, that it would not defend western Europe on the ground—unless they agreed to permit West Germany to rearm, and, indeed, unless they agreed to accept German rearmament right away. The American government, he told them, needed "to have an answer now on the possible use of German forces" in the defense of western Europe.[20]

The Eisenhower administration also tried to get the Europeans to create a system that would allow them to defend themselves—and would thus make it possible for the United States to withdraw its own forces. It therefore very much wanted in its first years in office to move ahead with the creation of the European Defense Community; the French, who had originally come up with the idea, were now dragging their feet; and to overcome French obstruction Dulles, now Secretary of State, famously threatened in December 1953 to conduct an "agonizing reappraisal of basic United States policy." Seven months later, he told the French prime minister that:

> public sentiment in the United States was reaching a point where we could no longer tolerate indefinite delay on French action. A hornets' nest of trouble would be stirred up if German rearmament had to be arranged without [a European Defense Community]. Indeed, if that actually happened, all further U.S. aid to NATO would be cut off.[21]

Those threats, of course, were never actually carried out. But throughout his time in office, Eisenhower very much disliked the fact that the defense of Europe was based, to such an extraordinary degree, on American military power. The Europeans, he felt , should be "ashamed" that they were so dependent on the United States for protection.[22] And

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(Dina Smeltz and Ivo Daalder with Craig Kafura), "Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment" (2014), p. 3 (link); see also the polling data reported there on p. 29.

[19] U.S. Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, *The Debate on NATO Enlargement* (Washington: GPO, 1998) (link), p. 20.

[20] Minutes of foreign ministers' meetings, September 12-13, 1950, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [FRUS], 1950 series, vol. 3 (Washington: GPO, 1977), pp. 1192, 1208 (link to September 12 meeting; link to September 13 meeting). On this extraordinary episode, see Christopher Gehrz and Marc Trachtenberg, "America, Europe, and German Rearmament, August-September 1950," *Journal of European Integration History* 6, no. 2 (December 2000) (link).

[21] National Security Council meeting, July 15, 1954, U.S. Declassified Documents Online, doc. no. CK2349133126, p. 11.

[22] Eisenhower-Spaak meeting, November 24, 1959, FRUS, 1958-60 series, vol. 7, part 1, p. 521 (link).

he resented the fact that as a result the United States had to spend so much on the defense of the NATO area. The Europeans, he said in 1959, were close to "making a sucker out of Uncle Sam."[23]

Under Kennedy as well, the U.S. government used the threat of withdrawal to force a key ally into line. In January 1963, with French president Charles de Gaulle's veto of British admission into the Common Market and with the signing of a friendship treaty between France and West Germany eight days later, it seemed that the continentals were forming a bloc with a distinct anti-American edge. U.S. leaders were livid and made it clear to their German counterparts that if they wanted continued U.S. protection, they would have to change course. And the German government gave way. The treaty with France was amended unilaterally to emphasize the Federal Republic's continuing commitment to the alliance with the United States. West Germany was also more or less forced to sign the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, thus, in effect, accepting a non-nuclear status—by now a key U.S. goal. And German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer—the great champion within Germany of the policy American leaders objected to—was soon forced from power.[24]

The U.S. government also took a tough line with its European allies after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war. By early 1974, Henry Kissinger, by that point the principal maker of American policy, had come to feel that the French government, in particular, was "pursuing a more active anti-US policy in the Middle East than the Russians."[25] It was far too pro-Arab for the U.S. government's taste. Kissinger also objected to the policy other major allied powers were pursuing in this area. He therefore decided to make it clear to the main European allies that they were putting their alliance with the United States at risk. The Europeans, he said, had to be made to "recognize the abyss before which they stand."[26] He told the French ambassador that the Europeans had behaved "not as friends but as hostile powers," and that his government was going to reassess its relationship with the allies in the light of their behavior in this area.[27] He also took various steps designed to give the Europeans the impression that the U.S. commitment to NATO was weakening. He instructed U.S. officials, for example, to stop "the compulsory reassuring of the Europeans on a nuclear guarantee."[28]

The Reagan administration was also quite willing to put pressure on the Europeans—in effect, to put the security relationship at risk—to get them to go along with American policy. The main example has to do with the projected Siberian gas pipeline, which the Europeans were helping the Soviets build. The Reagan team thought it made little sense for the West to help the Soviets earn what they needed to import technologically-advanced equipment by exporting natural gas. A stronger Soviet economy meant a stronger Soviet military and therefore higher U.S. defense budgets. The U.S. government therefore wanted the allies to go along with what it referred to in internal documents (but not openly) as its "economic warfare" policy.[29]

The crackdown, at the end of 1981, on forces within Poland that threatened its Communist regime's hold on power—and especially on the trade union Solidarity—gave the administration a chance to put that policy into effect. President Reagan himself told the NSC that if the Communists did not ease up on Solidarity, then America would "invoke

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[23] Eisenhower-Norstad meeting, November 4, 1959, FRUS 1958-60, 7(1):498 (link).

[24] See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 370-77.

[25] Kissinger telephone conversation with John McCloy, February 8, 1974, 11:10 a.m., U.S. Department of State Electronic Reading Room, Kissinger Transcripts series (link).

[26] Kissinger meeting with Rusk, Bundy, McCloy, et al., November 28, 1973, pp. 29, 31, Digital National Security Archive, item no. KT00928.

[27] Kissinger-Kosciusko-Morizet meeting, October 25, 1973, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 98, doc. 75, pp. 2-3 (doc. dated Oct. 26) (link).

[28] Kissinger, in Secretary of State's staff meeting, November 27, 1973, pp. 1, 16, Digital National Security Archive, item no. KT00927. For more on this issue, see Marc Trachtenberg, "The French Factor in U.S. Foreign Policy during the Nixon-Pompidou period, 1969-1974," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2011) (link), pp. 45-50.

[29] See, for example, "Statement of Options: Controls on Export to the USSR of Oil and Gas Equipment and Technology," attached to Lenz to Allen, November 9, 1981, NSC Meeting File, file for October 16, 1981, NSC meeting, NSC 00023 (1 of 3) (link), f. 38, and Pipes to Bailey, July 7, 1981, Matlock Files, box 30, "Pipeline USSR (2)" (link), f. 19, both in Ronald Reagan President Library, Simi Valley, CA.

sanctions (against the Soviet Union) and those (of our Allies) who do not go along with us will be boycotted, too, and will be considered to be against us." And he was not just thinking of using economic threats to force the European allies and Japan into line. The allies would be told "that if they don't go along with us, we let them know, but not in a threatening fashion, that we may have to review our Alliances."[30]

As it turned out, no explicit warning of that sort was actually given, but the U.S. government did forbid European subsidiaries and licensees of American firms from honoring contracts relating to the pipeline. It also imposed sanctions on those companies for defying those orders, even when they were ordered by the European governments to do so. European leaders, however, decided not to retaliate with sanctions of their own against U.S. firms. They understood that to enter into a trade war would put their security relationship with the United States at risk; they therefore preferred to work out arrangements with Washington that both sides could live with. So the prospect of a weakening of the U.S. commitment did, in the final analysis, have a major, albeit indirect, impact on the policy of America's European allies during this period as well.[31]

And it was not just the U.S government that interpreted the Article 5 commitment fairly loosely. Many commentators have made much of the fact that Article 5 was invoked formally after the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington. This, it was suggested, proved how much the United States had benefited from the NATO treaty. "I would remind Trump and all those who would walk away from NATO," Biden himself said, "Article 5 has only been invoked once—just once in our NATO history—and it was done to stand with America after we were attacked on 9/11. We should never forget it."[32] And it is of course true that practically every member of the alliance sent troops to fight alongside U.S. forces in Afghanistan. But a slightly larger number of non-members also sent troops. Even Russia itself supported the operation in important ways, especially in the first few months.[33] It is therefore hard to see how NATO membership, and in particular the members' legal obligations under Article 5, made much of a difference in these decisions.

More generally, in dealing with Arab terrorism, the allies felt relatively free to go their own way. In 1986, for example, Libyan agents set off a bomb in a Berlin discotheque frequented by off-duty American military personnel. More than 200 people, including at least 50 Americans, were injured, and two U.S. soldiers were killed. The U.S. government launched a retaliatory raid on Libya with aircraft based in Britain, but two NATO allies, France and Spain, refused to permit the aircraft to fly over their territory, making it much harder to conduct the raid. Most European leaders, in fact, opposed the operation.[34]

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[30] NSC meeting, December 21, 1981, p. 7, NSC Executive Secretariat Meeting Files, NSC 00033, posted on Jason Saltoun-Ebin's *Reagan Files* website (link).

[31] There are many accounts of this affair, including one written by the current Secretary of State when he was an undergraduate at Harvard: Antony Blinken, *Ally Versus Ally: America, Europe, and the Siberian Pipeline Crisis* (New York: Praeger, 1987). See also Michael Mastanduno, *Economic Containment: CoCom and the Politics of East-West Trade* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 247-63; Bruce Jentleson, *Pipeline Politics: The Complex Political Economy of East-West Energy Trade* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) (link), pp. 172-214; and George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993) (link), pp. 135-44.

[32] Remarks by President Biden on Senate Passage of the Bipartisan Supplemental Agreement, February 13, 2024 (link).

[33] See, for example, Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 65-66 (for the initial period) and pp. 219-20 and 231 (for cooperation in later years).

[34] For the European response, see Bernard Gwertzman, "U.S. Called 'Close' to 'Final' Decision on Role of Libya," *New York Times*, April 12, 1986, p. 1; James Markham, "Kohl Warns Against a Strike," *New York Times*, April 12. 1986, p. 4; E.J. Dionne, "U.S. Disregarded Warnings of Allies, Italian Says," *New York Times,* Apr 15, 1986, p. A13; E.J. Dionne, "West Europe Generally Critical of U.S.," *New York Times,* Apr 16, 1986, p. A16; and James Markham, "Libya Raids: Behind Allies' Reaction," *New York Times,* April 25, 1986, p. A6. See also Charles Cogan, "The Response of the Strong to the Weak: The American Raid on Libya, 1986," *Intelligence and National Security* 6, no. 3 (July 1991), and George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993), p. 687.

That attitude was not entirely new. From 1970 to 1981, according to the former head of France's equivalent of the CIA, the French government, for example, had a tacit understanding with certain terrorist groups that "terrorists operating out of French territory, even targeting [France's] European allies, would not be disturbed, provided no operation took place in France."[35] The "sanctuarisation" policy, as it was called, broke down in large part because the terrorists themselves violated the understanding. But the "sanctuarisation" policy itself, in effect for more than a decade, scarcely reflected a deep commitment on the part of the French government to the basic principle of allied solidarity—to the idea, that is, that an attack on one was an attack on all.

And it was not just the French who did not take the principle of Article 5 solidarity particularly seriously. Even in more recent years European publics in general have shown a certain unwillingness to use force if one of the NATO allies is attacked; that attitude seems to be based on the belief that the United States would carry the defense burden no matter what policy they pursued. A number of polls conducted in Europe by the Pew Research Center have been quite revealing in this regard. The following table sums up the results of a survey conducted in 2019:

Figure 1

More in NATO countries say the U.S. would use military force to defend an ally from Russia than say that their country should do the same

% who say if Russia got into a serious military conflict with one of its neighboring countries that is our NATO ally, ___ to defend that country

	Our country should use military force	The U.S. would use military force	*Diff*
	%	%	
Italy	25	75	***+50***
Greece	25	65	***+40***
Spain	41	72	***+31***
Germany	34	63	***+29***
Slovakia	32	57	***+25***
UK	55	73	***+18***
France	41	57	***+16***
Turkey	32	46	***+14***
Canada	56	69	***+13***
Poland	40	47	***+7***
Hungary	33	39	***+6***
Lithuania	51	57	***+6***
Czech Rep.	36	41	+5
Netherlands	64	68	*+4*

Note: Statistically significant differences in **bold**. U.S, Bulgaria, Russia and Ukraine not included.
Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q24 & Q25.
"NATO Seen Favorably Across Member States"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

[35] Alexandre de Marenches and David Andelman, *The Fourth World War: Diplomacy and Espionage in the Age of Terrorism* (New York: Morrow, 1992) (link), p. 198. This is an "updated and adapted" version of Alexandre de Marenches and Christine Ockrent, *Dans le secret des princes* (Paris: Stock, 1986) (link); see esp. pp. 280-81. Marenches's account is confirmed by many other sources. See, especially, Edwy Plenel, "La France et le terrorisme: la tentation du sanctuaire," *Politique étrangère* 51, no. 4 (1986) (link), p. 931; and Jeremy Shapiro and Bénédicte Suzan, "The French Experience of Counter-terrorism," *Survival* 45, no. 1 (2003), pp. 69-71 (link).

Much the same picture emerged from surveys Pew conducted in 2015 and 2017. As Bruce Stokes, one of the Pew analysts, put it in an article in *Foreign Policy* commenting on the 2015 findings, "a worrying percentage of European publics don't want to honor the fundamental tenet of the Atlantic alliance."[36]

None of this is really surprising. On the one hand, it was natural that the Europeans should want the United States to do the heavy lifting (as long as the U.S. government was willing to do so), especially since the alternative of a free-standing Europe (which would necessarily include a strong Germany) was not particularly attractive. On the other hand, the Americans felt that since they were carrying most of the burden, they had the right to set policy for the West as a whole, and they were often tempted to take advantage of the fact that the Europeans were so dependent on the United States to get their allies to follow America's lead. U.S. governments certainly understood that too strong a commitment was a source of weakness: they understood, that is, that the more absolute their commitment, the less leverage they would have over their allies. If the United States was going to defend them in any event, the allies would calculate, why should they give the Americans what they wanted? So the U.S. commitment had to be less than total if the American government was to have any influence at all, and U.S. leaders, in fact, often tried to use the leverage that less-than-total commitment gave them when they wanted to set policy for the alliance as a whole.

So it seems that much of the criticism directed against what Trump had said about NATO was excessive. There was never any "sacred commitment" to defend NATO Europe: Article 5, that is, did not oblige the United States to go to war with Russia if an ally was attacked. And the whole idea that until Trump came along the United States had never questioned its commitment to defend the Europeans and had never threatened the allies with abandonment is not supported by the historical evidence.[37]

But why does this matter? It is not just a question of getting the history right as a kind of end in itself. It matters because these historical claims have a certain political content. It is commonly believed that NATO has kept the peace for 75 years; that America has benefited enormously from its alliance with the Europeans; and that it is absurd for anyone to view the alliance as a burden. One American expert's view is typical: "we wouldn't have the position of global leadership that we do if it wasn't for our NATO allies and our commitment to European security."[38] Those views are very strongly held—they are essentially taken as basic articles of faith—and the argument about America's "sacred" Article 5 commitment is in line with that general way of looking at things. It suggests that the United States is so deeply, so unconditionally, committed to the defense of Europe that it can never pull back, and, indeed, that it would be dishonorable to even think of doing so. It thus helps fend off criticism of the current policy.

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[36] Bruce Stokes, "NATO's Rot from Within," *Foreign Policy*, August 6, 2015 (link); the phrase quoted was the subtitle of that article. The survey also showed, Stokes wrote, that while 69% of Republicans stood "ready to go to a NATO ally's defense," "only 47 percent of Democrats support[ed] fulfilling America's Article 5 commitment." For the Pew studies: see Pew Research Center (Katie Simmons, Bruce Stokes and Jacob Poushter), "NATO Publics Blame Russia for Ukrainian Crisis, but Reluctant to Provide Military Aid," June 10, 2015 (link; link to pdf), pp. 6 and 9; Pew Research Center (Moira Fagan), "NATO is seen favorably in many member countries, but almost half of Americans say it does too little," July 9, 2018 (link) (for the 2017 survey results); and Pew Research Center (Moira Fagan and Jacob Poushter), "NATO Seen Favorably Across Member States: Many in member countries express reservations about fulfilling Article 5's collective defense obligations," February 9, 2020 (link; link to pdf), pp. 5-6, 11 (for chart on "Publics in NATO countries express reluctance on Article 5 obligations"), 12 (for chart on "Changing views on whether their country should intervene in a conflict between Russia and a NATO ally), and 14-15 (for the 2019 survey results; the table copied into the text is on p. 14). Public opinion polls, of course, have to be used with some care. For two terrific books on the subject, see George Bishop, *The Illusion of Public Opinion: Facts and Artifacts in American Public Opinion Polls* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), and David W. Moore, *The Opinion Makers: An Insider Exposes the Truth behind the Polls* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008). Note also Moore's review of Page and Bouton's *Foreign Policy Disconnect*, in *Public Opinion Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (Fall 2007), pp. 471-75.

[37] See, for example, the Biden campaign advertisement, "Walk Away" (February 16, 2024) (link). "Every president since Truman," the narrator says, "has been a rock-solid supporter of NATO, except for Donald Trump."

[38] Kathleen McInnis (identified as "a NATO expert who currently works as a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies"), interview on National Public Radio's program *All Things Considered*, February 11, 2024 (link).

So the real issue here has to do with those fundamental beliefs about how important the NATO alliance is—about how important it is to make sure that the United States remains a European power. Those beliefs, as I say, are both widespread and strongly held. And that explains, at least in part, why many people reacted to Trump's comments the way they did. But not everyone thinks America's NATO policy has been such a phenomenal success. That policy, especially in the form it took in the post-Cold War period, has certainly had its share of critics. A number of serious scholars and well-informed observers, in fact, feel the policy the United States has pursued in Europe in the whole period after 1991 has been deeply misguided. Some of them, moreover, are convinced that recent events, especially the war in Ukraine, have revealed how bankrupt that policy is.[39]

The United States and European Security after the Cold War

The basic issue here therefore turns on one key question: what are we to make of America's whole policy toward Europe since 1991? That policy, it is important to remember, was not what Reagan had in mind when he left office in 1989. His aim, as he had laid it out years before becoming president, was to demonstrate to the Kremlin "that in an all out race our system is stronger"; they would then sooner or later "give up the race as a hopeless cause"; and when that happened "a noble nation believing in peace extends the hand of friendship and says there is room in the world for both of us."[40]

But the Reagan policy, as some former Soviet officials bitterly note, was abandoned by his successor, George H. W. Bush.[41] That president and his main advisors, especially his national security advisor General Brent Scowcroft, thought of Reagan as a romantic, a dreamer.[42] They saw themselves, on the other hand, as hard-headed realists who had not been taken in by the illusions that the reformist Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, was spinning. Gorbachev, in their view, was a kind of wolf in sheep's clothing—despite all the rhetoric, he remained a Communist at heart. They believed that his ultimate goal, as Scowcroft put it, was a "rejuvenated and reinvigorated Soviet Union," a country which might well still pose a threat to the West. They were therefore pleased when Gorbachev's policies failed. To be sure, they had often expressed support for the last Soviet leader and for what he was trying to do, and they very much wanted him to remain in power as long as possible. But this was because they calculated that his policies (unintentionally, of course) were "undermining what kept [the Soviet system] together"—and it was good, in their view, that that was happening, because the United States, as Scowcroft put it, "would be better off with a broken-up Soviet Union." Scowcroft, in fact, thought the Bush administration deserved credit for helping to bring about the collapse of the USSR. His "initial reaction to the

[39] See, for example, Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014) (link), esp. pp. 24-68; Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018), esp. pp. 7, 32-33, 64, and 266-67; Stephen Walt, "Liberal Illusions Caused the Ukraine Crisis," foreignpolicy.com, January 19, 2022 (link); John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion : Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), esp. pp. 171-79; and "John Mearsheimer on why the West is principally responsible for the Ukrainian crisis," *The Economist*, March 19, 2022 (link). Note also Jack Matlock, "I was there: NATO and the origins of the Ukraine crisis," *ResponsibleStatecraft.org*, February 15, 2022 (link).

[40] Ronald Reagan, "Are Liberals Really Liberal" (c. 1963), in Kiron Skinner et al., *Reagan in His Own Hand* (New York: Free Press, 2001), p. 442 (link).

[41] See especially Anatoly Adamishin, "The End of the Cold War: 30 Years On" (link), in Daniel Hamilton and Kristina Spohr, eds., *Exiting the Cold War, Entering a New World* (Washington: Foreign Policy Institute, 2019) (link).

[42] See, for example, Jeffrey Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017) (link), p. 84. Most people in the American national security community took a particularly dim view of Reagan's ideas about nuclear weapons. Scowcroft, for example, characterized the U.S. proposal at the Reykjavik summit in 1986 to do away with ballistic missiles as "insane." See Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 51 (link).

Soviet flag being lowered from the Kremlin for the last time," he wrote, was "one of pride in our role in reaching this outcome." The U.S. government, he said, "had worked very hard to push the Soviet Union in this direction."[43]

The Bush administration chose, in particular, not to help the Gorbachev regime make the transition to a market economy—at least not in any major way. Some well-known figures in the West—most notably former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and Jack Matlock, the U.S. ambassador in Moscow until 1991—thought a more generous policy was in order. They were convinced that Gorbachev and his supporters truly wanted to transform the whole Soviet system—that they genuinely wanted their country to rejoin the civilized world—and that the United States and its allies should do whatever they could to help them reach that goal. This did not mean, of course, that they were in favor of simply writing a blank check. But they felt that a program needed to be worked out to ease the transition, both to a flourishing market economy and to a liberal democratic political order, the two sides of the policy being viewed as mutually reinforcing. And they felt that the Western countries should provide whatever assistance was required, in line with that program, to help the Soviet Union become that kind of country.[44] But the Bush administration took a very different view. The USSR, as the president himself often pointed out, was still spending vast amounts on defense. Soviet military forces were still a major threat; their missiles were still aimed at American targets; and the Soviets were still providing billions of dollars of aid to countries like Cuba.[45] The United States, Bush thought, could scarcely provide a massive amount of assistance to a country that was using its own resources that way. And he simply did not view the Soviet Union, even under Gorbachev, as a friendly power. "As long as Soviet missiles are aimed at the United States," he told German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, "I know who the enemy is." And this was in July 1991, just a few months before the final Soviet collapse in December.[46]

What is extraordinary is that that tight-fisted policy was continued even when a new pro-Western regime under Boris Yeltsin came to power in Russia at the end of 1991. Seeing democracy take root in that country was simply not a top priority for the U.S. government. By the end of the Bush period American leaders had, in fact, decided to bring at least some of the Soviet Union's former allies in eastern Europe into NATO, despite the fact that Russian leaders clearly disliked the idea—and despite the fact that U.S. Secretary of State James Baker had told Gorbachev in February 1990 that, if the Soviets allowed a reunified Germany to remain in NATO, and if U.S. troops remained in that country, the alliance's jurisdiction would not move "one inch to the east." It is, of course, often denied that any binding commitment of that sort was made, but the evidence shows that U.S. and German leaders had given clear assurances of this sort.[47]

The NATO enlargement policy was by no means dropped when Bush lost his bid for reelection in 1992. Quite the contrary: his successor, Bill Clinton, decided in late 1993 that NATO needed to move east.[48] That decision was made even though the Clinton administration was well aware of how the Russians felt about the issue. As the U.S. embassy in Moscow reported in late 1994, "hostility to early NATO expansion is almost universally felt across the domestic political

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[43] See George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf, 1998) (link), pp. 543 and 563-64; "Brent Scowcroft: 'Gorbachev Was Doing Our Work For Us'" (Scowcroft interview with Radio Free Europe), December 5, 2011 (link to transcript) (link to video, broadcast December 2, 2011); Philip Zelikow et al., interview with Scowcroft, Miller Center, University of Virginia, November 12-13, 1999 (link), pp. 73-74; and Scowcroft to Zelikow and Rice, February 27, 1995 (link), Zelikow-Rice Papers, box 1, folder 3, Hoover Institution, Stanford CA.

[44] See Jack Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995) (link), pp. 537-39 and 558-59.

[45] See, for example, Heads of Government discussion, Houston G-7 Economic Summit, July 9, 1990 (link), paras. 45 and 48, Prem 19/2945, British National Archives, Kew.

[46] Bush-Kohl meeting, July 15, 1991 (link), p. 2, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, Memcons and Telcons (link).

[47] See Marc Trachtenberg, "The United States and the NATO Non-extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?" *International Security* 45, no. 3 (Winter 2020/21) (link). On the 1992 decision to expand NATO, see Joshua Shifrinson, "Eastbound and Down: The United States, NATO Enlargement, and Suppressing the Soviet and Western European Alternatives, 1990–1992" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, nos. 6-7 (2020) (link), esp. p. 838. This whole story throws a certain light on Biden's assertion, quoted above, that "when America gives its word, it means something. When we make a commitment, we keep it."

[48] For the timing, see Strobe Talbott to Christopher, January 2, 1995, quoted in Mary Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), p. 207, and Talbott to George Kennan, February 13, 1997, Kennan Papers, box 47, folder 4, Seeley Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton NJ (link).

spectrum here."[49] And the Clinton team adopted the NATO expansion policy even though it was well aware of the assurances Gorbachev had been given in February 1990.[50] But the new administration was determined to move ahead no matter how the Russians felt and no matter what promises had been made.

The basic U.S. attitude was that if Moscow did not like the idea, too bad for them. "It's Russia that must move toward us," Strobe Talbott, a key policymaker in this area, wrote in early 1996, "toward our way of doing things." There was no need for serious compromise. "We and the Soviet Union didn't meet each other halfway," he pointed out, "and we and Russia aren't going to do so either." And if people objected that this might be "an obnoxious confirmation of our doctrine of 'exceptionalism,'" he had a ready answer: "Well, tough. That's us; that's the U.S. We are exceptional." So there was no real need to give Yeltsin and company much of anything to get them to come along. "Russia is either coming our way," Talbott thought, "or it's not, in which case it's going to founder, as the USSR did."[51] Other top Clinton administration officials felt the same way.[52] As James Goldgeier writes, the U.S government, in 1995 and into 1996, was "moving further and further down the road of dictating the outcomes."[53]

None of this passed unnoticed at the time. "We're going to cram NATO expansion down the Russians' throats, because Moscow is weak and, by the way, they'll get used to it."—that was how the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman later characterized the Clinton administration's approach to the issue.[54] That phrasing was somewhat exaggerated, since the Clinton people wanted to make what they were dishing out as easy to swallow as possible, but Friedman was clearly on to something. Clinton's defense secretary, William Perry, remembered the response he got from other officials when he had argued that Russia would be alienated by a rapid enlargement of NATO: "Who cares what they think? They're a third-rate power."[55] Even years later, key U.S. officials took the view that Russia was too weak to stand up to America. Some remarks that Biden, then serving as vice president, made in a 2009 interview with the *Wall Street Journal* were particularly striking. The gist of what he had to say was summed up in the title of the front-page article that reported his comments: "Biden Says Weakened Russia Will Bend to U.S."[56]

Those attitudes were bound to have a major impact on Russia's relations with the western world in general and with the United States in particular. And the effect was by no means positive. William Burns—formerly ambassador to Russia and currently director of the CIA—was well aware, looking back in 2019, of how profoundly the NATO enlargement policy had poisoned relations between Russia and the West. Russian leaders were convinced, he said, that in expanding NATO the West was taking advantage of their country's weakness. They believed that the promises Baker had made in 1990 were being violated; and that belief, in Burns's view, was by no means baseless. They had taken Baker "at his word," Burns said, and now felt betrayed. Their resentment, their disillusionment, their sense of grievance—all that left "a mark on Russia's relations with the West that would linger for decades." "If you wanted to understand the grievances, mistrust, and smoldering aggressiveness of Putin's Russia," Burns thought, you first had "to appreciate the

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[49] Pickering to Christopher, December 6, 1994 (link), in National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 780 (link).

[50] See Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 93 (link). Talbott had come close to recognizing the point in a book he had co-authored about the Bush foreign policy just prior to taking office. See Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993) (link), p. 185.

[51] Talbott to Secretary of State Warren Christopher, March 24, 1995, quoted in Mary Sarotte, "How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019) (link), pp. 36-37.

[52] See Sarotte, "How to Enlarge NATO," pp. 29-30, and Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, pp. 222 and 267.

[53] James Goldgeier, "NATO Enlargement and the Problem of Value Complexity," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2020) (link), p. 167.

[54] Thomas Friedman, "What Did We Expect?" *New York Times*, August 20, 2008, p. A23 (link).

[55] Quoted in Julian Borger, "Russian Hostility 'Partly Caused by West,' claims former US Defence Head," *The Guardian*, March 9, 2016 (link).

[56] Peter Spiegel, "Biden Says Weakened Russia Will Bend to U.S.," *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2009, p. A1 (link).

sense of humiliation, wounded pride, and disorder that was often inescapable in Yeltsin's"—and he clearly believed that that sense of humiliation had a good deal to do with the way Russia had been treated by the United States and its allies.[57]

Many other writers have made much the same point. Stephen Kotkin, professor emeritus of history at Princeton and one of America's most distinguished students of Russian affairs, referred, for example, in his review of Talbott's memoir to "one of the main overall consequences of the Clintonites' Russian policy: the successful inculcation of deep anti-American sentiment."[58] Clinton himself could tell, looking at the crowds during a visit to St. Petersburg in 1996, that "there was a lot of alienation, a lot of anti-American feeling there. A lot of those people were giving me the finger." And he understood that the Americans were in some measure responsible for the way Russian feelings had shifted. "We keep telling Ol' Boris," he said, "'Okay, now here's what you've got to do next—here's some more shit for your face.'"[59]

Those U.S. policies, many observers thought, were bound to lead to trouble. The NATO expansion policy was a particular source of concern. Talbott, in 1996, had the impression that "virtually everyone I knew from the world of academe, journalism and the foreign-policy think tanks was against enlargement."[60] His one-time hero George Kennan was particularly outspoken. Expanding NATO, Kennan wrote in a widely-noted op-ed piece in the *New York Times* in 1997, "would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era." It would "inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion," "have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy"; "restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations"; and "impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking."[61] A year later Kennan returned to the charge. NATO expansion, he told Friedman, "would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves." "This has been my life," he said, "and it pains me to see it so screwed up in the end."[62]

Kennan was by no means an isolated figure. In June 1997, a group of 50 prominent Americans signed an open letter to Clinton, calling the U.S.-led effort to expand NATO "a policy error of historic proportions." This group included such pillars of the right wing of the U.S. national security establishment as Paul Nitze, Richard Pipes, and Fred Iklé.[63] Matlock also signed that letter, but he had already come out strongly against NATO enlargement in testimony before two Congressional committees in 1995 and 1996. He had pointed out, in particular, that Gorbachev had been "given the most categorical assurances" about non-expansion in 1990; this was important testimony, because Matlock had actually attended the meetings at which those assurances were given.[64] And many other well-known individuals and former officials also criticized the policy.[65]

But no one in authority paid much attention to what the critics were saying. Matlock's point about the non-expansion promises was simply ignored by the senators (including Biden) who heard him make it.[66] And Clinton himself dismissed the critics' arguments out of hand. "Some are against enlargement because of the fear of provoking a nationalist

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[57] William Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for its Renewal* (New York: Random House, 2019), pp. 55-56 (for the first quotation), 84 (for the third quotation), 91, 98, and 105-11 (the second quotation is on p. 109).

[58] Stephen Kotkin, "The Bear Hug," *The New Republic* 226, no. 21, June 3, 2002 (link), p. 33.

[59] Clinton quoted in Talbott, *Russia Hand*, p. 201.

[60] Ibid., pp. 219-20.

[61] George F. Kennan, "A Fateful Error," *New York Times*, February 5, 1997, p. A23 (link).

[62] Thomas Friedman, "Now a Word from X," *New York Times*, May 2, 1998, p. A15 (link).

[63] Open Letter to President Clinton opposing NATO expansion, June 26, 1997 (link).

[64] See U.S. Congress, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *NATO's Future: Problems, Threats, and U.S. Interests*, May 3, 1995 (Washington: GPO, 1995) (link), pp. 76-86 (p. 77 for Matlock's reference to what Gorbachev had been told); and U.S Congress, House Committee on International Relations, *U.S. Policy toward NATO Enlargement*, June 20, 1996 (Washington: GPO, 1996) (link), pp. 28-32 (p. 31 for Matlock's reference to the commitment the U.S. government had made).

[65] See, for example, the examples cited in Richard T. Davies, "Should NATO Grow? A Dissent," *New York Review of Books*, September 21, 1995 (link), with a letter of support signed by a group of eighteen former U.S. officials. Davies had been the U.S. ambassador to Poland from 1973 to 1978.

[66] Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *NATO's Future: Problems* (link), esp. pp. 76-86.

response in Russia," but that, he said, was "a silly argument."[67] The critics certainly never came close to derailing NATO expansion. The first group of new members—Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic—was, in fact, admitted in 1999, well before Clinton left office. And the process continued into the 21st century. Seven new members (including three former Soviet republics) were added in 2004, two other countries were admitted in 2009, and at NATO's Bucharest summit in 2008, the alliance formally declared that Georgia and Ukraine "will become members of NATO."[68]

That declaration about Ukraine was particularly serious. "There could be no doubt," Burns wrote in his memoir, "that Putin would fight back hard against any steps" in that direction; "Ukrainian entry into NATO," he had noted at the time, was "the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin)."[69] Other former high-ranking U.S. officials take much the same line.[70] It seemed obvious that the Americans were riding roughshod over Russia's interests in that very important neighboring country. That view was supported by some extraordinary evidence that came to light in 2014 about the U.S. government's deep involvement in internal Ukrainian politics.[71]

Russian feelings about all this were quite clear, but the West—and especially the United States—seemed determined to move ahead regardless. The consequences were predictable. Indeed, they had been predicted by the many critics of the NATO enlargement policy. It is therefore hard to avoid the conclusion that the policy the United States and its allies have pursued for the last 30 years is in large measure responsible for creating the mess we find ourselves in today.[72] This was not, of course, the only factor shaping the course of events. Russian policy has obviously played an important role in the story. The point is simply that it is hard to believe that if U.S. governments had pursued a more Russia-friendly policy from 1991 on—the sort of policy that Matlock and Thatcher and Kennan and many others called for at the time—relations between Russia and the western powers would be as bad as they are today. That, at least, is the view that many critics of the current policy have come to hold.

A Post-NATO World?

The critics, therefore, can make a strong case. Other people, to be sure, take a different view. But let's just say, for the purposes of the analysis here, that the critics are basically right. What, in that case, are we supposed to do now?

If the present policy is bankrupt, it obviously needs to be changed, and various alternatives are conceivable. There can of course be no return to the NATO of 1991, but a policy of avoiding further enlargement—especially into Ukraine—is by no means out of the question. It is not clear, however, that the defenders of the present policy would be willing to accept a solution of that sort. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, for example, marked the second anniversary of the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war by declaring "Ukraine will join NATO. It is not a question of if, but of when."[73]

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[67] Clinton-Blair meeting, May 29, 1997, Clinton Digital Library (link), p. 3.

[68] Bucharest Summit Declaration, April 3, 2008 (link).

[69] Burns, *The Back Channel*, pp. 230 and 233; see also pp. 237-38 and 413. Note also John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014) (link), and Mearsheimer's lecture, "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis," University of Chicago, June 2015 (link). That lecture has gotten almost 30 million views on YouTube so far.

[70] See, especially, Thomas Graham, *Getting Russia Right* (Hoboken NJ: Polity, 2023), pp. 94-95 and 170-72. Graham had served for a number of years in the U.S. embassy in Moscow and had then dealt with Russian issues on the NSC staff from 2002 to 2007.

[71] See Anne Gearan, "In Recording of U.S. Diplomat, Blunt Talk on Ukraine," *Washington Post,* February 6, 2014 (link).

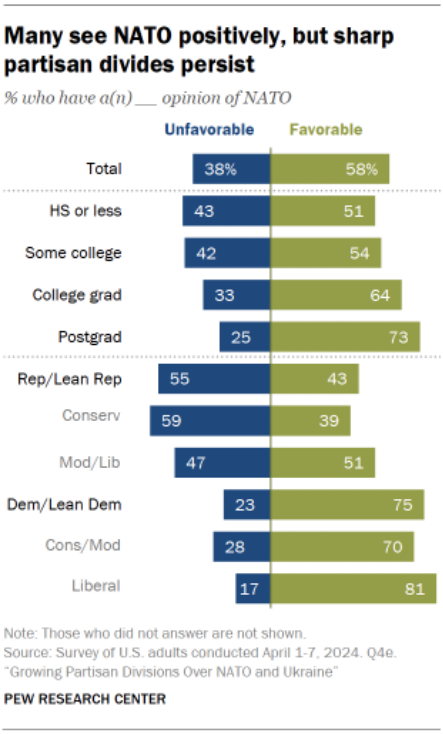
[72] This is a view, incidentally, which Trump himself now seems to hold. "Asked on a June 21 podcast whether he was willing to take NATO expansion into Ukraine off the table, Trump replied — in remarks that went largely unreported — that promising NATO membership to Ukraine had been a 'mistake' and 'really why this war started.'" Hirsh, "Trump's Plan for NATO Is Emerging" (link). For Trump's comments, see his conversation with venture capitalist (and Trump supporter) David Sacks and three of his friends, "All-in" podcast, June 20, 2024 (link), at 22:58-25:03.

[73] Isobel Koshiw and Amy Kazmin, "Nato chief says it is inevitable Ukraine will join defence alliance: Western leaders pledge to support Kyiv on second anniversary of Russia's invasion as doubts over US aid mount," *Financial Times*, February 24, 2024 (link).

U.S. leaders, including President Biden himself, take the same line.[74] So it may well be that if the present policy is to be changed, a more radical alternative might be necessary—that only stronger medicine has a chance of working. And that is one reason why it is important to think about shifting to a system where the Europeans defend themselves—where they no longer rely on the United States to protect them.

But there is a second reason why we need to think about this issue, and that's that that sort of world may come into being in any case. Donald Trump seems determined to move in that direction, and as I write this (in July 2024) the odds are that he will be reelected in November.[75] But it would be a mistake to focus too much on the views of a single individual. The Trump phenomenon needs to be seen in a broader context, and the shift in opinion in recent years among U.S. conservatives on America's role in the world has been quite striking. According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center, only 43% of U.S. adults who are either Republicans or lean Republican have a favorable view of NATO; 55% have an unfavorable view. (See Figure 2.)[76]

Figure 2



Over the past four or five years, in fact, the more conservative half of the country has become increasingly disenchanted with America's traditional foreign policy; that part of the electorate wants to focus more on problems closer to home. According to another Pew study released in March 2023, for example, 71% of Republicans and Republican-leaners agreed that the country "should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems here at home"; only 29% thought it was "best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs." Four years earlier, the gap had

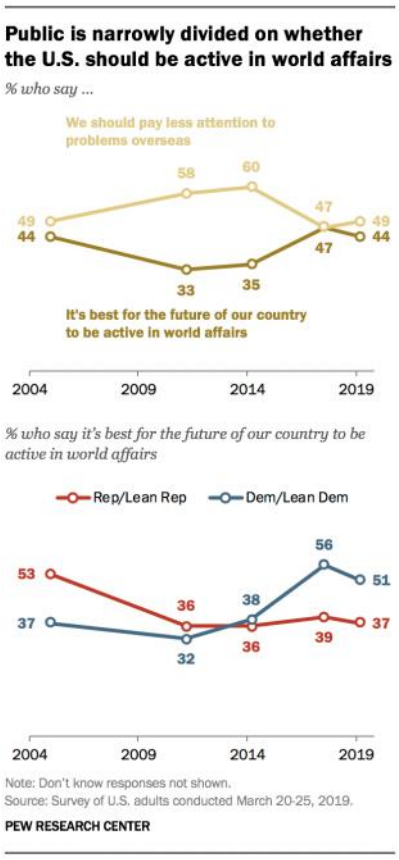
[74] See, for example, Biden-Zelenskyy joint press conferences, July 12, 2023 (link) and June 13, 2024 (link). On that latter occasion, the two leaders were commenting on the U.S.-Ukraine Bilateral Security Agreement (link), which the two countries had just signed. Other Biden administration officials have often reaffirmed America's commitment to an eventual admission of Ukraine into NATO. See, for instance, Secretary of State Antony Blinken's remarks before a meeting with the Ukrainian foreign minister, April 4, 2024 (link). For another such statement, see NSC Senior Director for Europe Amanda Sloat press gaggle, July 12, 2023 (link).

[75] Note the polling data in the RealClearPolitics compendium of general election polls (viewed May 14, 2024) (link).

[76] Pew Research Center (Richard Wike, Moira Fagan, Sneha Gubbala and Sarah Austin), "Growing Partisan Divisions over NATO and Ukraine" (May 2024) (link), p. 20.

been half as great; 40% of that part of the sample still favored an active foreign policy.[77] And even that figure represented a sharp decline from earlier levels of support. In 2004, for example, 53% of Republicans and Republican-leaners had agreed that it was "best for our country to be active in world affairs."[78] The Democrats, meanwhile, had been moving in exactly the opposite direction. By 2019, 51% of Democrats said it was best to be involved and only 37% took the other view. (See Figure 3.)[79]

Figure 3



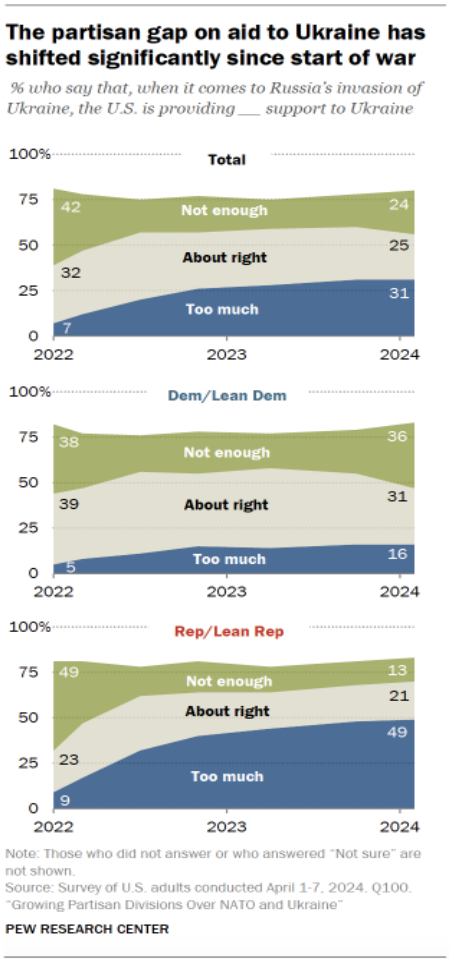
[77] Pew Research Center (Jacob Poushter, Moira Fagan, and Sneha Gubbala and Jordan Lippert), "Americans Hold Positive Feelings Toward NATO and Ukraine, See Russia as an Enemy" (May 2023) (link) (link to pdf), p. 4.

[78] Pew Research Center, "Large Majorities in Both Parties Say NATO Is Good for the U.S.: Wide partisan divide in views of U.S. compromising with allies," April 2, 2019 (link) (link to pdf), p. 3.

[79] Pew Research Center, "Growing Partisan Divisions Over NATO and Ukraine," May 2024 (link) (link to pdf), especially the chart titled "Partisan gap on views of NATO is increasing" on p. 4 in the pdf version; and Pew Research Center, "Large Majorities in Both Parties Say NATO Is Good for the U.S," April 2, 2019 (link) (link to pdf), p. 3 (for the chart reproduced in Figure 3). Attitudes on the right had thus been shifting well before Trump became a major political figure. On that point, note especially the chart titled "Conservative Republicans No Longer a Bulwark against Isolationism," in Pew Research Center, "In Shift from Bush Era, More Conservatives Say 'Come Home, America,'" June 16, 2011 (link). In absolute terms, moreover, the number of people saying the country should *not* be active in world affairs was amazingly high. Given the way the question was phrased, one would have expected a very different response. See also the chart showing how responses to this kind of question changed over time in the whole period from 1947 to 2014 in Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment," p. 7 (link). Note also the chart on p. 12 there showing the dramatic increase in the number of Republicans who said the country should "stay out of world affairs" in the whole period from 1974 to 2014 (from 21% to 40%).

The same trend was reflected in the survey data on the Ukraine and related issues. In 2015 the Republicans had been more hawkish than the Democrats on "what to do about Russia." 69% of them (but only 47% of the Democrats) had favored the use of force "to defend a NATO ally from Russia."[80] In 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 49% of Republicans and Republican-leaners thought the United States should increase its support of that latter country; 38% of Democrats and Democrat-leaners took that view in the survey. But by 2024, the pattern was very different. 36% of Democrats still thought the United States should increase its level of support, but only 13% of Republicans felt the same way. On the other hand, only 9% of Republicans in 2022 felt the United States was providing too much support; by 2024 that figure had risen to 49%. And by that point only 16% of Democrats shared that view. (See Figures 4 and 5.)[81]

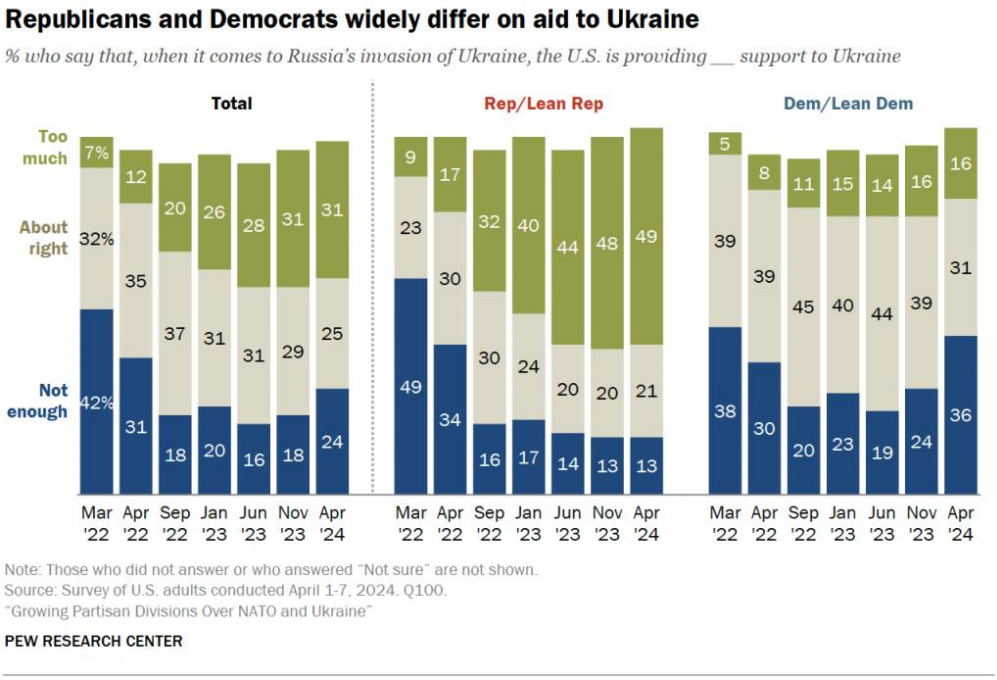
Figure 4



[80] Pew Research Center (Bruce Stokes), "Republicans and Democrats sharply divided on how tough to be with Russia" (link), June 15, 2015, chart on "Partisan Divide in U.S. on What to Do About Russia."

[81] Pew Research Center, "Growing Partisan Divisions Over NATO and Ukraine" (link) (link to pdf), especially the following charts (reproduced here): "Partisan gap on aid to Ukraine has shifted significantly since start of war" (p. 4) and "Republicans and Democrats widely differ on aid to Ukraine" (p. 13). For another straw in the wind, see the results of a poll conducted by the Eurasia Group Foundation in 2018. Even when respondents were told (incorrectly) that the NATO alliance required members to "defend each other militarily," more Republicans were against using force in the event Russia invaded Estonia, a NATO ally, than favored a military response. Eurasia Group Foundation (Mark Hannah), " *Worlds Apart: U.S. Foreign Policy and American Public Opinion* (2019) (link), p. 13.

Figure 5



To be sure, many Republican leaders still support America's traditional activist foreign policy, both in Europe and elsewhere. Ten years ago, Barry Posen began an important article by talking about "the long-standing consensus among American policymakers about U.S. grand strategy"—about how "Republicans and Democrats" still agreed "on the big picture." Both parties, he believed, felt that the "United States should dominate the world militarily, economically, and politically" and pursue what he called "a strategy of liberal hegemony."[82] And even today one can point to many prominent Republicans who still support a strategy of that sort (although most of them would not characterize it that way).[83] But there is a major debate now going on, as Ohio senator (and now vice presidential candidate) J.D. Vance put it, "between the establishment right and the populist right." "Establishment Republicans" (as the journalist Ian Ward paraphrased his views), believed "that the American empire is trending in the right direction; populist Republicans believe that the American empire is on the verge of collapse."[84] And the influence of populists like Vance is clearly

[82] Barry Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January-February. 2013) (link), p. 116. See also Posen, *Restraint*, p. 5: "Over the twenty-plus years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the foreign policy establishment has gradually converged on an activist grand strategy for the United States. There is little disagreement among Republican and Democratic foreign policy experts about the threats that the United States faces and the remedies it should pursue."

[83] See, for example, "Speaker Mike Johnson on the Threats to the US-Led World Order," address to the Hudson Institute, July 8, 2024 (link), and Robbie Gramer and Jack Detsch, "The Republican Party Grapples with Its NATO Platform: The new GOP has a love-hate relationship with the trans-Atlantic alliance," *ForeignPolicy.com*, July 9, 2024. The Republicans in Congress calling for a more modest policy, the authors point out, are still greatly outnumbered by "traditional Republican standard-bearers, such as House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul" who favor "backing Ukraine full tilt."

[84] Ian Ward, "The Grand Strategy Behind J.D. Vance's Latest Push To Kill Ukraine Aid," *Politico Magazine*, April 18, 2024 (link). The first quotation was a direct quote from Vance.

growing. When Vance, for example, entered the Senate in January 2023, he was "one of only a handful of Republicans who openly opposed U.S. financial support for Ukraine." "But since then," according to a March 2024 article on the Senator in *Politico Magazine*, "over two dozen Senate Republicans have come to share his skepticism."[85] One has the sense that the tectonic plates of American politics are moving rapidly, and that shifts in voter sentiment—closely tied to major shifts in the social composition of the two parties—will soon have a dramatic impact at the leadership level.

And given that shift in opinion among Republican voters, and given also that the Republicans may well come to power for a considerable period of time (perhaps for reasons having little to do with foreign policy), one has to reckon with the possibility that sooner or later the Europeans might have to defend themselves. But how should we feel about that? Should we be appalled by the mere prospect of an American withdrawal from Europe? Or could a world in which the Europeans provided for their own defense actually be a better world than the one we find ourselves in today?

The heart of the problem has to do not with Ukraine but with Germany, and especially with the question of whether that country should possess nuclear forces. For it has been obvious since the 1950s that the European members of NATO, taken together, have the resources to stand on their own militarily.[86] But it has also been clear that to stand up to a great nuclear power like Russia, the Europeans would have to have nuclear forces of their own. And that meant that the Federal Republic, in particular, would have to have a nuclear force under its own control; British and French nuclear forces could not provide the necessary degree of reassurance. But almost from the start, and certainly from the 1960s on, most people professionally concerned with these issues have been dead set against the idea of a German finger on the nuclear trigger; and it was clear that if Germany were to remain non-nuclear, the United States could not withdraw from Europe.[87]

This, in fact, was the basic reason why the Europeans, during the Cold War, never did develop the capability to stand on their own militarily, and, indeed, why the NATO system remained intact after the Cold War. Matlock, for example, explained in 2017 why he had thought in 1991 that NATO had to be kept in business. "We need to keep it," his thinking ran, "because we need to keep Germany under control. Germany unites—you want them loose from everything, or do you want them tied to an alliance, so they don't have an independent military? What would an independent Germany that goes nuclear do to the peace of the world two generations from now?"[88] Biden himself saw things the same way. He explained in 1997 what he thought the purpose of NATO had been. "It was not merely to contain Russia," he said. "It was to harness Germany; it was to bring stability in Europe; and it has never, never, never only been to contain Russia."[89] The implication was that the main reason NATO was still needed was that Germany still had to be "harnessed."

But such comments are rare, at least in public. Few people, either in Germany or in the other western countries, are comfortable dealing with that issue openly. And it was for that reason that U.S. officials, when explaining why NATO had to be preserved after the Cold War, pointed instead to "instability" and "uncertainty" as the new enemies that NATO would guard against. But those rationales were too weak in themselves to provide a politically viable basis for a continuing American presence on the continent. Indeed, some observers think that the expansion policy was adopted to provide a rationale for NATO's continued existence that would otherwise be missing.[90] Still, one wonders about the

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[85] Ian Ward, "Is There Something More Radical than MAGA? J.D. Vance Is Dreaming It," *Politico Magazine*, March 15, 2024 (link). This was based on a series of interviews Ward had with Vance in early 2024.

[86] Even today, the Europeans would probably be able to defend themselves in a purely conventional war. See Barry Posen, "Europe Can Defend Itself," *Survival* 62, no. 6 (2020-21), and Barry Posen, "In Reply: To Repeat, Europe Can Defend Itself," *Survival* 63, no. 1 (2021).

[87] For my take on this issue, see Marc Trachtenberg, "The United States and the German Nuclear Question under Eisenhower and Kennedy" (August 2023), to be published in a volume edited by Andreas Lutsch (link).

[88] "Jack Matlock: The US is not the Victor of the Cold War," January 19, 2016 (Valdai Club interview) (link), at 20 minutes, 40 seconds.

[89] U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *The Debate on NATO Enlargement* (link), p. 81.

[90] This issue is discussed in Jonathan Haslam, *Hubris: The Origins of Russia's War against Ukraine* (New York: Bloomsbury, forthcoming September 2024). "NATO looking eastward," Clinton himself pointed out, "will help explain the need for NATO to our domestic electorates." Clinton meeting with Italian Prime Minister Carlo Ciampi, September 17, 1993, Clinton Digital Library (link), p. 4. In the judgment of the U.S. ambassador to NATO, many of the European allies were not enthusiastic about NATO expansion, but went along with the policy because they thought expansion was needed

long-term viability of an alliance whose second most important member is so deeply mistrusted that it is not allowed to possess the only weapons that would allow it to stand up to a nuclear-armed Russia. And one wonders, therefore, how long the German nuclear problem can be avoided. If Trump is reelected and actually pulls the United States out of Europe, there is certainly no way in which it can continue to be ignored.

So when we think about a post-NATO world, we need to grapple seriously with the question of whether Germany should be allowed—indeed, encouraged and helped—to go nuclear. Most people outside of Germany, and many even inside that country, still think this is a terrible idea. But one has the sense that most non-Germans oppose the idea of a nuclearized Germany because they still deeply distrust the Germans on a visceral level; German behavior during the Nazi period was so horrifying that even the other Western countries cannot quite bring themselves to trust the Germans the same way they trust each other. Russian opposition is even deeper, since Russia suffered so much at German hands during World War II. And the Germans themselves have come to accept those attitudes as a given, and have adjusted their policy accordingly. But intelligent policy needs to be based not on visceral feelings, no matter how understandable, but on hard analysis. One therefore has to consider whether those fears about what Germany would do if it became a nuclear-armed power still have a rational basis.

For what was the whole Hitler phenomenon rooted in? It had many sources, but perhaps the most important taproot was the Social Darwinist notion that populations inevitably expand, that countries have to feed their growing populations, and that they therefore have to acquire land that could produce the food they need, since they could not count on being able to import it forever from areas under the control of foreign powers.[91] The Nazi dream of conquering and settling the Ukraine was clearly rooted in that kind of thinking. But the assumptions that that policy was based on turned out to be utterly unwarranted. The birth rate in Germany has been lower than the death rate every year since 1972; what demographers call the "natural rate of increase" has actually been negative, and population growth has been due entirely to immigration.[92] Agricultural yields, on the other hand, have increased dramatically over the last 60 years. Wheat yields, measured in tons per hectare, more than doubled in Germany during that period after having almost tripled in the previous century; they are now over seven times as large as they were in 1850. One finds much the same pattern when one looks at the data for the European Union as a whole. Europe today is not only self-sufficient in food production, but has actually become a major agricultural exporter.[93] All these changes have been quite extraordinary. What they mean is that the world that gave rise to National Socialism, and, indeed, to pre-1914 European imperialism in general, no longer exists. And that in turn means that a political system without a U.S. orderer (to use Kenneth Waltz's term) cannot be expected to work in the same dangerous way that the pre-1945 or pre-1914 system did.

So would an American withdrawal from Europe, even if it were well-managed—and that is a very big *if*—lead to a better world? The international political system is extraordinarily complex. All sorts of effects are therefore possible, and no one can tell in advance how things will sort themselves out. But one point is worth stressing. The United States—"the world's one remaining superpower," the "indispensable nation" (to use the term Madeleine Albright made famous[94])—

"to preserve vigorous U.S. interest in European security." Hunter to State Department, January 25, 1995, Clinton Digital Library (link), f. 10. The "expand or die" argument was quite common at the time. In dealing with the allies, the standard U.S. line, one well-informed reporter wrote, was that "expanding NATO will provide more political stability in central and Eastern Europe and ensure that the United States remains a power in Europe." Michael Dobb, "With Cold War Over, U.S. Policy Debate Flared," *Washington Post*, July 5, 1995, p. A1.

[91] See, for example, Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler's Weltanschauung: A Blueprint for Power* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), esp. pp. 90-92, and Ian Kershaw, *Hitler*, 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1998–2000), esp. 1:290 and 448, and 2:xli, 19-21, and 208-209. Hitler's fundamental goals, Kershaw writes (2:xli), rested on a "'world-view' that saw racial struggle and survival of the fittest as the key determinants in human history"; his "crude social-Darwinism," Kershaw says (1:448), "dictated his approach to the economy, as it did his entire political 'world-view.'"

[92] For the figures, see the Statistisches Bundesamt's website (https://www-genesis.destatis.de/genesis/online), tables for births and deaths, 1950 to the present, conveniently summarized (with additional data going back every year to 1817) in the Vital Statistics section of the "Demographics of Germany" article in Wikipedia (link).

[93] See the data in Hannah Ritchie, Pablo Rosado and Max Roser, "Crop Yields," in the *Our World in Data* website (link) and the sources given there.

[94] "If we have to use force," she said (referring to Iraq), "it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us." Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright Interview on "The Today Show" with Matt Lauer, February 19, 1998, Department of State website (link).

was, and is, able to pursue very ambitious policies. But a European system, a system in which the United States would play at most a peripheral role, would work differently. The Europeans' ambitions would be limited to what all the major component states would support. Their policy would therefore almost certainly be more moderate, more *status quo*-oriented, more purely defensive, than the policy the United States has been pursuing since 1991 and would thus pose less of a threat to Russia.[95] So there is a good chance that a European system would be more stable than the one we are now living with. The issue, at any rate, is certainly worth thinking about. "There are few things so bad," as two RAND analysts remarked many years ago, "that not thinking about them won't make them worse."[96] Indeed, the mere fact that this sort of thinking is going on might have a positive impact on everyone's policies.

And this brings me to my final point, about the role that historical analysis should play as we grapple with these issues. My claim here—in fact, my basic claim in this paper as a whole—is that it has a very fundamental role to play, and that one of the main reasons why we have to deal with the mess we now find ourselves in is that it hasn't played anything like the role it should have. The case of America's treatment of Germany at the end of and immediately after World War I comes immediately to mind. The Germans did not surrender unconditionally; they laid down their arms after they had been given certain promises and assurances—some explicit, some tacit—about how they would be treated after the war. But the victor powers, and especially the Americans, reneged on those promises—with devastating consequences, both in Germany and eventually in the western countries themselves.[97] The whole story here is not well-known. When people think of the failure of the peace of 1919 they tend to blame the British and the French; Woodrow Wilson is rarely held responsible for what happened. But his policies, and especially his refusal to honor the pre-armistice agreement, played a very important role in the story. And it might have been a good idea to keep that story in mind as U.S. policy toward Russia was being worked out after 1991. To be sure, the argument was often made that the western powers should have pursued a more generous policy toward their former Cold War rival in the 1990s; Winston Churchill's famous saying, "In Victory: Magnanimity," if often cited in this context. But a deeper historical understanding might have given the point greater force—and thus greater emotional and therefore political salience. And historical study more generally can be of real value in this context. Trying to understand, for example, why the peacemakers in 1815 were able to lay the basis for a relatively stable international system while their successors a century later failed to do so can yield important lessons about how we should deal with international politics today—and that includes the question of how, if at all, we should move to a post-NATO world.

So is there life after NATO? Of course there is. The world will not end if the United States withdraws from the alliance. The Europeans, with a combined GDP (by some estimates) roughly five times as large as Russia's, are certainly capable of defending themselves, and if America withdraws they would have little choice but to work out some system for doing

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[95] This is particularly true, since any purely European successor to NATO is bound for the foreseeable future to have a confederal, rather than federal, structure: most Europeans, one study revealed, would oppose a decision on the part of the European Union "to use military force if their own government disagreed." See Matthias Mader, Francesco Olmastroni and Pierangelo Isernia, "The Polls—Trends: Public Opinion toward European Defense Policy and NATO: Still Wanting It Both Ways?" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2020), pp. 562-63. America's own experience in the years following independence is relevant here. The system established by the Constitution enabled the country to pursue a much more muscular foreign policy than had been possible under the Articles of Confederation—and, indeed, the system was changed, in large part, to make it possible to pursue such a policy. See Max Edling, *A Hercules in the Cradle: War, Money, and the American State, 1783-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014) (link), esp. pp. 18 and 21; Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), esp. pp. 6 and 26-28; and Frederick Marks, *Independence On Trial: Foreign Affairs and the Making of the Constitution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), esp. pp. 50-51.

[96] Herbert Goldhamer and Andrew W. Marshall, with the assistance of Nathan Leites, *The Deterrence and Strategy of Total War, 1959-1961: A Method of Analysis*, RM 2301 (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1959), p. 191, quoted in David Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945-1960," *International Security* 7, no. 4 (Spring 1983), p. 59 (link).

[97] See Marc Trachtenberg, "America, Germany, and the Versailles Peace: A Reassessment," in Christian Bremen, ed., *Amerika, Deutschland und Europa von 1917 bis heute*, vol. 1 (Aachen: Edition aixact, 2022) (Festschrift for Klaus Schwabe) (2022) (link), and "The United States and the NATO Non-extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?" *International Security* 45, no. 3 (Winter 2020/21) (online version) (link), Appendix IV: "The Pre-Armistice Agreement of November 1918 and its Fate."

so. But how well the transition to a European defense system will be managed—assuming there will be a transition—is very much an open question. And the time to start thinking about it is now.