Scholars such as John G. Ikenberry maintain that the resulting post-Cold war order proved certain realist expectations of dramatic shifts in world politics incorrect. Indeed, events such as the disappearance of American hegemony, the return of a great power balance and the downfall of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) did not come to pass. Within academic circles, this period was characterized by a clear disassociation between the credibility of realist rhetoric and its ability to define correctly contemporary inter-state behaviour. In retrospect, a re-evaluation of the behaviour of the alliance’s participatory states during NATO’s 1990 to 1997 enlargement process does in fact demonstrate their actions as having been parallel to realist dictums of “unitary actors who, at a minimum seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination”. Expansion was not a mere quixotic endeavour undertaken within a multi-polar cooperative international arena, but a carefully considered project realised by the institution’s affiliates in the midst of a unipolar world. Throughout the enlargement project, the United States (U.S.), the reigning superpower, used its excess resources to manipulate the strategic weaknesses of Russia, the Visegrad states and the European Union (EU), in order to both expand further eastward its hegemony and to safeguard its existent sphere of influence. On the other hand, the militarily inferior states of Western and Eastern Europe had little choice but to concede the hegemon NATO’s expansion, so as to safeguard their immediate survival. During this short time, the resulting world order was consequently one of relative stability where centripetal inter-state forces outweighed centrifugal balance of power tendencies as weaker countries were not able to create a counterweight to overweening American capabilities.

In 1949, catalyzed by the growing Soviet menace, a post-war devastated Europe and a militarily superior U.S. coalesced to form the NATO. The military alliance served to mollify European concerns about a potential German threat, to enhance the continent’s unity and security, and, most importantly, to provide a mechanism for American participation in Europe’s economic and military recovery. For the following forty years, NATO was the cornerstone of bipolar stability, performing both military and non-military functions for its members. Throughout the Cold War, serving as a bulwark against Soviet encroachment into Western Europe, the alliance became increasingly correlated with resolute American leadership. Nevertheless, as the Berlin Wall tumbled on November 9, 1989, the bipolar structure that had shaped the security policies of the major powers for nearly half a century vanished. From this point onwards, the Soviet Union (U.S.S.R.) quickly disintegrated, with German reunification in October 1990, and the final collapse of the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO) on April 1, 1991. While the demise of the Eurasian behemoth produced the greatest change in world power relationships since the Second World War, it became evident that the military alliance faced an existentialist question. After all, if the U.S.S.R. was no longer NATO’s raison d’être, what or who would fill this vacuum? History did not offer examples of any alliance that had outlived its enemy. During the Madrid Summit on July 7 and 8, 1997, then-American President Bill Clinton produced the solution: the Atlantic Alliance would continue to be dominant in the transatlantic military sphere, with the added memberships of the Visegrad states of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic.

Prior to the expansion of 1997, the Atlantic Alliance had enlarged three times: the first wave of enlargement came in 1952 with the entry of Greece and Turkey, 1955 constituted the second wave, with the admittance of the Federal Republic of Germany, and the induction of Spain in 1982 signalled the third period of growth in NATO membership. Consequently, in 1989, the exclusive military alliance consisted of sixteen countries including the mercurial French, and the unstable Turks and Greeks. Among the
members, enlargement did not take precedence in early-day post-Cold War discussions. Nonetheless, NATO’s London Summit of July 1990 declarations of intent to “reach out to the countries which were our adversaries in the Cold War, and extend to them the hand of friendship” encouraged Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the U.S.S.R. to visit Brussels to address the North Atlantic Council (NAC). Subsequently, the creation of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in December 1991 originated during the Rome Summit of the previous month. This fostered dialogue and cooperation with the Central Eastern European states. In late 1993, this first phase ultimately culminated with the introduction of the Partnership for Peace (PFP). The project was intended to go beyond the NACC, by offering “a practical program of defence planning, and budgeting joint exercises and operations with NATO nations”. Although certain scholars like Gerald B. Solomon viewed the PFP as a path into the military alliance, others, including Ann L. Griffiths, criticised the agreement as a mere method by which to avoid altogether the question of expansion.

The second period of NATO’s expansion commenced with the Brussels Summit in January 1994, where the PFP framework was promulgated as a fait accompli. Correspondingly, the Combined Joint Task Forces (CJTF) were adopted to create a more responsive military structure in crisis management and peacekeeping. Meanwhile, the NAC’s announcement that it “expected and would welcome NATO enlargement” was further solidified by the Council’s adoption of the Principle of Enlargement in December 1994. The third phase of NATO’s evolution witnessed the debate’s gradual shift from one of internal governmental and alliance discussions to one of public campaigning, so as to sell the policy externally. During this period, the NACC had grown to encompass thirty-eight countries, providing a forum for consultation on a full range of political, economic, military, scientific, and environmental issues. As well, the Atlantic Alliance invited Russia’s cooperation in establishing a political framework for a new relationship. Although the former adversary delayed in responding, negotiations commenced in January 1997, and an agreement was finally reached the following May. The signing of the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation on May 27, 1997 was preceded by the Madrid Summit, the outset of the fourth and final chapter of the alliance’s expansion. During this stage, a firm commitment to begin accession negotiations with the Visegrad states was taken, despite the treaty having to face ratification by the affiliated national governments which required a referendum in some countries.

Numerous academics view the above process as having been spearheaded and espoused by the American government: for instance, Gale A. Mattox suggests that NATO enlargement be understood “within the broader context of the debate over the role of the U.S. and its leadership in international affairs in the post-Cold War era”, while Kenneth Waltz explicitly accuses the military alliance of being “primarily, if not wholly, an agent of U.S. power”. In fact, French Foreign Minister Hervé de Charette would later acknowledge that the Americans controlled the pace and the scale of expansion by hastening the process and establishing a tight timetable. Throughout the enlargement project, NATO affiliates frequently witnessed American hegemonic authority and the country’s penchant for unilateral action. Examples range from Clinton’s premature announcement: “the question is no longer whether NATO will take on new members, but when and how”, made during the preliminary stages of the PFP program, to the staunch American supervision under which all consultations between NATO’s Secretary General and Russia were conducted.

American dominance over NATO’s evolution mirrored the existent unipolar world in which the U.S. enjoyed preponderance in all underlying components of power: military capabilities, technology, geography, population, and economic resources. This advantage can be traced back to the 1950 adoption of the National Security Council (NSC) Directive 68 which confirmed American readiness to take on a more pronounced leadership role in the post-war world order. Indeed, throughout the Cold War, the United States’ superiority steadfastly drove its foreign policy and reflected such leadership perceptions as John F. Kennedy’s belief that the U.S. was “powerful enough to deter any aggression”.

Capstone Seminar
NATO Looks East: A Realist Reassessment

and Lyndon Johnson’s view that America’s role was that of world policeman. This tradition was continued with the Pentagon’s 1992 New Grand Strategy, a scheme intended to preserve unipolarity by preventing the emergence of a global rival and thereby foster a “world environment in which the American system would survive and flourish.” A key result of this policy was the exponential degree of U.S. confidence in the longevity of American hegemony, illustrated by Ambassador George C. McGhee’s comment: “the U.S. is and will, in the twenty-first century, continue to be by far the most influential country in the world...it faces no important enemies or threat.”

In light of such sanguine self-assurance, the hegemon felt free to disregard substantial criticisms made against the feasibility of NATO enlargement. Firstly, opponents pointed to the institution’s existent volatile structure, for, as Brigadier General Robert T. Osterthaler suggests, “three time bombs [were] already built into NATO – Turkey, Greece, and France.” Since, the Atlantic Alliance required unanimity to act, expansion could potentially destabilise NATO cohesiness, prevent the institution from performing its important functions, and lead to the alliance losing credibility as a military entity. Secondly, critics argued that the monetary costs of enlargement greatly outweighed any benefits gained in security. NATO would have to undergo improvements in communications, training, command and control arrangements, and infrastructure in the new member countries. Also, expansion would include large increases in the institution’s force projection capabilities, including naval forces, ground-based and carrier-based combat aircraft, and explicit reliance on nuclear weapons. Although Washington supplied a figure of between 27 and 35 billion dollars over twelve years for the program’s total cost, RAND estimated that the expense of integrating the new members would run as high as 100 billion dollars over ten years. In fact, despite the United State’s initial accountability for only fifteen percent of the total fee, the parsimonious military spending of the European members and the weak economic climate of the Visegrád states would leave the hegemon responsible for over half of the total costs.

However, the most fervent cluster of protest to American-led NATO expansion was found in the country’s intellectual community that focused on Russia. The father of containment, historian George Kennan averred: “NATO enlargement would inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion, have an adverse affect on the development of Russian democracy, [and] restore the atmosphere of the Cold War to east-west relations”. Such opponents warned that NATO expansion would feed the paranoia that maintained nationalist fervour in Moscow, weaken the support of those Russians most inclined toward liberal democracy, and force the ex-superpower to look to China for a military ally. In addition, expansion came at a time when the second Strategic Arms Reduction (START II), which called for further decreases in nuclear weapons, remained unratified by the Duma. Critics questioned whether NATO enlargement would not encourage “a bunker mentality in Russia that would obstruct the development of a constructive relationship with the West and a cooperative approach to arms control and non proliferation”. Consequently, fears abounded that the decision to enlarge NATO eastwardly would not only destroy the prospects for the START II treaty’s approval by the Russian parliament, but also postpone further reductions in armaments including START III, and permit the possibility that the former adversary’s nuclear weapons “fall into the hands of warring bands”.

NATO’s intentions for eastward expansion certainly fostered an inimical relationship between Russia and the West. The May 1992 issue of Military Thought asserted that the ex-superpower reserved the right to take “necessary measures to guarantee its own security” against the advance of foreign troops into the territories of neighbouring countries or the increase of army and naval groupings near its borders. In 1993, then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin went so far as to surreptitiously write letters of complaint to the American, British, French, and German Heads-of-State claiming: “relations between our country and NATO should be several degrees warmer than the relations between the alliance and Eastern Europe”. By 1996, the wide range of threats emanating from the former adversary had become ominous, as evident in ex-First Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais’ assertion that NATO’s enlargement “would force Moscow to reappraise its policy of co-operation with the West, [and] threaten to trigger a fresh arms
Indeed, in the Duma, the dominant feeling was one of betrayal: Russia had been friendly towards the West and did not deserve NATO expansion. Ultimately, the former foe perceived the alliance’s enlargement and traditional balance of power considerations to be congruent, accusing NATO of taking advantage of its temporary economic, political, and military difficulties.

Certain scholars, including Owen Harris and Sergei Plekhanov, justified the ex-superpower’s suspicions by maintaining that one of the goals behind the alliance’s U.S.-led expansion was, indeed, to increase American dominance over Eastern Europe by relieving Russia of its former Cold War sphere of influence, and exploiting its substantial weaknesses. At the time, the former adversary’s dwindling influence in international affairs was reflected in the downsizing of its conventional forces due to budgetary constraints, and the full withdrawal of Russian troops from Europe. Post Cold-War Western attempts to deter Russian ambitions had, in fact, begun shortly after the opening of the Berlin Wall with the reunification of Germany and the incorporation of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) into the Atlantic Alliance, despite months of vehement opposition and objections from Mikhail Gorbachev and the Soviets. NATO’s strengthening influence in Eastern and Central Europe only acted as a further deterrent against renewed Russian imperialism, by “bolstering the alliance’s geostrategic weight to hedge against a disequilibrium in Europe in which a preponderance of power rested in the hands of a hostile power”. Indeed, during the preliminary stages of the institution’s enlargement, Waltz suggests that “NATO, led by America, scarcely considered the plight of its defeated adversary”, but violated the 1990 Two-Plus-Four Agreement that former WTO members would not be allowed to join the military alliance.

The negotiation process preceding the signing of the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security ultimately delineated the zero-sum relationship held between the U.S. and Russia. The ex-superpower was not granted veto rights over the broadening of NATO, nor did Yeltsin obtain substantial strategic and military concessions. Instead, under previously mentioned close American direction, the alliance refused to promise both the non-deployment nuclear arms on its new member states’ territories and/or draft the agreement as a legally binding document. Moreover, NATO made no precise commitment to Russia’s request that military spending resulting from the institution’s expansion be held to no more than five percent above current levels. In the end, although “verbally challenging U.S. hegemony [had become] a political fashion in Moscow”, Russia had little choice but to either agree with the formal enlargement of NATO, and accept the accompanying vague promises of cooperation and dialogue, or watch the alliance expand with neither its approval nor influence.

The inclusion of the Visegrad states in an NATO fulfilled the hegemon’s goal of expanding eastward its sphere of influence, so as to subsume a greater geographic area into an American-led world order of democratic regimes and free-market economies. Throughout the enlargement process, Washington viewed the process as the primary method of solidifying democracy in Eastern Europe. The Clinton administration delineated the five criteria for inclusion into the Western institution: contending members would have to comply with the following criteria: 1) abstain from territorial disputes with neighbours, 2) be democracies, 3) have market economies, 4) have civilian control of the military, and 5) have forces with NATO interoperability (Russet 87). Waltz claims that the measures taken by Clinton, to enhance these ideologies around the world, during the expansion program, acted to “camouflage the great leverage the U.S. enjoy[ed] in international politics by making it seem that [all] nations [were] similarly entangled in a thick web of interdependence”. According to proponents of the hegemonic stability theory, the result was the American manipulation of weaker states in order to create, maintain, and perpetuate a peaceful international order.

The malleability of the Visegrad states to American demands stemmed from the security vacuum which had been created by the collapse of the WTO. Although Eastern European countries had considered filling the void with such options as neutrality and an institutionalized form of regional-
security cooperation, precipitous declines in defence budgets and obsolete equipment could not provide for their national security without external assistance. Furthermore, the Visegrad states were haunted by the events of their past, when only sixty-four years earlier, Berlin's 1939 invasion of Poland fuelled a world-wide conflagration that left their fate in the hands of the Soviets. Anxiety about future hypothetical Russian aggression made NATO membership attractive to the Eastern European states who feared the ex-superpower's location, size, demography, economic potential and nuclear capabilities. Also, the war in the former Yugoslavia proved to the Visegrid states that the Atlantic Alliance was the continent's only credible security system, for Europe would not act to stop wars even among near neighbours. Lastly, these fledging market democracies wanted affirmation that they belonged to the West. NATO membership was principally important as a symbol that they were fully European, and as "a means of back door entry into the European Union (EU)". Indeed, admission into the alliance was initially easier and faster to obtain than entry into the EU, which, at that time, called for achieving unfeasible economic objectives.

Such reasoning led Eastern European countries to express a desire to join NATO, as early as 1990. The Visegrad states sought, at a minimum, political participation in the alliance and, as the Slovak and Czech Federal Republic proposed in September 1991, a treaty-based security arrangement with NATO. Nevertheless, because these governments lacked the political clout necessary to drive the enlargement campaign, "the strongly expressed desire of the Central and Eastern European countries themselves to become active members of the alliance had to be interpreted as a secondary rather than primary source of the policy". The PFP program was a clear demonstration of this point. The initiative proved to be a sobering event for the Visegrad states, in particular for Poland, because the plan demonstrated the difficulties the countries faced in attaining their goal of membership. Then-Polish Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlak stated that although Poland was not happy with the process, "we can accept it if we are certain that Poland will ultimately be able to become a full member". In the end, viewing the PFP as the only possible way into the military alliance, Poland put aside its initial displeasure and, on July 5 1994, became the first partner to sign an Individual Partnership Program (IPP). Furthermore, certain academics argue that Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic were really only chosen for entry on the basis that they guaranteed the hegemon minimal effort in maintaining a zone of security: as David Law suggests, expansion brought into the alliance "those countries least needing a security umbrella", while denying vulnerable areas like the Baltic states a protective mantle.

Indeed, the U.S. avoided such superfluous costs so as to initially expend its resources on safeguarding its existent sphere of influence in Europe. Enlargement seemed to offer the perfect opportunity for the Americans to rededicate themselves to European security in a fashion reminiscent of the original guarantee to Western Europe a half century before. Throughout the Cold War, Washington elites, including Zbigniew Brezinski, had linked American primacy to "preponderance on the Eurasian continent". Following the demise of the Soviet Union, the hegemon's commitment to Europe's stability continued to be paramount. The U.S. understood the area's strategic geographic utility: retaining American forces on the continent allowed for easier access to, and influence over, volatile regions of Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. According to David D. Newson, the Pentagon at that time viewed possible threats to American security as stemming from the Middle East and North Korea and, in turn, all military planning was based on such a two-war structure. Consequently, the role of NATO expansion was perceived as one of maintaining over one-hundred thousand U.S. troops in Europe as a reserve unit for deployment to such recalcitrant areas of the globe. Washington therefore deemed it necessary to exercise its power to prevent "centrifugal forces - both old and new - from breaking the alliance apart".

Traditionally, attempts to destabilize America's dominance within NATO had come from France's endeavour to bolster its own prestige and assert itself as a major power. General de Gaulle's emergence
as President of France in 1958 precipitated fundamental changes in U.S.-European dialogue. Previously, American policymakers had considered Europe’s political unity as a prerequisite to the formation of an Atlantic community that would share with the U.S. the burdens of containing communism all the while accepting American dominance. Nonetheless, De Gaulle’s increasingly vocal criticisms of U.S. interference in Europe, his clear opposition to the 1962 Nassau Agreement, which tied the British nuclear program to that of the U.S., and his 1966 decision to withdraw France from NATO’s military command to support French nuclear forces led the superpower to perceive a united Europe as the single greatest internal challenge to an American dominated Atlantic policy. Scholars, including Waltz, agreed, predicting the EU as the next great power that would restore a balance in the world, emphasising the continent’s population, resources, technology, economy, and military capability.

Increasingly, France’s post Cold-War strides to demonstrate Europe’s autonomy in defence and foreign policy led to contentious relations with the U.S. Specifically, Washington interpreted the country’s efforts to bolster the role of both the Organisation on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Western European Union (WEU) as direct attempts to undermine an American-led Atlantic Alliance. Consequently, in 1991, the Franco-German eurocorps produced a sharp reaction from Washington. Then-U.S. Undersecretary of State Reginald Barthalomew’s letter to the governments of the European members of NATO clearly warned against Europe formulating any independent policies on defence and/or reviving the WEU so as to create an instrument to vehicle a European security identity. To American satisfaction, the subsequent Maastricht Treaty of December 1991 delineated the role of the WEU as a mere component of NATO, leading then-American president George Bush Sr. to remark: “we are pleased that our allies in the WEU…decided to strengthen that institution as both NATO’s European pillar and the defence component of the EU”. Moreover, despite initial appeals to strengthen the OSCE on the grounds that it transcended NATO and offered better prospects for collective security, to the delight of the U.S., the organisation faltered because of difficulties related to consensus decision-making. Although the OSCE summit held on December 2, 1996 ruled out any concrete steps to strengthen the organisation, the institution had already fallen “victim to the war in the former Yugoslavia and lost credibility”.

Clearly, Europe’s attempts at autonomy could not be instantaneously accomplished by concentrating resources on the realisation of a strategic balance of power. Instead, taking advantage of the relatively weak military position of their Eastern European neighbours, EU members set aside immediate concerns over state security for the longer-term regional goal of a successful European Monetary Union. To join the unified currency, a state had to achieve certain benchmarks: a budget deficit less than three percent of GDP, a national debt less than sixty percent of GDP, an inflation rate no more than one point five percentage points above the average of the three lowest-inflation EU members, and stable interest rates and national currency values. In July 1990, as a first step at fulfilling these requirements, major European affiliates of NATO unilaterally announced large reductions in their force levels, all the while supporting the entry of the Visegrád states into the military alliance. Numerous academics, including Harris and Newson, attached Germany’s and France’s overt support of NATO expansion to the aim of avoiding, or at least delaying, the eastward enlargement of the EU. As suggested by then-German Defence Minister Volker Ruhe’s 1993 statement: “it [is] conceivable and also desirable that Eastern European membership be more likely in security policy, that is, in NATO…These countries probably need a good ten years” for EU membership, the admission of the Visegrád states into the EU was perceived as problematic. The expense of EU enlargement would have significantly outweighed the gains: member-states would have had to shoulder economically the Eastern European countries as free-riders, at a time when the Maastricht Treaty had already increased the EU budget by 25 billion dollars to provide economic assistance to the poorer member-states of Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain. Ultimately, the alliance’s European counterparts set a more cautious timetable for EU expansion and acquiesced the hegemon NATO’s enlargement, in order to successfully realise monetary objectives of a common European currency, a precursor to future increased power capabilities and regional autonomy.
In summation, claims that the demise of the U.S.S.R. and the subsequent end of the bipolar world order dissolved the foundations of realism as a paradigm of choice for explaining post-Cold War interstate behaviour were premature. The above analysis of the conduct of NATO members and contenders between the years of 1990 to 1997, in fact, delineates the continued importance of such realist rhetoric as the retention and expansion of power capabilities and the need for states to guarantee their survival. NATO's fourth phase of enlargement provided all participants with the vehicle with which to fulfil their respective unitary goals. The Atlantic Alliance was the platform which the U.S., the reigning post Cold-War superpower, used to manipulate militarily weaker states in order to both safeguard its existent sphere of influence over Europe and expand its hegemonic authority further eastward into Eurasia. Moreover, the Visegrad states' entry into the military alliance provided the former Warsaw Pact allies with an enhanced national security, formal protection against a resurgent Russia, and tangible evidence of acceptance by the West. Lastly, NATO's European members conceded to the U.S. the alliance's easterly expansion, so as to buy sufficient time that would permit them to focus on domestic concerns of successfully establishing a European Monetary Union—a path to regional autonomy. Indeed, in terms of inter-state relations, the short period of 1990 to 1997 was an anomaly, for there was no evidence of power balancing but a general acceptance and propagation of the unipolar world system. Nonetheless, an attempt at equilibrium would come five years later as a stronger France, Germany, and a more confident Russia joined forces to counter America's unilateral strides to expand its jurisdiction into the Middle East by invading Iraq and toppling its regime. Ultimately, such efforts demonstrated the international system's innate penchant for pure balance of power politics, its future potential to check American capabilities, and the possible reestablishment of a pluralistic world.

Notes

22 Alain Pellerin, NATO Enlargement – Where We Came From and Where it Leaves Us (Aurora Papers. 29. Ottawa.
24 Ibid, 34.
28 Alain Pellerin, NATO Enlargement – Where We Came From and Where it Leaves Us (Aurora Papers. 29. Ottawa: CCIPS, 30 May 1997) 4.
33 Ibid, 24.
40 Alain Pellerin, NATO Enlargement – Where We Came From and Where it Leaves Us (Aurora Papers. 29. Ottawa: CCIPS, 30 May 1997) 22-23.
44 Alain Pellerin, NATO Enlargement – Where We Came From and Where it Leaves Us (Aurora Papers. 29. Ottawa: CCIPS, 30 May 1997) 23.
55 David D. Newsom, “Some Further Thoughts on NATO Expansion” in Kenneth W. Thompson, ed, NATO Expansion
NATO Looks East: A Realist Reassessment


Alain Pellerin, NATO Enlargement – Where We Came From and Where It Leaves Us (Aurora Papers. 29. Ottawa: CCIPS, 30 May 1997) 69.


Alain Pellerin, NATO Enlargement – Where We Came From and Where It Leaves Us (Aurora Papers. 29. Ottawa: CCIPS, 30 May 1997) 69.


Alain Pellerin, NATO Enlargement – Where We Came From and Where It Leaves Us (Aurora Papers. 29. Ottawa: CCIPS, 30 May 1997) 69.


104 Alain Pellerin, NATO Enlargement – Where We Came From and Where it Leaves Us (Aurora Papers. 29. Ottawa: CCIPS, 30 May 1997) 23.


108 Ibid, 94.


124 Owen Harris, “The Dangers of Expansive Realism”. The National Interest 50 (1997): 5;

Works Cited

NATO Looks East: A Realist Reassessment


