Poking the Russian Bear with the NATO Umbrella

Our Western European partners thought it was a bad idea then, and do now. Why aren't we listening?

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Some terrible foreign policy ideas seem to have eternal life. One example is the proposal to expand NATO yet again by offering membership to Georgia and Ukraine. That campaign has gone on for more than a decade and is a significant factor in the West's deteriorating relations with Russia.

George W. Bush's administration apparently decided that the United States and its European allies had not provoked Russia sufficiently with the first two rounds of NATO expansion. U.S. leaders adopted that attitude even though the second round in 2004 added the three Baltic republics, which had been part of the defunct Soviet Union itself. The administration now pushed hard to make certain that Ukraine and Georgia received membership invitations.

Washington's key European allies began to balk, however. France, Germany, and most of Washington's other long-standing Alliance partners were unwilling to take that step when Bush formally proposed the first stage in the admission process, a Membership Action Plan (MAP), for both countries, at the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recalled that German Chancellor Angela Merkel was especially negative. Merkel "did not trust the Georgians, whom she still saw as corrupt." The German leader also observed that Ukraine's governing coalition "was a mess." Although the primary reason for Western European reluctance was the unsatisfactory domestic political and economic situations in both countries, there also was uneasiness that another stage of NATO expansion would damage already delicate relations with Russia.

Despite the intra-Alliance resistance to the Bush administration's campaign to offer MAPs to Kiev and Tbilisi, though, the outcome of the Bucharest summit was not a total defeat for U.S. ambitions. The summit's final declaration stated that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO." There was no timetable but the ultimate outcome seemed clear.

The Kremlin's anger threatened to boil over at this point, and Moscow's push back began. Even before the issuance of final declaration, Vladimir Putin bluntly warned summit attendees that

> "The emergence of a powerful military bloc at our borders will be seen as a direct threat to Russian security."

The country's deputy foreign minister, Alexander Grushko, stated that NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine would be "a huge strategic mistake" causing the "most serious consequences" for European peace and security.

Germany, France, and other key European allies became even warier of provoking the Kremlin when war broke out between Georgia and Russia in August 2008. Initial condemnations of "Russian aggression" faded as evidence emerged that Tbilisi had initiated the military phase of the crisis. The reluctance of "Old Europe," (Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's dismissive label) to offer NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine has diminished little since that time. That is especially true since the onset of the Ukraine crisis in 2014

France has been adamant in its opposition. Then-French President Francois Hollande candidly told a press conference in Paris on February 5, 2015, that Ukraine's NATO membership would be "undesirable" for France.

> "We must state it clearly, we should tell other countries the truth, including about what we are not ready to accept. This is the position of France."

Hollande reiterated these sentiments at the NATO summit in Warsaw, Poland, the following year:

> "NATO has no role at all to be saying what Europe's relations with Russia should be. For France, Russia is not an adversary, not a threat."

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was hardly any more receptive to making Ukraine a NATO member, stating:

> "I see a partner relationship between Ukraine and NATO, but not membership."

Wolfgang Ischinger, chairman of the Munich Security Conference and member of the Yalta European Strategy Conference Board, concluded in September 2017:

> "I cannot see any possibility on the horizon for all NATO members to vote in favor of Ukraine's membership. There is no chance of this happening while there is gunfire in [Ukraine]. The key problem is the conflict, which will prompt many NATO members to say: if we accept Ukraine, we inherit these problems with Russia."

Unfortunately, Washington's determination to see both Georgia and Ukraine admitted to NATO has not diminished over the years. Even the persistence of severe tensions between Russia and Ukraine since the 2014 crisis has had little sobering effect on U.S. officials or NATO enlargement advocates within the American foreign policy community.

Indeed, when Russia annexed Crimea following the success of U.S.-encouraged demonstrators in ousting the elected, pro-Russian Ukrainian government of Viktor Yanukovych, anti-Russian American hawks seem more determined than ever to extend Washington's security umbrella over Ukraine and Georgia. Writing in the May 5, 2014 issue

of the *Weekly Standard*, John Bolton [made that objective clear](#):

> Obama left Ukraine and Georgia to fend for themselves, ignoring the politico-military reality that Russia instinctively understood. He thereby left open the vulnerability that Bush had tried to close in April 2008. Many who now oppose robust U.S. efforts to protect Ukraine from Russian depredation and partition assert that we have no serious interests there, and accordingly also reject any hint we might once again consider NATO membership. Yet, in the long term, joining the alliance is the only strategy that can realistically secure Georgian and Ukrainian sovereignty and keep alive the option of joining the West more broadly.

That view is worrisome, given Bolton's position as President Trump's National Security Adviser. Other vocal conservatives are joining the campaign to secure NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. Luke Coffey, Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy at the conservative Heritage Foundation, issued [a report](#) in January 2018 titled "NATO Membership for Georgia: In U.S. and European Interest" Coffey stated flatly that the United States must "continue to be an advocate" for Georgia's membership in NATO. The report also urged NATO members at the upcoming July summit in Brussels to reaffirm the commitment originally made in 2008 concerning eventual membership for Georgia.

Continuing enthusiasm for adding Georgia and Ukraine to NATO is not confined to conservative or neoconservative precincts. Atlantic Council scholars Damon Wilson and David J. Kramer authored [an August 2018 report](#), "Enlarge NATO to Ensure Peace in Europe." In it, they argued that

> "Extending NATO membership to nations who earn it can eliminate destabilizing security vacuums."

In their view, not taking such a step creates needless dangers:

> "Without a sense of timing on when such membership is coming, the dangerous gray zone that Ukraine and Georgia find themselves in will continue. Allies should not allow their aspirations to be held hostage by Russian occupation."

Unfortunately, the Trump administration appears to be thinking along the same reckless lines. On a visit to Tbilisi in August 2017, Vice President Mike Pence [blithely declared](#):

> "President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will one day become a member of NATO."

He added:

> "We strongly support Georgia's aspiration to become a member of NATO. And we'll continue to work closely with this Prime Minister and the government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member."

Indeed, the administration is forging close military ties with Kiev even without Ukraine becoming a formal member of NATO. Washington has sent U.S. troops as participants in joint military exercises [with Ukrainian forces](#)—an act that Moscow considers especially provocative, given its continuing tense relations with Kiev. Secretary of Defense James Mattis admits that U.S. instructors have been [training Ukrainian military units](#) at a base in western Ukraine. Washington also has approved two [important arms sales to Kiev](#) in just the past ten months.

The policy of restraint that Germany, France and other Western European nations have adopted regarding membership for those two countries is considerably more sensible than Washington's stance. It is uncertain how firm that resistance will remain, however, in the face of a concerted campaign by influential elements of the American foreign policy community and the Trump administration itself.

One hopes that the determination on the part of Washington's key European allies to shield the United States from its own foreign policy folly persists. Expanding NATO to include Georgia and Ukraine would intrude into Russia's core security zone. Moscow would not likely let such a menace to its national security go unchallenged, and the results could be tragic for everyone concerned.

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Featured image: Members of the U.S. Marine Corps during exercise Peace Shield's opening ceremony held in Ukraine in 2011. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Gunnery Sgt. Donald Preston)

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