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Great Power Politics And Alliance Expansion: The Case Of Nato And Russia

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ABSTRACT

The end of the Cold War generated renewed hope for a more peaceful international order. It also created the possibility for a more cooperative relationship between the United States and Russia. With the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) sought to redefine its role in the emerging unipolar world. In doing so, NATO opened up its membership to several Eastern European states with the promise of fostering a more stable and democratized region. However, this transformed role of NATO became a source of grave concern to Russia. The situation further deteriorated as NATO's eastward expansion increasingly came to be perceived by Russia as a threat to its national security. This paper, with the help of qualitative approach, aims to examine Russia's actions in response to NATO's eastward expansion using the theoretical frameworks of security dilemma and offensive realism.

KEYWORDS: Russia, NATO, Security Dilemma, Offensive Realism, Eastward Expansion

INTRODUCTION: The most important outcome of World War II was the emergence of two superpowers- the United States and Soviet Union. The incompatibility between the two superpowers with regard to national interest and ideology became more pronounced. The U.S. economic system was based on capitalism while Soviet Union embraced Marxist ideology. Soviet Union used its newfound power to solidify its sphere of influence in the buffer states of Eastern Europe. On the other hand, U.S. interest lay in containing the Soviet Union. It feared that the whole of Europe might fall to communist design.

NATO came into being as a response to Soviet threat. It was established on 4th April, 1949, via the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty (Washington treaty). It was conceived as a military-political alliance which aimed to create a counterweight to Soviet armies stationed in Central and Eastern Europe after World War II. In response to NATO, Soviet Union established the Warsaw Pact in 1955 when West Germany was admitted into NATO.

The fall of the Berlin wall symbolized the end of the Cold War. It was followed by the rapid dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in July 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Following the end of the Cold War, NATO was reconceived as a 'cooperative security organization'.

Russia- NATO cooperation grew during the 1990s and early 2000s. Russia joined the Partnership for Peace program in 1994. The NATO-Russia Founding Act was signed in 1997, creating the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) through which they consulted each other and worked together on security issues. This was replaced in 2002 by the NATO-Russia Council. During this period, there were suggestions of Russia becoming a NATO member.

The relation between NATO and Russia witnessed many ups and downs. For example, in the case of Kosovo war in 1999, Russia suspended all ties with NATO. Another factor was the NATO expansion that happened in 1999 and 2004 which was quite different from the previous expansions that took place during the Cold war. NATO members increased from 16 to 26 and the 'enlargements significantly extended the alliance border areas

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adjoining Russia, and increased the size of the area under the collective security umbrella in Europe by 30 percent' (Frydrych,2008).

The NATO expansion did not sit well with the Russian government. They mainly opposed the expansion to its two neighbors Georgia and Ukraine. They perceive this expansion to its borders as a threat to its security. During the Munich Conference on Security Policy in February 2007, President Vladimir Putin said that 'NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe' (Frydrych,2008).

NATO's eastward expansion has signified a shift in global security dynamics since the end of Cold War. The war in Ukraine in 2022 and the heightened tensions it generated across Europe can, to a significant extent be linked to the expansion of NATO, thereby making it an important area of study in international relations.

The paper begins by examining the debate surrounding the expansion of NATO. It then shifts its focus to the consequences of NATO'S eastward expansion with Georgia, Crimea and Ukraine as the principal cases affected by this process. Finally, it analyzes Russia's actions through the theoretical lenses of the Security Dilemma and Offensive Realism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of reviewing the literature for the study is to obtain relevant information about the research topic.

The debate about NATO expansion has generated considerable academic interest. Jackson and Sorensen (2003) presents the two sides of the debate surrounding NATO expansion. The proponents argue that the expansion will deter Russia from threatening its neighbors and provide security to smaller states. It will reduce the likelihood of conflict and strengthen international order. While the opponents believe that the expansion could provoke Russia and create instability in the region.

Frydrych (2008) argues the expansion of NATO is more of a political process rather than a military one. The author believes that NATO expansion can bring security and stability in Europe.

Manto (2003) provides a realist viewpoint of NATO expansion which proves the continued relevance of realism in the context of power capabilities and state survival.

Majumder examines the evolution of NATO and its subsequent relationship with Russia. According to the author, NATO's role in the post-Cold War era differs significantly from its earlier function. The alliance should pursue its expansion strategy with caution. Events such as the Kosovo war serve as a reality check, demonstrating that expansion can create new complications. Furthermore, the author contends that alliances like NATO tend to remain united in the face of credible external threat. In the absence of such a threat, however, maintaining unity among member states becomes increasingly difficult.

Several scholars have analyzed the evolving relationship between NATO and Russia as well as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, using different theoretical perspectives.

At the theoretical level Anyalebechi (2024) describes the NATO expansionist policy and Russia's response through the concept of Security Dilemma where Russia perceives NATO's expansionist policy as a threat to its national security. Building on this realist understanding, Kumar (2023) contends that Russia-NATO relations and the Russia-Ukraine war of 2022 through the lens of offensive realism where states seek to maximize their power to survive in an anarchic world system. Tsygankov (2018) offers a constructivist perspective to analyze Russia's response to NATO expansion. Russia not only sees NATO as a military threat but also as a threat to its identity, status and influence.

Makio & Fuccille (2023) highlights the geopolitical and economic importance of Crimea and Ukraine, arguing that these factors played a crucial role in Russia's attempt to prevent their alignment with NATO. Smith (2008) evaluates the deteriorating relation between NATO and Russia in the event of Russia-Georgia war in 2008. The author recommends that the West and Russia should focus on common challenges like climate change, financial crisis, global health etc. in order to foster a peaceful relation.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative approach using secondary sources like academic books, journal articles, international news outlets and websites.

The Debate

The enlargement of NATO post-Cold War has been a contentious issue. After the Cold War, there was a debate regarding the eastward expansion of NATO to include Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. The proponents of NATO expansion argue that the eastward expansion would deter Russia from threatening or attacking its neighbors or reclaim its lost territories. Russia would not risk an all-out confrontation with the NATO members. This expansion will not only provide reassurance to its eastern European members but also non-NATO members like Ukraine. It would also protect smaller Baltic states like Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia from Russia's aggression. The eastward expansion would also benefit Russia. Under the protective blanket of NATO membership, the Eastern European countries would not try to form military alliances or develop nuclear weapons for their security. Such actions would provoke regional instability. With NATO present in the region, it would bring an opportunity for cooperation between Russia and with the states of the West.

The opponents of NATO expansion think that the eastward expansion could provoke Russia and create instability. In 1997, many former U.S. officials wrote a letter to Bill Clinton, warning that expanding Nato would be a serious historical mistake. They argue that, NATO's eastward expansion would place in doubt 'the entire post-cold war

sentiment'. They contend that expanding the alliance towards Russia's borders would threaten Russian security interests and encourage nationalist and anti-western forces within Russia. This expansion might create a division between those former Soviet satellite countries who are members of NATO (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) and those who remained outside. Those members who are outside NATO would try to seek other security alliance which might lead to greater instability in the region. One of NATO's fundamental principles is to defend its member states in case of an attack. If NATO expands too far east it would be difficult to defend those countries which are geographically closer to Russia. The other NATO members would hesitate to fight with Russia which would weaken the alliance's credibility. Finally, the United States is the main power behind NATO. If NATO expands into areas which are unstable and difficult to defend, American citizens might question why the U.S. should defend distant countries. This could revive U.S. isolationism and weaken the alliance. This could increase the risk of conflict instead of improving security.

President Bill Clinton emphasized that NATO's expansion was intended not only to deter aggression against its member states but also to safeguard the alliance from non-traditional security threats emanating from outside Europe.

RUSSIA ATTACKED GEORGIA

While NATO considers the eastward expansion as an aim to enhance collective security, Russia views this expansion as encroaching upon its traditional sphere of influence which aims to threaten its national security. This has led to periods of instability and crisis in the region.

Russia and NATO relations deteriorated during the second term of Russian president Vladimir Putin. During this time NATO welcomed seven new members into the alliance including three Baltic states. NATO immediately began F-16 patrols over Baltic territory. Alarmed by this new development and the rising upheaval caused by the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia invaded Georgia in 2008. As Vladimir Putin (2008) summarized Russia's perception, 'we view the appearance of a powerful military bloc on our borders...as a direct threat to the security of our country. The claim that this process is not directed against Russia will not suffice. National security is not based on promises' (Tsygankov, 2018).

RUSSIA AND CRIMEA

Relations worsened in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea. Crimean Peninsula has been a part of southern Ukraine before Russia annexed it in 2014. The issue of NATO's expansion is also evident in this case. Crimea was annexed by Russia in order to prevent NATO from exerting its influence in Eastern Europe. Since Crimea was not part of NATO, the NATO countries could not take military action against Russia. The other reasons being that most of Crimean population are of Russian origin and they expressed to be a part of Russian federation. Access to

Crimean Peninsula would provide Russia access to Black Sea and Azov Sea which would be beneficial for trade and commerce. Along with this, it would also prevent Ukraine from getting closer to the Western European countries.

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in 2022

From a strategic point of view, Ukraine is considered important to Russia because of its geographic location. Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe and it acts as a buffer state between Russia and the Western powers like U.S. and European Union. Ukraine is located on the fringes of European Union and is surrounded by countries that are part of NATO. There is even the sharing of borders with Poland, Hungary and Romania, all members of both blocs. NATO recognized the strategic importance of Ukraine by signing the 'Charter on a Distinctive Partnership' in July 1997. This is the only country besides Russian Federation which has developed special relations with NATO. Starting in 2021, Russia increased its military presence along the border with Ukraine, even from inside Belarus, a neighboring country. Russia opposed NATO's expansion and asked that Ukraine be prevented from ever joining the military alliance.

SECURITY DILEMMA AND OFFENSIVE REALISM

The security dilemma is evident in Russia-NATO relations where NATO's perceived defensive actions has been viewed by Russia as a threat to its internal security. Security dilemma, a fundamental concept in international relations, was first conceptualized by John Hertz in 1950. The theory describes a condition in which efforts to improve national security have the effect of appearing to threaten other states, thereby provoking military countermoves. The intensity of security dilemma varies depending on the political relationship between states. Capabilities should not be examined in a political vacuum (Griffiths, O'Callaghan & Roach, 2008). In this regard, U.S. and Russia have always been antagonistic towards each other. The eastward expansion of NATO has been perceived by Russia as strategic encroachment and a threat to its security.

During the Cold war, the Soviet Union exercised significant control over the countries of Eastern Europe. However, with the end of the Cold war, this influence has largely diminished and Russia emerged as a comparatively weaker state both economically and militarily. In this context, NATO's decision to admit East European countries heightened Russia's fear of being strategically encircled by its adversaries. For instance, Poland has historically been a route for invading Russia and Russia has always tried to keep this area under its sphere of influence.

Another concept that helps explain Russia's actions toward NATO is the theory of offensive realism proposed by John Mearsheimer. The core idea of offensive realism is that states pursue power aggressively due to uncertainty about others' intentions. Mearsheimer's theory makes five

assumptions: the international system is anarchic; great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability, and accordingly can damage each other; states can never be certain about other states' intentions; survival is the primary goal of great powers; and great powers are rational actors. From these assumptions, Mearsheimer deduces that great powers fear each other, that they can rely only on themselves for their security, and that the best strategy for states to ensure their survival is maximization of relative power (Griffiths, 2007).

Russia's decision to invade Georgia and Ukraine fulfills all the conditions of offensive realism. Russia considers NATO's eastward expansion to be a breach of trust. According to Russian Federation, at the time of integration of East Germany, the Western powers have promised that there will be no extension of NATO and that was the condition on which Soviet Union allowed the integration.

The security dilemma caused by NATO's eastward expansion into its sphere of influence, prompted Russia to act aggressively in order to maximize its relative position in the international system.

RESULTS

By linking the concepts of security dilemma with offensive realism, the research paper tries to explain Russia's actions from the perspective of insecurity that it faced due to NATO's expansionist strategy. The findings suggest that NATO's post-Cold War transformation and expansion have led to a complicated relation with Russia. NATO argues that its expansion aims to promote democracy and security for European countries. While Russia believes NATO's presence near its borders challenges its traditional influence and security. This conflicting perception between the two powers has led to mistrust each other, which in turn intensified the conflict in Eastern Europe.

Conclusion

It has been observed that the issue of NATO expansion has been one of the key determinants of Russia's policy towards Western powers. Russia's invasion of Georgia, annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine- all of these have been done in order to prevent NATO's influence in Eastern Europe. Due to the war in Ukraine, NATO has strengthened its defense system and is focusing more on collective defense within Europe.

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