

# NATO's NEW ID

by Jacob Mitchell

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**BardPolitik** What was the initial purpose of NATO?

**Asmus** The initial purpose of NATO was to defend Western Europe from what was then perceived as the threat posed by the Soviet Union and communism. At the time when we were trying to define the purpose of a post-Cold War NATO, many of us went back and dug deeper in the archives in terms of trying to understand what Truman, Acheson and the others really wanted, a question of course James Chace addresses in his book on Dean Acheson.

Harry Truman's speech given at the founding of NATO April 4, 1949 is a very modern, indeed a progressive speech. He doesn't define NATO in terms of Stalin and the Soviet threat; he defines it as an alliance of democracies that have come together to defend their common civilization, their common interests and their common way of life. This is still important when you think about why NATO continued after communism and the initial threat for which it was created went away- its because the need for that alliance to defend those common values still exists.

**BardPolitik** What is its purpose in the post-Cold War era?

**Asmus** When George Bush Sr. confronted this question, his team was so focused on ending the Cold War that they didn't really get to face the question of NATO's long term future. Between the collapse of

communism in 1989 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US exerted helter-skelter diplomacy to bring the Cold War to an end. NATO was still seen in those years as a hedge against the chance that the Cold War might not yet be over. Instead, the government was asking how to unify Germany and how to deal with Gorbachev.

So it was really Clinton that had to deal with the question. And as I try to capture in my book, that question led to one of the biggest debates of the 1990s and US foreign policy. The answer the administration eventually gave was that NATO was just as important as before, but for a different set of reasons. Because its job had not only been to defeat communism but to win peace, to win a new peace and to become the backbone of a new Pan-European Security structure that would make the possibility of war in the Eastern half of Europe as remote as it had become the Western half of Europe.

**BardPolitik** How would you describe the origins of NATO expansion after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact?

**Asmus** It is important to recall that the origins of the NATO expansion debate did not take place in NATO or even in the West. It came from Central and Eastern Europe. Had they not knocked on NATO's door and demanded that we debate this issue, I doubt whether we would have done it of our own volition. At the time of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, no one in

Eastern or Central Europe was really thinking about joining NATO. Two years later during the intellectual revolution these dissidents fostered as they came to power, they began to debate how to secure their independence and how to integrate themselves in the West. When they first began negotiating with the EU and NATO, there were very few people who were actually open to these ideas. I was fortunate enough to be one of those. I was with RAND at the time, and we were among the first teams of Westerners who went in to help these countries figure out how to establish democratic control over the national security apparatus. I remember many long evenings with dissidents who explained that they fought for the same values that NATO stands for, and had spent time in prison, risked their lives and had friends killed in the process. They would ask, "Since we share the same values, why can't we be part of your alliance?" So the initial impetus came from them, but then started to fall slowly but surely on fertile soil in the west.

**BardPolitik** Why did Clinton push for NATO expansion?

**Asmus** Clinton pushed for three reasons. One, he was attracted to and supported the vision of a new Europe, as a whole and free entity. He wanted to extend the benefits of security to the eastern half of Europe, and use the power and authority of the United States to lock peace into Europe once and for all. Second, I think he wanted a new modern alliance. He understood that he had to explain to the American public what NATO's purpose was. He constantly pushed them to define a new purpose for NATO, and in his mind the alliance between the US and Europe had to be a permanent alliance, with the knowledge that we were the leading democracies of the West, destined to work together. He wanted a NATO for the 21st century, not for the 20th century. He viewed this enlarged Europe that was increasingly at peace with itself as a natural partner for the US, as it had to deal with a new global agenda.

Finally, he viewed the debate over NATO enlarge-

ment as part of a broader struggle for the US over internationalism. Clinton was an internationalist. He was an alliance builder, and he thought that to defeat the forces of isolationism, he had to show that alliances could be adapted to a new era.

**BardPolitik** Why did the US expand its commitment to Europe without threatening the precarious process of democratization in Russia?

**Asmus** When Bill Clinton embraced NATO enlargement, he did not do so as an anti-Russian move, but as a pro-integration and pro-stability move. He made it clear to his own administration, and also to Boris Yeltsin, because he believed that by creating greater stability in Central and Eastern Europe he would actually aid the process of Russia's democratization and integration. Of course both the US and NATO were strong enough to enlarge NATO and simply say the hell with the Russians- but we would have considered that a fail-

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ure. The goal wasn't to enlarge NATO; it was to secure peace in Europe by reaching out.

**BardPolitik** How was conflict among NATO members as to how many and which nations would be invited to join NATO solved?

**Asmus** The most difficult issues NATO members wrestled with were how many countries should be invited in the first round, whether the door should be open for future rounds, and how to manage that whole process. One has to realize that when we started going down this path, there was no system in place; this enlargement was different than past enlargements. It

was on a scale of a strategic magnitude that made it different, and we didn't have a real system in place to decide what the standards were, who would adjudicate that process, and how we'd make those decisions. So, we spent a lot of time trying to define those standards. At the end of the day, it was a political-strategic judgment.

Initially many of our allies were very skeptical and wanted a very small enlargement round. The US embraced that idea because we were afraid that a big round would bring in countries that weren't qualified. We found that a number of our initially skeptical allies ended up being in favor of a much bigger first round. We opposed this because we thought that the three countries invited, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary were the only countries that qualified. We didn't think the other two candidates at the time, Romania and Slovenia, had done quite enough to ensure us at that point. We wanted a small round because we wanted to have a robust open door policy and to keep the prospective open for other countries. We were particularly concerned that a large round would isolate the Baltic States, undercutting their security. So we chose those three countries both because we thought they were the most qualified and for these broader strategic considerations.

**BardPolitik** Why was there so much opposition in the US to NATO expansion? How was it overcome?

**Asmus** There were three arguments against NATO enlargement. The first was the Russia factor, and the accusation that enlarging NATO would lead to a new wreck in relations with Russia and possibly a new Cold War. The second argument was that enlarging NATO would dilute it, destroy it as an ultra-alliance. The third factor, which was often not spoken, but very real, was the argument that these countries in Central and Eastern Europe weren't like us; they weren't really Western democracies. They were too nationalist, too xenophobic and too anti-Semitic. I was often asked, "Do you really want these countries in your alliance?" From 1992 - 1994, the gap between Western and

Eastern Europe was much greater than it is today, and I remember many a meeting where you would have your polished West European and American diplomats and you would have these slightly woolly bearded former dissidents who had been in prison twelve months before, show up in lousy shoes, crappy suits, barely speaking English and saying they wanted to join NATO. It was huge clashes of cultures, even though these dissidents often were "Western," were freedom fighters. We often talked about the two faces of Central and Eastern Europe, from which we had of course been cut off for fifty years. Was the region that was going to emerge from the wreckage of communism all freedom-loving dissidents- or when you lifted the rock were you going to find anti-Semites, nationalists, or the xenophobic legacy that also existed in this region?

We had to show that we could enlarge NATO without ruining relations with Russia, and that we were serious about keeping NATO strong as a military alliance. We did it because these countries themselves took very real and often painful steps to show that they were true democracies that were becoming more and more like us. We discovered that many of these countries were, if anything, more pro-American, pro-atlantisists than even some of our west European allies.

**BardPolitik** Seven new nations were recently admitted into NATO. Is this too many, too soon?

**Asmus** I was in favor of a second big round of NATO enlargement because I believed that these seven countries were qualified this time around. September 11th highlighted the need to move as quickly as we could to lock peace into Europe at a time when we faced threats to peace outside of Europe. In my book, Senator Ted Stevens comes in to see President Clinton, and says, "Why are we doing this on Europe, Europe's peaceful and secure, we should be focusing on China." His response, which is one of the most important insights into Clinton's thinking, is, "Senator, China may be the long term threat, but what I'm trying to do is lock in peace in Europe now, so that if we ever face a

major threat in the Middle East or Asia, we never again have to worry about facing a war or conflict in Europe. We can deal with these new threats knowing that Europe is secure, and I think that after September 11th, that sort of put a premium on that second factor. Let's get it done and let's get it done now because we have this new threat we're facing in the form of terrorism."

**BardPolitik** How did the events of 9/11 influence the second round of expansion? Why has the Bush Administration pushed the second round, and how do his motives compare to Clinton's during his campaign for the first round?

**Asmus** I think the motives are very similar in many regards. I want to mention that there were also Republicans who from the beginning were in favor of NATO enlargement; this was not a democrat versus republican issue. Even though the presidents have changed, if you look at the motives and rationale, we created enough bipartisanship so that this policy could be embraced and continued by the Bush administration with hardly any changes. It's interesting that the conservatives criticized us at the time for negotiating the NATO Russia Founding Act, and then the President ended up pursuing the same policy, both on enlargement and NATO Russia.

One difference is that President Clinton really saw this as a fight for internationalism and against isolationism and unilateralism. He always said, "We're not expanding the old NATO, we're building a new NATO. He felt that NATO had to take on new missions, including protection beyond Europe and terrorism. The Bush administration has been much slower to embrace that last piece than we were, but if you look at what came out of Prague, I would argue that they're now starting to move in the same direction.

**BardPolitik** How has the second round of expansion affected US- Russia relations?

**Asmus** After the first round, Putin concluded that fighting the US was the wrong strategy, and that Russia

would be safer pursuing a strategy to protect their interests by getting closer to NATO. Second, I believe Russia's relations with Europe will improve as a result of NATO enlargement. The Russians didn't like NATO enlargement, but the reality is that Russia's relations with Poland are much better today than ever before, even though the Russians predicted the world would end if Poland joined NATO. It make take some time, but the same will end up being true in Russia's relations with the Baltic states and other Central and Eastern European countries, because now that they're secure, they can feel much more relaxed about having a normal relationship with Russia. This will lead to improved US-Russian relations as well as improved European-Russian relations over time.

**BardPolitik** The December 2002 National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) describes US plans to prevent the spread of WMD's. It does not mention NATO once. Do you think NATO is therefore still relevant?

**Asmus** The next step in reforming NATO after enlargement was to reorient NATO to take on new missions. At the Washington Summit in 1999, we put things like terrorism in NATO's new strategic concept. The Bush administration was not clear whether it wanted NATO to take on certain new missions. I think Afghanistan caught it off guard, and it was surprised when Democrats and Europeans criticized it for not using NATO.

When Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz went to NATO headquarters in December 2001, he said, "We don't need NATO, we're going to do this ourselves." Everyone was horrified, because he had returned from Brussels after the Prague Summit where he said, "We want to use NATO if we have to intervene in Iraq," and invited NATO to be part of this operation. Those are two different Paul Wolfowitzes, with two different messages.

I think the administration learned in this intervening period that if NATO doesn't start taking on some of these new challenges, it could be marginalized,

and that some of these problems are so big that the US cannot and should not try to tackle them by itself. The strategic issues in the nineties were ending war in the Balkans, integrating Central and Eastern Europe, and preserving peace with Russia. Now the question is, can we complete enlargement and rearm NATO to deal with the new threats. We don't yet have the answer to that question.

**BardPolitik** Is there a chance that the alliance could create a new global rift, reminiscent of Roosevelt's "four policemen" – an elite group with unparalleled military capacity?

**Asmus** I don't see that danger. NATO is an alliance of Western democracies, created to defend itself and to defend its interests. The fact that it is getting bigger should be something we are cheering, not something we're worried about.

**BardPolitik** As a result of 9/11, NATO invoked Article 5, which declares an attack on one nation an attack on all. Likewise, the UN responded with Resolution 1368. How do these two organizations, both designed to ensure security for their members, work together?

**Asmus** The origins of NATO and the UN are different. The UN was created at a time when people believed that we could create this new concert, symbolized by the idea that five permanent members could work together for global security. NATO was created as a response to the Soviet threat. It really focused on Europe.

I think the UN would be happy to have more NATOs around the world because when it comes to stopping the wars in Europe and preventing new conflicts, it devolves its responsibility down to NATO, a regional alliance. It doesn't have anything like that for the Middle East or for Asia. The UN could still provide the international legitimacy but then hand over responsibility for enforcing it to an institution like NATO.

**BardPolitik** The new security threat – posed by non-state actors, such as borderless terrorist organizations – does not aim to achieve territorial occupation; instead, it seeks territorial devastation with WMD. Responding to this sort of threat requires flexibility and mobility. Does NATO possess these qualities in sufficient measure to respond effectively to the threat posed by non-state actors?

**Asmus** If you look at the origins of the alliance it's clear that the founding fathers aimed to defend Western Europe from Soviet aggression, but they left an opening for NATO to move beyond the specific territory of its members if it wanted to act in concert to defend common interests. Second, NATO is not a static organization. It's a living alliance that can redefine itself and adapt to modern times.

A world in which the Article V threat is not the Soviet army, but a threat that is planned in Hamburg, financed in Asia, and carried out by Al Qaeda, is a very different world in which NATO has to recreate itself. But if NATO is going to live up to the principles that the founding fathers articulated, it must be able to do this.

**BardPolitik** Modernizing NATO's military is a key issue and is mentioned in the Bush Doctrine. The US has called for European nations to increase their military budgets in return for increased US aid. What are the prospects that the Europeans and Americans will resolve this source of tension?

**Asmus** The disparity in capability and in spending is a problem. Yet I do not want the Europeans to spend the same amount of money and to build the same capabilities that the US has. They don't need to emulate us because they're not a global power, and they don't have the same interests and responsibilities. Europe still has a set of armed forces that is focused too much on fighting the old land wars, and not on projecting modest numbers of troops and powers to the new trouble spots. I want Europe to have more special forces, the capability of the American mountain

division in Afghanistan, and ranger forces that can deploy over distance and engage in real combat. With a modest budget, they can do this over the next five years. NATO took an important step forward in that process at the Prague summit by pledging to create a NATO response force, so the next time we have a conflict like Afghanistan, a NATO division can deploy a part of the team with us.

**BardPolitik** Does the unprecedented power and military strength of the US give it a more influential role in NATO and consequently undermine the development of the EU?

**Asmus** It's a mistake to view NATO and the EU as competitors. They are complimentary partners, but it is up to us to ensure that they don't become competitors. The problem for America is not that Europe is too strong, but rather that it is too weak. The way for Europe to become stronger and grow into the more equal and capable partner we want is in part through European integration. Europe must harness its resources collectively and apply them in a way that allows it to project more of its political, economic, and military power. This requires NATO and the EU to work together.

**BardPolitik** Once a nation joins there is no mechanism to ensure that it upholds the standards found in the treaty. Further, there is no way to expel a nation from NATO. Do you think this is a major shortcoming of the alliance?

**Asmus** The existing implicit mechanisms in the treaty have worked. Once a country starts to stumble, it comes under tremendous pressure from its allies to get back on track. When the Portuguese in the mid seventies were in danger of becoming a right wing dictatorship, and when Greece under the colonels was becoming a non-democracy, we froze it out of NATO activities.

One of the problems that we have with the new countries is that they need another decade of reform to really mature into full NATO members, and we need to help them stay on that positive and pro-reform track. It's not a mechanism that makes it work, it's the political pressure that is exerted by the US and other allies on these countries.

I do think we need to look at our alliance and see whether we can't come up with more effective ways to keep countries on track, but NATO works by consensus, and when twenty-six countries shame and humiliate you because you're screwing up, it's a very powerful motive to stay on track. We may have to fine tune, but I think we should be very careful because NATO has worked as well as it has over the last fifty years precisely because we have preserved that principal of NATO operating by consensus and have used consensus as the means to keep members on track.