

The Transformation of NATO-Russia Relations under the Context of NATO Expansion: From Post-Cold War to the 2014 Crimea Crisis

Zhenfeng Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*Qingdao Academy, Qingdao, 266000, China*

a. georgey061213@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper will examine the transformation of NATO-Russia relations from the post-Cold War stage to the 2014 Crimea crisis. It will specify how NATO's several eastward expansions contributed to the shift of Russia's foreign policy and their bilateral relationship. The analysis will begin with the optimism the Russian side held after the Cold War and the establishment of bilateral cooperation acts such as the Basic Act and the Partnership for Peace. The paper will also analyze the color revolutions that occurred in Ukraine and Georgia, as well as the subsequent 2008 Russo-Georgian War, to examine how Russia's foreign policy has shifted during the 2000s. The paper will then shed light on the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, which ultimately ended the cooperation between Russia and NATO. Through case studies, this paper will examine the shift of Russia's foreign policy in the context of NATO's eastward expansion, which has reshaped the geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe in the past decades.

Keywords: Russia Politics, NATO-Russia Relations, NATO expansion.

1. Introduction

In February 2022, Russia initiated a "special military operation" against Ukraine, which marks the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian armed conflict that already took place in 2014. It also indicates that the previous proxy conflict has turned into a high-intensified direct military conflict [1]. The war is considered one of the most severe situations in Europe ever since World War II. In his broadcast, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared Kyiv a "neo-Nazi regime" and accused the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) of continuously expanding eastward since the beginning of the 21st century. Given the high proxy nature of the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict, it is pivotal to recognize the contribution of the shift in relations between NATO and Russia in the escalation of the conflict. This paper will examine the transition of NATO-Russia relations post-Cold War, and elaborate on how NATO's continued expansion has compressed Russia's geopolitical capital and ultimately led to the shift of Moscow's perception of the West and, Moscow's policy to the Europe and United States.

The post-Cold War era initially heralded a new partnership between Russia and the West. The establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and various bilateral frameworks, such as the NATO-Russia Basic Law, symbolized early attempts at cooperation. Later, however, NATO's decision to include former Warsaw Pact and USSR states in its subsequent expansion

created concerns on the Russian side, given that the Balkans, especially Ukraine, are essential to Russia's sphere of influence and strategic interests. The continued expansion of NATO, coupled with multiple color revolutions and the pro-western democratized administration in Ukraine and Georgia, further alerted Russia, all of which ultimately led to direct armed conflict.

This paper analyzes these separated yet interconnected events in chronological order, under the context of the transition of NATO-Russia bilateral relations. Section one will cover the initial post-Cold War optimism Moscow held to NATO and European integration from 1990 to 2004, which will focus on critical events such as the signing of the bilateral cooperations and their first expansion to the Balkans in 1999. Section two explores NATO's "big bang" expansion from 2004 to 2008, which will include the impact of color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, as well as the pro-Western administrations on Russian foreign policy. This section will also on the 2008 Bucharest Summit and the subsequent Russo-Georgian War, which will depict Russia's altered perception of the West and the ultimate shifts in military and foreign policy. The fourth section will discuss the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, including the annexation of Crimea and the impact this conflict has brought on bilateral relations. In general, this paper aims to examine the transformation of Russia's European policy, considering NATO's eastward expansion as a dominant reason.

2. Post-Cold War Optimism and Early Bilateral Relations

At the end of 1991, Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev announced the dissolution of the USSR, with it no longer existing as a sovereign state. This ended the long-term trend of East-West confrontation on the European continent. The dissolution of the USSR marked a shift between the bilateral relationship as the new Russia endorsed utterly different political systems and foreign policies. Boris Yeltsin, the first president of Russia, began to implement his liberal policies, which included economic privatization, political democratization, and reshaping relations with the West. In the early 1990s, both sides held an optimistic attitude toward each other and were willing to extend bilateral communication. In 1994, Russia was included in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) protocol initiated by NATO; in 1997, they further signed the NATO-Russia Basic Act. Both of the initiatives consolidated NATO-Russia cooperation, and it is based on these communications that they established the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Commission (NRPJC) was created. NRPJC plays roles in consultation and cooperation mechanisms between NATO and Russia [2, 3]. The Basic Act attempted to appease Russia by stating that NATO had no intention, plan, or motives to deploy nuclear weapons on new member states' territory [4].

Despite these efforts, underlying tensions began to rise. During NATO's military operations in Bosnia in 1995, Russia raised concern and rejection over the operation as they viewed NATO's actions as unilateral and in violation of international laws [5]. This event and the subsequent Kosovo conflict further strained relations between the two entities. In the late 1990s, NATO saw its first eastward expansion. In February 1991, the Visegrad Group was formed by Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia in order to promote their integration into Western Europe under the basis of participating in the EU and NATO [6]. Necessary steps were carried out, such as NATO-standard military reforms and political democratization [7]. During the Bush administration, Washington feared that the EU or other European supranational organizations would stand out and function similar as NATO in Eastern Europe and endanger the U.S. controlled NATO's influence in the region after the Cold War. The U.S. thus considered NATO expansion as a prudent strategy to solidify the Western hegemony dominated by U.S. President Clinton included NATO enlargement into his foreign policy in 1996 and extended an invitation to post-Soviet and former Warsaw Pact states to join the alliance [8]. In March 1999, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic officially became NATO states, indicating NATO's first round of eastward expansion. Moscow raised concerns and rejections towards this deal, claiming that it severely violated the consensus achieved that NATO

would not expand eastward after the unification of Germany [9]. At the final stage of Yeltsin administration, Russia's economy was dragged down by his market-oriented economy. Shock therapy was implemented, which caused severe inflation, corruption, and bureaucratic problems domestically. In addition, the failure of the first Chechen War also put the administration under tremendous pressure. As a result, despite Russia's dissatisfaction with NATO's expansion to former Warsaw Pact countries, it continues to participate in the NATO-Russia Council and still seeks bilateral cooperation and the possible economic development it brings in order to resolve domestic issues.

In 2000, Vladimir Putin was elected President of Russia, replacing Yeltsin, who had already lost public trust. He inherited a country facing major challenges, such as economic decline, oligarchic participation in politics, massive corruption, and the Chechen crisis. One of his early focuses was to continue to build stable political and economic relations with Western countries, namely the U.S. and NATO. Putin expressed his desire for Russia to join NATO to then-NATO Secretary-General George Robertson in 2000 when he first came into power [10]. Besides building stable relationships, Putin's counterterrorism policy also became one of the main goals of his first presidential term. The Putin administration thus increased its efforts to quell insurgency and counterterrorism. In 2001, Putin reached out to President Bush and offered his support for the U.S. and condemned terrorism after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. Counterterrorism, as aforementioned, is one of the main concerns of Putin's strategies, and he thus found common ground with the United States by supporting the Afghanistan war [9]. The newly established positive relationship between the U.S. and Russia would have a promising influence on NATO-Russia relationship. In 2002, this positive impact was demonstrated by the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). Both sides stated that they did not see each other as adversaries and would "jointly build a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic region based on the principles of democracy and cooperative security." NATO and Russia would cooperate in the fight against terrorism, the military, and the Afghanistan problem, according to the bilateral statement [11]. Until 2004, despite that the NATO-Russia bilateral relationship was accompanied by resistance and challenges, both sides remained confident in cooperation, with Russia's confidence in the West much greater than it is today.

3. The Shift Begins: Color Revolutions in Eastern Europe and Expansion of NATO

The period between 2003 and 2014 experienced a massive shift in the political landscape of Eastern Europe. Geopolitical shifts that occurred during this decade fundamentally changed Russia's view of the West and, in turn, its relationship with NATO. The changes began with two color revolutions occurred in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003-2004, both former Soviet states that border Russia and are, therefore, strategically important to Russia.

The 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia indicated the beginning of another wave of democratization in Russia's sphere of influence. Nonviolent protests led to the removal of President Eduard Shevardnadze as they were dissatisfied with a combination of electoral fraud, political corruption, and economic decline [3]. As a result, a pro-Western government led by Mikhail Saakashvili rose to power. Saakashvili enacted liberal policies and launched initiatives to join the EU and NATO, pushing Georgia away from Russia's traditional influence. Russia viewed this shift as a direct threat to its strategic interests and involvement in the Caucasus region. In addition, the revolutions were supported by Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governments, which raised Russian concerns about Western political institutional encirclement and ideological erosion [12]. Similarly, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 further eroded Russia's traditional sphere of influence. Massive nonviolent protests led to a re-election of the presidency, which then confirmed pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko as the president of Ukraine. The revolution was also supported by various Western entities, including NGOs and governments [2, 6]. Russia viewed these revolutions

as another Western-driven attempt to weaken its influence in its traditional sphere of influence, thereby expanding NATO's influence to Eastern Europe, even Russia's borders [13].

In the same year, NATO underwent its largest expansion to date, admitting seven new members: Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia. This expansion extended NATO's borders directly to Russia's border. Moscow viewed this move as a direct challenge to Russian security, claiming that it violated the informal assurances given to Soviet leaders in the 1990s that NATO will stop expanding to the east front again. Russia was deeply unhappy this expansion, as it placed Western military infrastructure in Baltic region that had been under Russian influence for centuries [3]. Considered in conjunction with the two color revolutions that took place at the same time, the year 2004 marked a turning point when NATO's eastward expansion became clear politically and militarily, while Russia began to reevaluate its geopolitical capital and NATO-Russia relations [4, 14].

In 2007, Putin gave a speech in which he addressed Russia's future foreign policies. Putin attacked the US's "almost unrestrained excessive use of force in international relations" as well as the US's monopoly on international relations. Putin brought up NATO's pledge to stop enlarging into new Eastern European nations. He stressed that Russia considered the eastward expansion of NATO to be a serious danger [15]. Following the Ukraine Crisis in 2022, this speech was repurposed. While some analysts interpreted it as a signposting of Putin's future plans, others, including John. J. Mearsheimer, saw it as Putin's direct alert to the West that NATO's eastward expansion poses threat to Russia's security [16].

During the Bucharest Summit in 2008, NATO announced that both Ukraine and Georgia would eventually become NATO countries [17]. This statement indicated a clear, encroaching intent to expand, which further fueled Russian concerns. Kimberly Marten believes that Russia considers NATO's expansion into the post-Soviet region to be another prominent threat to its strategic interests [18]. These kinds of promises will eventually lead to a sense of encirclement and insecurity within the Kremlin. Russia responded to these threats with both political and military strategies. Politically, Russia has tried to establish ties with European right-wing parties that oppose the EU and NATO, seeking to undermine the Western alliance. Militarily, Russia has finally shown its willingness to use necessary force to maintain its sphere of influence [12]. The Bucharest summit significantly undermined Georgia's relationship with Russia, and the subsequent 2008 war with Georgia directly reflected Russia's determination to prevent NATO from further expanding into the Caucasus. It is pivotal for Russia to maintain its regional influence, and the armed conflict sends a clear message to other post-Soviet countries about the consequences of allying with the West [2, 6].

The decade from 2004 to 2014 was thus a period of escalated tensions and strategic realignment between Russia and NATO. The color revolutions and NATO's expansionist policies reshaped Russia's perception of the West and its subsequent foreign policy changes, including initiating armed conflict. This perception would lead to subsequent conflicts in Crimea and the entire state of Ukraine.

4. The 2014 Crisis and its Aftermath

The 2014 Ukrainian conflict has caused severe consequences as the disagreements between the two sides are now becoming actual and armed. It was another major turning point in NATO-Russia relations as it completely changed the geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe and the perceptions held by both sides. This paper contends that the reason for this conflict lies in Ukraine's historical relationship with Russia and its vacillating political stance between pro-European and pro-Russian tendencies.

The conflict began with Ukraine's decision in November 2013 to suspend preparations for an association agreement with the European Union. This decision was made by then-President Viktor Yanukovich, who is a pro-Russian politician under the influence of the Russian side. However, this

decision sparked mass protests in Ukraine, known as the Euromaidan movement. The protests reached a peak in February 2014 and Yanukovich had to flee the country. Thus, a new pro-Western government in Kyiv was formed. Historically speaking, Ukraine has been a battleground of projecting both soft and hard power between Russia and the West since the dissolution of the USSR. Thus, Ukraine's incline toward the European Union and possible NATO membership was interpreted by Russia as a prominent threat to its sphere of influence and security interests, as Ukraine shared culture, history, and half of its people with Russia [3]. In March 2014, Russia annexed Crimea in order to provide support for separatist movements in eastern Ukraine, where the Russians consisted of the majority of the population. This was a strategic move to prevent or prolong Ukraine, at least the Eastern Ukraine, from fully integrating into Western institutions [12, 14].

From the Russian perspective, the Euromaidan protests and the subsequent regime changes in Ukraine are perceived as another color revolution the West is attempting to create in Ukraine so that Russian influence in neighboring countries would be undermined. Dmitry Gorenburg's analysis in "Countering Color Revolutions: Russia's New Security Strategy and Its Implications for U.S. Policy" emphasizes that Moscow view color revolutions as a form of warfare used by the West to impose regime change in strategically important regions [12]. Putin believes that these movements are part of a broader strategy to impose Western hegemony and values. Such values are in contradiction with traditional Russian values and were thus interpreted as threat worth noticing to Russia's sovereignty on an ideological level [19]. On the other hand, NATO's eastward expansion is motivated by a mission to promote democracy and security. However, as Kimberly Marten explains, Russia sees this expansion as a strategic encirclement and a betrayal of previous assurances made when the USSR gave the clearance to the unification of Germany, where they had to abandon their interest in Eastern Germany [2]. The strategic importance of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO and their potential membership identity are major concerns for Russia. Combining all these factors, the annexation of Crimea, coupled by the support of separatist movements in eastern Ukraine might give us the perceptions Moscow now holds of the West, which is enemies that seek to undermine Russia's geopolitical capital in its traditional sphere of influence [20]. As a result, the armed conflict touched the bottom line of Western countries, while the bilateral relationship was severely damaged. Western countries have imposed economic sanctions on Russia in order to pressure it to withdraw from Crimea and cease support for separatist movements [1].

From 2014 to 2022, the conflict in Ukraine underwent continuous escalation and numerous attempts to achieve a resolution, but the armed conflict or "invasion" used by most Western scholars has undoubtedly intensified the relationship and damaged the bilateral relationship to a certain extent. Following the annexation of Crimea, pro-Russian separatists declared independence in the state of Donetsk and Luhansk, which led to a civil war with Ukrainian forces. Despite multiple ceasefire agreements, such as the Minsk Protocols, the conflict remained ongoing. On July 17th, 2014, a Malaysian passenger flight was taken down by a surface-to-air missile launched from Russian-backed separatist in Donetsk, causing the death of 298 passengers. The investigation found that the missile originated from Russia, which further intensified the mutual doubts from both Russia and the Western [1].

In general, the West has maintained economic sanctions against Russia which aimed to curtail its support for separatist movements and pressuring it to return Crimea to Ukraine. In response, Russia has strengthened its military presence in Crimea and continued to support separatists in Eastern Ukraine. Diplomatic efforts have failed to produce a lasting solution. By 2022, the situation remained unresolved and was even severely intensified by the further military operations taken by Russia. Stricter sanctions were made to deter Russia, including banning Moscow from general international systems such as the Swift Trade [21]. The West continues to support Ukraine politically and militarily, while Russia remains steadfast in its strategic objectives and aims to take over Eastern Ukraine.

5. Conclusion

The transformation of NATO-Russia relations after the collapse of the USSR to the 2014 Crimea crisis illustrates a significant shift in the geopolitical situation and strategic considerations by the Russian side. The NATO-Russia bilateral relationship initially started with optimism and cooperation, with multiple acts and cooperations signed to strengthen conversations. The relationship began to sour as NATO expanded eastward continuously, incorporating post-Soviet states. This continued expansion, according to the Russian side, posed direct threat to its strategic interests and in violation of the promises made to soviet leaders during the 1990 unification of Germany. Together, it prompted a reevaluation of Russia's foreign policy and strategic objectives.

The color revolutions, coupled with NATO's second enlargement cycle, exacerbated Moscow's fears of Western encirclement and ideological erosion. The Georgian War and the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 were direct responses to these perceived threats, as the bottom line of Russia, namely Ukraine and Georgia, was eroded by Western ideologies and has already shown a willingness to cooperate with Western countries not only economically but also politically and militarily. These two armed conflicts also signified the shift of Russia's foreign policies and its reevaluation of Western moves. This shift has increased the possibility of Moscow using the military to directly project Russian influence in its traditional sphere of influence in order to deter further movements. The annexation of Crimea marked the definitive end of cooperative NATO-Russia relations, which led to a prolonged and unresolved conflict that was further intensified in 2022, followed by a large-scale military movement.

In conclusion, the shift in NATO-Russia relations and Russia's foreign policy has reshaped the geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe in the past decades. The involvement of NATO's several rounds of eastward expansion could be one of the direct factors contributing to this situation. The resolution to this conflict will require efforts and mutual understanding from both sides so that disputes could end sooner and more innocent lives could be saved.

References

- [1] Godzimirski, J.M. (2019). *Explaining Russian Reactions to Increased NATO Military Presence*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs Policy Brief. 2019, 16, p.1-4.
- [2] Marten, K., 2017. *Reducing Tensions Between Russia and NATO*. Council on Foreign Relations.
- [3] Adomeit, H. (2019). *Inside or Outside? Russia's Policies Towards NATO*. Retrieved from https://www.nupi.no/nupi_eng/Publications/CRISin-Pub/Inside-or-Outside-Russia-s-Policies-towards-NATO. Accessed 25 June 2024.
- [4] Rühle, M. (2014). *NATO Enlargement and Russia: Die-Hard Myths and Real Dilemmas*. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2014/10/21/nato-enlargement-and-russia-die-hard-myths-and-real-dilemmas/index.html> Accessed 25 June 2024.
- [5] Goldgeier, J. and Shiffrinson, J.R.I. (2023). *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory to the Russia-Ukraine War*. Springer International Publishing.
- [6] Lazarević, D. (2009). *NATO Enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia: Old Wine in New Bottles?* [pdf] Available at: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/144129/8D5970A1-FAF9-43B7-AC5F-CA4F40A1C1B3.pdf>. Accessed 25 June 2024.
- [7] Banka, A. (2019). *The Breakaways: A Retrospective on the Baltic Road to NATO*. War on the Rocks. Retrieved from <https://www.warontherocks.com/2019/10/the-breakaways-a-retrospective-on-the-baltic-road-to-nato/>. Accessed 6 July 2024.
- [8] Shiffrinson, J.R. (2020). *NATO enlargement and US foreign policy: the origins, durability, and impact of an idea*. *International Politics*, 57(3), pp. 342-370.
- [9] Sarotte, M.E. (2014). *A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion*. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(5), pp. 90-97.
- [10] Rankin, J. (2021). *Ex-NATO head says Putin wanted to join alliance early on in his rule*. *The Guardian*, 4 November. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/04/ex-nato-head-says-putin-wanted-to-join-alliance-early-on-in-his-rule> Accessed 6 July 2024.

- [11] NATO. (2002). *NATO–Russia Council Statement 28 May 2002*. Available at: https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/null/1/4/145410/STATEMENT_2002-05-28_BIL.pdf Accessed 6 July 2024.
- [12] Gorenburg, D. (2014). *Countering Color Revolutions: Russia's New Security Strategy and Its Implications for U.S. Policy*. PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 342. Available at: <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/countering-color-revolutions-russia%E2%80%99s-new-security-strategy-and-its-implications-us-policy> Accessed 25 June 2024.
- [13] Ssentamu, M. (2019). *Russia's Foreign Policy Towards NATO*. Available at: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/people/ssentamu/publications/russias_foreign_policy_towards_nato.pdf Accessed 25 June 2024.
- [14] Frear, T., Kulesa, L. and Raynova, D. (2018). *Russia and NATO: How to Overcome Deterrence Instability* Available at: <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/181019-ELN-Russia-and-NATO.pdf> Accessed 25 June 2024.
- [15] Kremlin. (2007). *Munich Conference on Security Policy. President of Russia*. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034> Accessed 6 July 2024.
- [16] Fata, D. (2022). *Putin Announced His Manifesto Against the West Fifteen Years Ago. His Story Hasn't Changed. The Bulwark*, 7 February. Retrieved from <https://www.thebulwark.com/putin-announced-his-manifesto-against-the-west-fifteen-years-ago-his-story-hasnt-changed/>. Accessed 6 July 2024.
- [17] NATO. (2008). *Bucharest Summit Declaration*. NATO. Available at: http://www.summitbucharest.gov.ro/en/doc_130.html Accessed 6 July 2024.
- [18] Marten, K. (2018). *Reconsidering NATO expansion: a counterfactual analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s*. *European Journal of International Security*, 3(2), 135–161.
- [19] Nixey, J. (2020). *Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia: How They Affect Western Policy, and What Can Be Done*. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/01/myths-and-misconceptions-around-nato-enlargement/03-russia-was-promised-nato-would-not-enlarge> Accessed 25 June 2024
- [20] Msellemu, S.A. (2014). *War in Ukraine: A Crisis between NATO and Russia*. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/73865387/War_in_Ukraine_A_Crisis_between_NATO_and_Russia Accessed 25 June 2024.
- [21] *Government of the Netherlands*. (2015). *Investigation by the Dutch Safety Board*. *Government.nl*. Available at: <https://www.government.nl/topics/mh17-incident/investigation-by-the-dutch-safety-board> Accessed 6 July 2024.