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Balancing, Bandwagoning And Power Maximization: Nato Enlargement Through The Lens Of Offensive Realism

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 made the 1990s one of the most perilous transitional periods in European history. As its members disbanded the Warsaw Pact, the security vacuum that ensued meant that most of Eastern Europe was now free to choose new foreign and security policy paths after almost 50 years spent under Moscow's purview. NATO had been bogged down during the same period in a stand-off with the Eastern Bloc and was now also unrestricted in its pursuit and construction of a new continental security order, just as the European project started taking shape. The Transatlantic alliance opted to grow from its original sixteen members: in 1999, Poland, Hungary, and Czechia joined its

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ranks, while Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia followed suit in 2004. Since then, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have also joined. From the start, this policy was controversial. McCgwire argued it was an error of "historic importance."[1] Skalnes underlined the fact that neorealism and its 'sub-theories' could not account for the move.[2] Haglund suggested that it would only yield minimal benefits, while Barany contended that every new member state would worsen the already volatile situation.[3]

In recent years, the most notorious neorealist decrier of NATO's enlargement has been the father of the theory of offensive realism.[4] Indeed, Mearsheimer has disputed the strategic wisdom of NATO's expansion, claiming that it was from the beginning a flawed and provocative move that would only serve to push the Russian Federation toward revanchism.[5] This offensive realist narrative frames NATO enlargement as an ill-advised plan that brought forth disaster and conflicts which could have been avoided had Western leaders followed the theory's prescriptions.[6] Similarly, Walt claimed that the United States and European Union were responsible for the causes of the Ukraine crisis.[7] Tsygankov likewise outlined Russia's revanchism as simply born out of the necessity of counteracting Western encroachment in its legitimate sphere of

[1] Michael McCgwire, "NATO expansion: 'a policy error of historic importance'," *Review of International Studies* 24, no. 1 (1998): p. 23.

[2] Lars S. Skalnes, From the Outside In, from the Inside Out: NATO Expansion and International Relations Theory," *Security Studies* 7, no. 4 (1998): p. 44.

[3] David G. Haglund, "NATO Expansion and European Security After the Washington Summer—What Next?" *European Security* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1999): p. 1; Zoltan Barany, "NATO Expansion, Round Two: Making Matters Worse," *Security Studies* 11, no. 3 (Spring 2002): p. 123.

[4] Offensive realism is part of the structuralist (and neorealist) tradition of international relations. It argues that the Great powers are the main players in an anarchical international system and are all endowed with offensive military capability. Since uncertainty and doubts about other states' intentions can never be avoided, and the policy that increases a given state's chances of survival is the only correct one to adopt, all states will seek to maximize their share of the world's power to gain an advantage against their neighbors and foes. See: John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY & London, UK: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

[5] John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2014): p. 3.

[6] Ibid., pp. 7-8.

[7] Stephen M. Walt, "Why Arming Kiev Is a Really, Really Bad Idea," *Foreign Affairs* (February 2015): p. 3.

influence.[8] Two underlying claims are at play here. The first is that NATO enlargement was a policy that came from hubris, not from legitimate security considerations. The second is that the policy cannot be explained or supported by an offensive realist account. Those two proposals deserve a thorough and methodical critical assessment. Indeed, why did NATO expand after the end of the Cold War? Can its first two expansions be explained by an offensive realist account of international relations, or was it truly an unprovoked and solely ideological act of reckless expansionism?

This article disputes both statements and contends that NATO expansion can be explained by an *expansive* adaptation of Layne's *robust* offensive realist theory, in conjunction with Walt's balance of threats theory.[9] This article emulates the methodology found in Mearsheimer's 2001 *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* to argue that NATO expansion was a policy driven by the objective security fears of former Soviet satellites that sought balance against Russian revisionism and to bandwagon with the United States. It further argues that it was an act of rational *domineering maximization* by a revisionist United States against a still relatively powerful but weakened Russia. The underlying implications of its arguments are that the failure of Mearsheimer's offensive realism to account for NATO enlargement is largely self-inflicted by the theory's unsound narrowness. Thus, challenging his interpretation is of theoretical (and empirical) interest. This paper is divided into four parts. First, it details in this section its methodology, contains a literature review and explains the offensive realist theoretical framework it uses to make its argument. Second, it assesses the policy from the perspective of the Eastern European countries that joined NATO in 1999 and 2004. Third, it reviews the US-led internal drive within NATO for enlargement. Fourth, it concludes and discusses implications.

[8] Andrei Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's last stand: the sources of Russia's Ukraine policy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 4 (2015): p. 4.

[9] Christopher Layne, "The 'Poster Child for Offensive Realism': America as a Global Hegemon," *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (Winter 2002): p. 130; Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985).

Methodology

This article uses a mixed-method of process-tracing for the period from 1991 to 2002 to build a qualitative account of the factors that drove Eastern European countries to desire NATO membership and the factors that pushed NATO to offer such membership. Further, it complements its analysis with quantitative measures of latent and military power that Mearsheimer developed in *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* by drawing from the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *Military Balance*, the World Bank's databases and the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency's *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfer Database*.[10] Specifically, it uses the GNP (or GNI) and each country's population to measure latent power, and each country's active and reserve military personnel to measure military power. This article focuses on the target Eastern European countries of the 1999 and 2004 expansions (which were agreed upon in 1997 and 2002, respectively) and the United States.

Literature Review

The question of NATO enlargement—whether it was a mistake or the correct course to adopt—has over the years generated considerable academic interest. Brown criticized the expansion of the Transatlantic alliance as stemming from flawed logic.[11] Similarly, Reiter challenged the idea that NATO membership would advance democratization in Europe by examining the empirical record of the Cold War.[12] This showed that inclusion in NATO "did not promote democracy among its members," an argument further advanced by Poast and Chinchilla.[13] The democratization argument is considered prominent in the literature to justify the alliance's push toward the East—Reiter's criticism, on the other hand, demonstrates that it rests on shaky grounds. Waltz contended that the disappearance of the Soviet Union meant that the United States no

[10] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 55 and 61-67.
[11] Michael E. Brown, "The flawed logic of NATO expansion," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 37, no. 1 (1995): p. 41.
[12] Dan Reiter, "Why NATO Enlargement Does Not Spread Democracy," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001): p. 42.
[13] Ibid.; Paul Poast and Alexandra Chinchilla, "Good for democracy? Evidence from the 2004 NAYO expansion," *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (2020): p. 47.

longer faced a major risk to its safety.[14] The unbalanced expression of power crystallized in the eastward expansion of NATO left weaker states "uneasy" and is framed as being nothing but a way of "maintaining and lengthening America's grip on the foreign and military policies of European states."[15] Accordingly, NATO and its enlargement were a way of entrenching American influence in Europe[16] as Yeltsin's "flirtation with the West was ending."[17]

Furthermore, NATO enlargement is supposed to have had several negative consequences: it drew "new lines of division," alienated "those left out," and weakened the Russian leaders that were inclined toward liberal democracy and capitalism.[18] Waltz's argument presupposed that Russia, at the time, was nothing more than a defeated adversary. Mearsheimer has also been a prominent critic of NATO's expansion.[19] According to him, the dissolution of the Soviet Union meant that the Transatlantic alliance would end and the lack of a peer capable of competing with the United States would result in a more unstable and dangerous Europe.[20] Likewise, he argued that the idea of collective security—a concept core to the very foundation of NATO—had a flawed causal logic, as no path to overcoming fear of the others existed and anarchy remained omnipresent.[21] Collective security was "illusory," as shown by the failure of the United States to prevent the wars in Yugoslavia.[22] Glaser argued that, even though war with Russia was "unlikely," NATO would "provide a better hedge than any of the alternatives."[23] Expansion, however, was a policy that could entrap the

[14] Kenneth Waltz, "NATO expansion: A realist's view," *Contemporary Security Policy* 21, no. 2 (2000): p. 24.
[15] Ibid., p. 29.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Jonathan Eyal, "NATO's Enlargement: Anatomy of a Decision," *International Affairs* 73, no. 4 (October 1997): p. 701.
[18] Kenneth Waltz, "NATO expansion: A realist's view," p. 30; Michael Mandelbaum, "Preserving the New Peace: The Case against NATO Expansion," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (May/June 1995): p. 9.
[19] John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," p. 5.
[20] John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): p. 6; see also: Stephen M. Walt, "US grand strategy after the Cold War: Can realism explain it? Should realism guide it?" *International Relations* 32, no. 1 (2018): p. 4.
[21] John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): p. 30.
[22] Ibid., p. 34.
[23] Charles L. Glaser, "Why NATO is Still Best: Future Security arrangements in Europe," *International Security* 18, no. 1 (1993): p. 5.

West in war and lead to an unintended conflict with Russia.[24] Kay also claimed that enlargement rested on faulty assumptions and that it risked "offering a false promise of security."[25]

On the other hand, Kydd suggested that NATO enlargement only resulted in mutual distrust between Russia and the West because of uncertainty about each other's preferences.[26] Lanoszka further argued that NATO enlargement "fulfilled a reasonable need to hedge against Russian resurgence" and was, as such, a policy that had overall benefits for European security.[27] Marten also explored how the tensions between Russia and the West originated in Russia's decline and preceded NATO enlargement.[28] Bering demonstrated that Russian nationalism and communist revisionism had been part of its political life since the beginning of the 1990s.[29] Menon & Ruger framed the policy as one that sought to maintain the United States' global primary and to perpetuate Europe's security dependence.[30] Sushentsov and Wohlforth analyzed the debate on NATO expansion through the lens of offensive realism and presented a case for the use of the theory to explain the behaviour of Russia and the United States, as both were "revisionists whose preferences and grand strategies brought them into conflict."[31] Van Hooft also argued that a preoccupation with instability in Europe was central.[32] Wolff

[24] Ibid., pp. 11-12.

[25] Sean I. Kay, "Realist Foreign Policy and Transatlantic Security Institutions," *Security Studies* 29, no. 3 (2020): p. 493.

[26] Andrew Kydd, "Trust Building, Trust Breaking: The Dilemma of NATO Enlargement," *International Organization* 55, no. 4 (2001): p. 803.

[27] Alexander Lanoszka, "Thank goodness for NATO enlargement," *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (2020): p. 451.

[28] Kimberly Marten, "Reconsidering NATO expansion: a counterfactual analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s," *European Journal of International Security* 3, no. 2 (2017): p. 135; Kimberly Marten, "NATO enlargement: evaluating its consequences in Russia," *International Politics* 57, no 3 (2020): p. 401.

[29] Helle Bering, "The New, Bigger NATO: Fears v. Facts," *Policy Review* (April/May 200): p. 6.

[30] Rajan Menon and William Ruger, "NATO enlargement and US grand strategy: a new assessment," *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (2020): p. 371.

[31] Andrey Sushentsov & William C. Wohlforth, "The tragedy of US—Russia relations: NATO centrality an the revisionists' spiral," *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (2020): p. 427.

[32] Paul van Hooft, "Land rush: American grand strategy, NATO enlargement, and European fragmentation," *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (2020): p. 530.

found that "geopolitically-influenced arguments" had preeminence in the decision-making process over "explanations usually deemed to be non-geopolitical."[33]

Finally, the question of whether Russia was a revisionist power has also led to substantial academic debates. Bremmer found that much of Russia's revisionist fervour is rooted in the embarrassment of the 1990s.[34] Loukianov suggested that the 1999 raid on Pristina was the first instance of Russia behaving in a revisionist manner.[35] Krickovic contended that contemporary Russia classifies as a "reactionary revisionist," whereas the United States behaves in the manner of a "domineering revisionist."[36] Karagiannis found evidence of this in his application of offensive realism to the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, as did Götz in the case of Ukraine since 1991 and Peña-Ramos in the cases of the country's energy-driven interventions in the South Caucasus.[37]

Theoretical Framework

Mearsheimer's offensive realism theory is used in this article as a theoretical framework to explain what drove NATO enlargement. Offensive realism is a pessimistic sub-theory of neorealism that stipulates that states constantly seek to maximize their relative power compared to others to guarantee their survival.[38] Anarchy, the presence of offensive military capabilities, uncertainty about the other states' intentions, the goal of survival, and rationality are the five assumptions that underpin the system and that create incentives for states to behave in a relentlessly aggressive manner.[39] Thus, the international system is one in which zero-sum

[33] Andrew T. Wolff, "Explaining NATO Expansion into Central and Eastern Europe, 1989-2004: An Analysis of Geopolitical Factors, Rationales, and Rhetoric" (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2010), p. ii.

[34] Ian Bremmer, "Revionist Russia," *Global Dialogue* (Winter/Spring 2009): p. 34.

[35] Fiodor Loukianov, "La Russie, une puissance révisionniste?" *Politique étrangère* 2, no. 1 (2015): p. 12.

[36] Andrej Krickovic, "Revionism revisisted: developing a typology for classifying Russia and other revisionist powers," *International Politics* 59, no. 4 (2021): pp. 619 and 633.

[37] Emmanuel Karagiannis, "The 2008 Russian-Georgian war via the lens of Offensive Realism," *European Security* 22, no. 1 (2013): p. 74; Elias Götz, "Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine policy, 1991—present," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): p. 301; José A. Peña-Ramos, "The Impact of Russian Intervention in Post-Soviet Secessionist Conflict in the South Caucasus on Russian Geo-energy Interests," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 3, no. 11 (2017): p. 1.

[38] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 2.

[39] Ibid.

competitions over power are rife and self-help is the only way of guaranteeing one's security.[40] The distribution of capabilities (latent and actual power) in the system is what creates conflicts.[41] In this context, states have a limited set of tools they can employ: warfare, blackmail, bait and bleed, bloodletting, balancing, and buck-passing.[42] As such, great powers will seek to attain regional hegemony, whereas already established regional hegemons will employ offshore balancing to prevent their rivals from rising as they are the only status quo powers in the system.[43] This specific argument is logically inconsistent: if all states are relentless maximizers, even regional hegemons could (and should) be revisionists if they are provided with the chance to improve their relative power and position—not doing so would simply be irresponsible.

As "great powers facing powerful opponents will be less inclined to consider offensive action,"[44] this article adapts for its theoretical framework Mearsheimer's original theory by adopting Layne's *robust* offensive realism and stipulating that the opposite should also logically be true: great powers facing weakened rivals *will* be more inclined to consider offensive action to capitalize on their momentary advantage, be they regional hegemons or not.[45] Here, Krickovic's typology of revisionism serves as the theoretical basis on whether or not Russia (and the United States) qualify as a revisionist power. Revisionism is defined by opposition to an unsatisfying *status quo* that results in rule-breakings to change the system.[46] Krickovic divided revisionist powers into six categories according to the means and aims they seek: radical reformists, moderate reformists, orthodox, radical, domineering, and rogue.[47] In the context of this paper, the two relevant categories are *domineering revisionists* (great powers on the ascendency that seek to transform the international system to their needs) and *radical revisionists* (powers that seek to reverse "recent changes to the status

[40] Ibid., pp. 33-34.
[41] Ibid., p. 56.
[42] Ibid., pp. 140-145.
[43] Ibid., p. 128.
[44] Ibid., p. 37
[45] Christopher Layne, "The 'Poster Child for Offensive Realism': America as a Global Hegemon," p. 130.
[46] Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017): pp. 12-13.
[47] Andrej Krickovic, "Revionism revisisted: developing a typology for classifying Russia and other revisionist powers," p. 626.

quo") in the cases of the United States and Russia, respectively.[48] Finally, the lens of offensive realism is applied to the behaviour of minor states, not simply great powers, as the five assumptions that guide state behaviour according to offensive realism are no less salient for minor states than they are for great powers—all states exist in the same system. This means that the theory's "expansive" insights can also serve to explain the behaviour of minor states.

Joining The West: The Desire For Nato Membership

This section deals with whether offensive realism can account for Eastern European countries' aspiration for NATO membership and argues in the affirmative due to the distribution of power and capabilities between them, Russia, and the United States, the region's security challenges, and Russia's revisionism. In 1990, even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, officials from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland had begun to signal a desire for NATO membership.[49] Even if Czech president Václav Havel floated the idea of a "pan-European security order" in 1993, elites in those countries preferred to join the alliance.[50] In 1991, the Visegrád Group was formed by Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia to push for NATO integration. Likewise, Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Croatia formed the Vilnius Group in 2000 to lobby for NATO membership. Previously, the three Baltic nations had issued a joint statement in 1993 to announce membership as their objective.[51] NATO enlargement was not simply the result of the United States' strategic goals and did not come solely from NATO—it was a process in which the desires of the former Eastern bloc countries were tremendously important in explaining its eventual realization.[52] However, was it an act of "bandwagoning," a case of weaker states joining forces with a more powerful

[48] Ibid., pp. 11-17.

[49] James Goldgeier and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "Evaluating NATO enlargement: scholarly debates, policy implications, and roads not taken," *International Politics* 57, no. 1 (2020): p. 294.

[50] Quoted in Ibid., p. 295; J. Havránek and J. Jireš, "Václav Havel and NATO: Lessons of Leadership for the Atlantic Alliance," in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security after the Cold War*, edited by D.D. Hamilton and K. Spohr (Washington, DC: John Hopkins University, 2019): p. 173.

[51] Andres Kasekamp, "An uncertain journey to the promised land: The Baltic states' road to NATO membership," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 6 (2020): p. 871.

[52] Ibid.

opponent?[53] Or was it a deliberate act of "external balancing" in which they joined a defensive alliance to deter opponents such as Russia?[54] The next three subsections provide evidence and an offensive realist rationale supported by empirical evidence for both.

The Distribution Of Power And Capabilities

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the disbandment of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 left the Soviet Union's former satellites and its successor state in a position of profound power asymmetry. Latent power is measured by the population and by the level of wealth of a given country, indicated by its GNP, as both are the "sinews" of military power.[55] Actual military power, meanwhile, is more simplistically measured and operationalized as the total number of military personnel (both active or in reserve) a country has for its defence.[56] Indeed, the balance of war power is considered to be the principal determinant of victory, and the most significant indicator as the number of troops is what allows a country to conquer and coerce.[57] During the period from 1991 to 2002 (the year when the second wave of adhesions was agreed to), Table 2.1 reveals a deep imbalance between the military capabilities of the Russian Federation and the Soviet Union's former satellites that sought to join NATO.

Whereas Moscow maintained a force of more than a million active soldiers until 2002, its closest competitor in that regard was Poland, which had at most under a fifth of the forces available to Russia. Furthermore, when taking into account Russia's reservists, not a single one of those countries played on the same level. Even when weakened by the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Russia still had an overwhelmingly larger force than any of those minor countries. Since it was the only state to possess nuclear weapons, Russia also possessed nuclear superiority over all of them. Nuclear superiority is defined by Mearsheimer as when a "great power has the capability to

[53] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 162.
[54] Ibid., p. 156.
[55] Ibid., pp. 61-67.
[56] Ibid., p. 51.
[57] Ibid., p. 85.

destroy an adversary's society without fear of major retaliation."[58] Since Eastern European states did not have their own weapons, they could not hope to deter Russian aggression. As the presence of offensive military capability is, in itself, the source of dangers, the balance of military power between those states and Russia supports the case for a phenomenon of balancing.[59] Russia's offensive capabilities were threatening enough to cause concerns.

TABLE 2.1

Military Personnel of Future NATO members in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1991—2002

Active (Reserves) | NATO membership invitation | Not applicable

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Bulgaria	107,000 (472,500)	107,000 (472,500)	99,400 (303,000)	101,900 (303,000)	101,900 (303,000)	103,500 (303,000)	101,500 (303,000)	101,500 (303,000)	80,760 (303,000)	79,760 (303,000)	77,260 (303,000)	68,450 (303,000)
Czechia			106,500 (0)	92,900 (0)	86,400 (0)	70,000 (0)	61,700 (0)	59,100 (0)	58,200 (0)	57,700 (0)	53,600 (0)	49,450 (0)
Czecho-slovakia	154,000 (495,000)	145,800 (495,000)										
Estonia		2,000 (0)	2,500 (6,000)	2,500 (6,000)	3,500 (6,000)	3,450 (2,650)	3,510 (14,000)	3,340 (14,000)	4,800 (14,000)	4,800 (14,000)	4,450 (14,000)	5,510 (24,000)
Hungary	86,500 (210,000)	80,800 (192,000)	78,000 (195,000)	74,500 (195,000)	70,500 (173,000)	64,300 (173,000)	49,100 (186,400)	43,300 (90,300)	43,440 (90,300)	43,790 (90,300)	33,810 (90,300)	33,400 (90,300)
Latvia		2,550 (0)	5,000 (16,000)	6,850 (18,000)	6,950 (18,000)	8,000 (16,500)	4,500 (16,600)	4,960 (14,600)	5,730 (14,500)	5,050 (14,500)	6,500 (14,400)	5,500 (14,050)
Lithuania		7,000 (0)	9,800 (11,000)	8,900 (12,000)	8,900 (12,000)	5,100 (11,000)	5,250 (11,000)	11,130 (355,650)	12,130 (355,650)	12,700 (355,650)	12,190 (336,000)	13,510 (309,200)
Poland	305,000 (507,000)	296,500 (435,200)	287,500 (465,000)	283,600 (465,500)	278,600 (465,500)	248,500 (466,000)	241,750 (343,000)	240,650 (343,000)	240,650 (406,000)	217,290 (406,000)	206,045 (406,000)	163,000 (234,000)
Romania	200,800 (626,000)	200,000 (593,000)	203,100 (427,000)	230,500 (427,000)	217,400 (427,000)	228,400 (427,000)	226,950 (427,000)	219,650 (470,000)	207,000 (470,000)	207,000 (470,000)	103,000 (470,000)	99,200 (130,000)
Russia		2,720,000 (20,000,000)	2,030,000 (20,000,000)	1,714,000 (20,000,000)	1,520,000 (20,000,000)	1,270,000 (20,000,000)	1,240,000 (20,000,000)	1,159,000 (20,000,000)	1,004,100 (20,000,000)	1,004,100 (20,000,000)	977,100 (20,000,000)	988,100 (20,000,000)
Slovakia			47,000 (0)	47,000 (0)	47,000 (0)	42,600 (20,000)	41,200 (20,000)	45,450 (20,000)	44,880 (20,000)	38,600 (20,000)	33,000 (20,000)	26,200 (20,000)
Slovenia		15,000 (85,000)	15,000 (85,000)	8,100 (70,000)	8,400 (70,000)	9,550 (53,000)	9,550 (53,000)	9,550 (53,000)	9,550 (61,000)	9,000 (61,000)	7,600 (61,000)	9,000 (20,000)

Source: Figures for all countries are from the 1991 to 2002 issues of the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *Military Balance* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991-2002).

The population is an essential measure of latent power, as it allows for bigger armies and has "important economic consequences, because only large populations can produce great wealth."[60] Table 2.2 reveals that, despite negative population growth, Russia remained enormously more populous than any of the Eastern European countries. Poland, the closest in population size, did not even have even half of Russia's

[58] Ibid., p. 129.
[59] Ibid., p. 31.
[60] Ibid., p. 61.

population at any point. As the Russian Federation could count on a more numerous population for its manpower and economic activity, the disparity between this (still) great power and its minor former satellites meant that they were very much in a situation of asymmetry. Simply put, they did not have the societal capabilities to compete on their own against Russia and ensure their survival in war, something to which states pay keen attention. This meant that seeking protection elsewhere and great power patronage was the most rational decision for those states.

TABLE 2.2

Population of Future NATO members in Eastern Europe, Russia and the United States, 1991—2002

NATO membership invitation | Not applicable

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Bulgaria	9,080,000	9,098,000	8,753,000	8,435,000	8,411,000	8,375,000	8,338,000	8,349,000	8,400,000	8,231,000	8,187,000	7,837,000
Czechia			10,302,000	10,365,400	10,374,000	10,400,600	10,350,000	10,311,000	10,480,000	10,290,000	10,218,000	10,197,000
Estonia		1,573,000	1,613,000	1,623,000	1,541,000	1,475,000	1,472,000	1,454,000	1,445,000	1,450,000	1,375,000	1,379,000
Hungary	10,555,400	10,543,800	10,396,000	10,434,000	10,206,000	10,155,000	10,159,000	10,050,000	10,028,000	10,005,000	10,002,000	10,159,000
Latvia		2,687,000	2,733,000	2,622,000	2,602,000	2,594,000	2,587,000	2,458,000	2,450,000	2,420,000	2,308,000	2,310,000
Lithuania		3,723,000	3,833,000	3,833,000	3,743,000	3,712,000	3,709,000	3,700,000	3,700,000	3,700,000	3,655,000	3,443,000
Poland	38,038,000	38,207,000	38,655,000	38,814,400	38,492,000	38,583,000	38,673,000	38,659,000	38,854,000	38,648,000	38,819,000	38,230,000
Romania	23,404,600	22,749,000	22,759,000	23,177,000	22,805,000	22,787,000	22,769,000	22,520,000	22,732,000	22,500,000	22,231,000	21,730,000
Russia		148,041,000	150,385,000	148,920,000	148,940,000	149,120,900	148,000,000	146,600,000	146,300,000	146,000,000	146,720,000	145,306,000
Slovakia			5,487,000	5,520,000	5,414,000	5,441,000	5,370,000	5,391,000	5,280,000	5,400,000	5,384,000	5,377,000
Slovenia		1,927,000	1,970,000	1,988,300	2,007,000	2,010,000	2,012,000	2,015,000	2,017,000	2,020,000	1,981,000	1,994,000
United States	252,981,000	256,514,000	259,919,000	263,126,000	266,278,000	269,394,000	272,657,000	275,854,000	279,040,000	282,162,000	284,969,000	287,625,000

SOURCE: Figures for all countries (except for 2002 and the United States) are from the 1991 to 2001 issues of the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *Military Balance* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991-2001). Figures for the year 2002 for all countries and all figures for the United States are from the World Bank's *Population total* database, as retrieved on 12 April 2022.

Wealth is the second measure of latent power. As a "state cannot build a powerful military if it does not have the money and technology to equip, train, and continually modernize its fighting forces," the wealth disparity is of great importance when a given state assesses the threat posed by another.[61] Mearsheimer used the GNP

[61] Ibid.

to measure wealth—to replicate his methodology, this article has done the same. The result, Table 2.3, displays a more nuanced situation than the two preceding tables. Although no state had the same level of wealth as Russia (there are some severe asymmetries between, for example, the Baltic countries and Russia), it was going through a period of economic decline that meant it did not have the same resources as the former Soviet Union. In 1999, Poland even came relatively close to Russia's level, even though it later quickly rebounded. What is significant here is that no state had the wealth necessary to defend itself against Russia (or even the United States), meaning that the distribution of wealth between those countries did support the notion that the future NATO members had to find security protections somewhere.

TABLE 2.3

Wealth in Future NATO Countries, Russia, and the United States by GNP, 1991—2002

NATO membership invitation | Not applicable or available

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Bulgaria	$9.83bn	$10.18bn	$10.64bn	$9.5bn	$18.55bn	$11.9bn	$10.96bn	$14.75bn	$13.44bn	$12.92bn	$14.2bn	$16.75bn
Czechia		$34.59bn	$40.9bn	$47.89bn	$59.68bn	$66.38bn	$61.25bn	$65.82bn	$63.96bn	$60.63bn	$65.9bn	$79.24bn
Estonia										$5.47bn	$5.95bn	$6.98bn
Hungary			$39.17bn	$41.97bn	$44.43bn	$44.55bn	$44.42bn	$45.68bn	$45.89bn	$44.48bn	$50.63bn	$63.76bn
Latvia					$5.83bn	$6bn	$5.58bn	$7.2bn	$7.46bn	$7.95bn	$8.39bn	$9.57bn
Lithuania					$7.85bn	$8.29bn	$9.23bn	$10.99bn	$10.71bn	$11.32bn	$12.07bn	$14.11bn
Poland	$82.61bn	$90.17bn	$92.44bn	$108.24bn	$140.3bn	$159.12bn	$158.23bn	$173.5bn	$169.02bn	$171.49bn	$190.29bn	$198.4bn
Romania	$29bn	$25.03bn	$26.22bn	$29.94bn	$37.19bn	$36.63bn	$35.25bn	$41.19bn	$35.5bn	$37bn	$40.2bn	$45.6bn
Russia	$516.55bn	$455.79bn	$430.62bn	$393.24bn	$392.17bn	$386.29bn	$396.24bn	$259.17bn	$188.19bn	$252.97bn	$302.36bn	$338.89bn
Slovakia					$25.98bn	$28.17bn	$27.77bn	$29.91bn	$30.32bn	$29.05bn	$30.77bn	$35.04bn
Slovenia					$21.46bn	$21.56bn	$20.75bn	$22.11bn	$22.69bn	$20.24bn	$20.86bn	$23.29bn
United States	$6.1tr	$6.43tr	$6.73tr	$7.17tr	$7.57tr	$8.05tr	$8.59tr	$9.13tr	$9.69tr	$10.38tr	$10.75tr	$11.05tr

SOURCE: Figures for all countries are from the World Bank's *GNI* database, as retrieved on 12 April 2022. The source and figures are different from Table 3.1 due to data availability.

The picture that emerges here is one in which there was a serious imbalance between the power—actual or latent—of the future NATO members and Russia. There was also a tremendous power imbalance between them and the United States. Thus, the relative distribution of power and capabilities between those countries did create a situation in which the smaller ones would have strong incentives to seek alliance

membership or alternate great power patronage to ensure their security and survival. Traditional offensive realism would stipulate that the theory's dynamics only apply to great powers, rendering this analysis moot. This rebuttal is rejected for two reasons. First, this argument removes agency from minor states and places it entirely in the hands of great powers. This ignores the fact that each state, independently of its status, will seek to maximize its power to guarantee its survival. Second, it disregards the assumption of rationality, as all states are aware of the security environment in which they operate and think "strategically about how to survive in it."[62]

Mearsheimer's claim that there is "little room" for trust among states should not be limited to great powers—it is also the reality of minor powers.[63] As they also anticipate danger, it logically follows that they will act to better their security prospects. In this case, the power distribution objectively favoured balancing *and* bandwagoning as the right strategies. Walt's balance of threats theory offers answers as to why balancing against Russia and bandwagoning with the United States were favoured. Russia represented the most proximate threat.[64] Since power projection is made more difficult by distance, the Atlantic ocean served as a barrier that made Russia more threatening than the United States.[65] This is, in effect, what Mearsheimer conceptualized as the "stopping power of water:" its ability to prevent the projection of power over large distances.[66] Additionally, the fact that no other power comparable to the United States meant that Eastern European countries had no available alternative and no choice but to bandwagon with it.[67]

Security Threats and Distrust in the International System

The period from 1991 to 2014, following the end of the Soviet Union and beyond the distribution of power and capabilities between the future NATO members and

[62] Ibid., p. 31.
[63] Ibid., p. 32.
[64] Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the balance of World Power," p. 10.
[65] Ibid.
[66] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 114.
[67] Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the balance of World Power," p. 17; Anders Wivel, "Balancing against threats or bandwagoning with power? Europe and the transatlantic relationship after the Cold War," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 21, no. 3 (September 2008): p. 301.

Russia, was also one of considerable security threats and instability in Eastern Europe. All European countries faced considerable security challenges that went beyond Russia. The end of the Warsaw Pact meant that, for the first time in almost half a century, Eastern Europe was left to fend for itself without any power to adjudicate its conflicts. It opened up important questions about what new security order would emerge, especially in the face of predicted Russian revanchism.[68] Asmus et al. (1995) raised the possibility of a security vacuum that could "undercut the fragile new democracies" in Eastern Europe by "reviving old patterns of geopolitical competition and conflict."[69] Asmus & Nurick (1996) further argued that the perception of potential Russian ambitions was of considerable concern to former Warsaw Pact members.[70] The power vacuum that existed in the region meant security threats and distrust were predominant, making the adoption of a bandwagoning strategy regarding the United States and a balancing strategy against Russia even more likely.

The Yugoslav wars had considerable consequences for European security and reinforced the impetus created by the power vacuum in the search for a new security arrangement. The emergence of those violent conflicts in the 1990s created great fear of large-scale ethnic violence becoming the new staple of Eastern European history. As Van Evera (1994) presented, the risk of "large-scale violence" was deemed "substantial."[71] Indeed, the "spectre of irredentism" across the region was the source of concern for countries such as Poland, Romania, and Czechia due to the new democracies' fragility and considerable ethnic diversity.[72] Concerns were particularly present in some officials' statements, as the desire for NATO expansion was motivated by the "unravelling of Yugoslavia and the Soviet coup of August 1991."[73] Indeed, the conflicts in the Balkans meant that Eastern European countries perceived continuous

[68] See: Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival* 15, no. 2 (1993): pp. 42-43.

[69] Quoted in Alexander Lanoszka, "Thank goodness for NATO enlargement," p. 453; Ronald D. Asmus et al., "NATO Expansion: The Next Steps," *Survival* 37, no.1 (1995): p. 9.

[70] Ronald D. Asmus and Robert C. Nurick, "NATO Enlargement and the Baltic States," *Survival* 38, no. 2 (1996): p. 122.

[71] Stephen Van Evera, "Hypotheses on nationalism and war," *International Security* 18, no. 4 (1994):p. 8.

[72] Quoted in Alexander Lanoszka, "Thank goodness for NATO enlargement," p. 453; Stephen Van Evera, "Hypotheses on nationalism and war," pp. 8-9.

[73] Andrew T. Wolff, "Explaining NATO Expansion into Central and Eastern Europe, 1989-2004: An Analysis of Geopolitical Factors, Rationales, and Rhetoric," p. 79.

threats nearby.[74] In that environment, belonging to a collective security organization was particularly attractive to former Soviet satellites to cultivate cooperation and prevent wars with their neighbours.[75] It further pushed those countries to avoid conflicts.[76]

Thus, bandwagoning with the United States through NATO had many purposes. First, it allowed those states to benefit from the security and stability the Transatlantic alliance brought to its members. Second, it forced them to peacefully resolve their potential conflicts with their neighbours. Third, and most significantly, it made them members of a security space in which their fears, rooted in rational but uncertain considerations and assessments of their neighbours' offensive capabilities, could at least be minimally alleviated. Even though the region did not entirely devolve into ethnic conflicts and those acts of violence were contained to the former Yugoslavia, many other Eastern countries had similar characteristics that could have led them to conflicts. Particularly in the cases of the Baltic countries and Ukraine, Brubaker (1995) argued that the presence of significant Russian minorities on their territories could lead to the Russian Federation asserting its "right, and obligation, to protect the interests of diaspora Russians."[77] But there were also significant populations of other national minorities in other countries. Thus, the overall situation in Eastern Europe after the dissolution of the Soviet Union was one of doubts and threats. In that context, NATO membership was perceived by the former Soviet satellites as a way of ensuring their security through bandwagoning.

Revisionism and Russia

The third element that empirically grounds the offensive realist account of the Eastern European countries' desire for NATO membership is *Russian revisionism*. Indeed, it is the reason why NATO enlargement can be explained by the concept of

[74] Stéfanie von Hlatky and Michel Fortmann, "NATO enlargement and the failure of the cooperative security mindset," *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (2020): p. 559.
[75] Andrew Kydd, "Trust Building, Trust Breaking: The Dilemma of NATO Enlargement," p. 807.
[76] Jonathan Eyal, "NATO's Enlargement: Anatomy of a Decision," p. 697.
[77] Rogers Brubaker, "National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands in the New Europe," *Daedalus* 124, no. 2 (Spring 1995): p. 127.

balancing on the part of the future members against Russia. Offensive realist opponents of NATO enlargement claim that, during the 1990s, Russia was "too weak" and "did not look so threatening."[78] This article contends that only a severely selective reading of the record delivers such an assessment and that the portrayal of Russia as being nothing more than a vanquished foe was wishful thinking on the part of Western intellectuals. Indeed, even at the depth of its post-Cold War troubles, the Russian Federation "remained a power to be reckoned with."[79] According to future NATO members, the Russian danger had not disappeared and was still salient,[80] as there remained a "residual threat posed by Russian military power."[81] This is particularly obvious when taking into account Table 2.1's figures and the dominance of Russian military power *vis-à-vis* its former satellites—something of which those states were keenly aware.

Revisionism is best understood through the typology conceptualized by Krickovic. In the case of Russia, the most relevant category is that of *reactionary revisionists*, which are powers that seek to "preserve important elements of the *status quo*" and to "roll back recent evolutionary changes to the *status quo*" to return to a previous order.[82] Since the end of the Cold War, Russia had been dissatisfied with its place and decline in the world and has sought to re-assert its position as a pre-eminent great power.[83] As Sushentsov & Wohlforth argued, its culture was grounded in its great power status, which gave it the authority to have its own sphere of influence.[84] Russia

[78] John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," p. 2.

[79] Maciej Herbut and Renata Kunert-Milcarz, "The Explanatory Power of Structural Realism in the 21st Century: the Eastern Partnership, Russian Expansionism and the War in Ukraine," *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 46, no. 2 (2017): p. 197.

[80] Stéfanie von Hlatky & Michel Fortmann, "NATO enlargement and the failure of the cooperative security mindset," p. 558.

[81] John S. Duffield, "NATO's Functions after the Cold War," *Political Science Quarterly* 109, no. 5 (1994): p. 766.

[82] Andrej Krickovic, "Revionism revisisted: developing a typology for classifying Russia and other revisionist powers," p. 628.

[83] Andrej Krickovic & Yuval Weber, "What Can Russia Teach Us About Change? Status-Seeking as a Catalyst for Transformation in International Politics," *International Studies Review* 20, no. 2 (2018): p. 292; Kimberly Marten, "Reconsidering NATO expansion: a counterfactual analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s," p. 135; Kimberly Marten, "NATO enlargement: evaluating its consequences in Russia," p. 401.

[84] Andrey A. Sushentsov & William C. Wohlforth, "The tragedy of US—Russian relations: NATO centrality and the revisionists' spiral," p. 433.

perceived its weakening to be temporary and strongly believed in a multipolar world in which it was free to do as it pleased in its own backyard.[85] This fact meant that Russian revisionism, in the minds of Eastern European leaders, was not simply hypothetical. It was a question of *when* not *if*. Thus, balancing against the more proximate threat of Russia by bandwagoning with the overwhelmingly stronger United States was a move made necessary by feared (and actual) Russian revisionism. Despite the prevailing view that Russian revisionism only began in the 2000s, after NATO's two expansions, I contend that some key events allow for Russia to be classified as revisionist as early as the 1990s. Those events were sufficient to create distrust between Russia and the Soviet Union's former satellites.

In 1992, Russia already had revisionist ambitions toward the Washington-imposed status quo that placed the two countries on unequal footing.[86] This simple fact was the source of anxieties for the Soviet Union's former satellites that did not wish to be brought back within Moscow's sphere of influence. From 1991 onward, revisionist interventions in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh showcased the Russian willingness to damage its neighbours' "sovereignty and territorial integrity" under the "right set of conditions."[87] Russia's covert and overt involvement in those "frozen" conflicts that began with the intervention of local Soviet military units (now under Russian command) in favour of the rebels cemented its image, even before the 2000s, as a threatening neighbour.[88] In Transnistria, Russian tanks intervened to support the rebels.[89] The 1999 raid on Pristina also demonstrated a Russian inclination to flex its muscles and actively use its power.[90]

Additionally, Russia's policy toward Ukraine from 1991 onward was marked by claims of legitimate oversight over the latter's internal affairs (Götz 2016.[91] Estonia was

[85] Ibid., p. 434

[86] Ibid., p. 436.

[87] Sabine Fischer, "Russian Policy in the Unresolved Conflicts," in *Not Frozen! The Unresolved Conflicts over Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh in Light of the Crisis over Ukraine*, edited by Sabine Fisher (Berlin, Germany: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2016): p. 9.

[88] Charles King, "The Five-Day War: Managing Moscow After the Georgia Crisis," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 6 (2008): p. 5.

[89] "The next Bosnia? Russia and Modolva," *The Economist* 323, no. 7762 (June 1992): p. 53; "Moldova holds its breath, too," *The Economist* 338, no. 7956 (March 1996): p. 50.

[90] Fiodor Loukianov, "La Russie, une puissance révisioniste ?" p. 13.

[91] Elias Götz, "Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine policy, 1991—present," p. 302.

accused of practising *Apartheid* against its Russian-speaking population; the Russian parliament voted in 1992 to contest Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea.[92] All of those events were signals that placed Russia strongly in the revisionist category as early as the 1990s and made it a proximate threat against which balancing was deemed necessary. Bandwagoning with the United States was, thus, the logical strategy after a rational balance of threats calculus on the part of the future NATO members. In sum, an *expansive* offensive realist theory of international relations that applies its insights to the behaviour of minor states yields great insights into the factors that motivated Eastern European countries to seek NATO membership. The distribution of power meant that they were stuck between a rock and a hard place, as both the United States and Russia had an overwhelming actual and latent power advantage over them. A balance of threat calculus, reinforced by the overall European security context at the time and Russia's early selective revisionism meant that NATO enlargement in their perspective can best be understood as an act of bandwagoning with the United States *and* of balancing against Russia. As those are not mutually exclusive (since states face multiple threats all at once), NATO enlargement was the best strategy to achieve both.

The Internal Drive for Expansion

This section reviews whether an offensive realist account can explain NATO enlargement from the perspective of its leading member, the United States. A *robust* offensive realist theory as conceptualized by Layne can provide a persuasive theoretical explanation as to why NATO expansion was desirable for the United States. Mearsheimer stipulated that all great powers seek to attain regional hegemony—once that point is reached, however, they then become *status quo* powers that only seek to preserve the pre-existing balance in the system.[93] From that point of view, and assuming that the United States is a regional hegemon, NATO enlargement can indeed be perplexing. Yet, as Layne argues, that argument is logically flawed.[94] If states truly are relentless maximizers as offensive realism claims, then even regional hegemons should and will seek to maximize their advantage against their rivals, especially at

[92] Stephen Sestanovich, "One Nation Under Boris," *The New Republic* (June 1992): p. 20.
[93] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 34-35 and 40.
[94] Christopher Layne, "The 'Poster Child for Offensive Realism': America as a Global Hegemon," p. 128.

times when they are vulnerable. Not doing so would be irresponsible. What emerges is what Layne calls "robust offensive realism:" since global hegemony is the best response to the fear and uncertainty that plague the international system, great powers will seek to press their advantage and to "put the competition out of business."[95] As NATO's drive for expansion was led by elites from the United States that sought to "check Russian resurgence."[96] This policy is consistent with robust offensive realism. The next two subsections provide empirical grounding for that assertion as they consider the distribution of power between the United States and Russia, America's revisionism, and two counterfactuals alternative to NATO enlargement.

The Distribution of Power and Capabilities

Between the United States and Russia at the end of the Cold War, the distribution of latent power was overwhelmingly in the former's favour. As shown in Table 3.1, the United States was substantially wealthier than Russia. While the United States had a quarter of the world's wealth for the entire period from 1991 to 1999, Russia only had around 2 percent. The relative share of wealth between the two was even more unbalanced. This meant that Russia's economic output and its technological advancements could not match the United States and that it could not actually compete. Table 2.2 shows a slightly different story. While the United States did have a substantially larger population than Russia, the latter still had a population big enough to sustain future economic growth and large armies. Thus, even if Russia was outmatched during this period on both measures of latent power, as it had lost significant portions of the Soviet Union's power through the independence of former Soviet republics, there still remained the potential for Russia to rise again. This eventuality was particularly entrenched in the Russian leaders' way of thinking as they

[95] Christopher Layne, "The Waning of U.S. Hegemony—Myth or Reality? A Review Essay," *International Security* 12, no. 2 (Winter 2009): p. 130.

[96] Stéfanie von Hlatky & Michel Fortmann, "NATO enlargement and the failure of the cooperative security mindset," p. 557

saw their decline as a mere temporary setback.[97] It was also, as previously exposed, a source of considerable concern for Eastern European leaders and US strategists.

TABLE 3.1

Russia and the United States' GNP and Relative Share of Wealth, 1991—1999

GNP (Relative Share of Wealth | Share of World Wealth) | Not available

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Russia		$796bn (11% | 3%)	$746bn (10% | 2%)	$666bn (8% | 2%)	$649bn (8% | 2%)	$637bn (7% | 2%)	$652bn (6% | 2%)	$615bn (7% | 2%)	$625bn (6% | 2%)
United States	$6,010bn (NA | 24%)	$6,340bn (88% | 25%)	$6,670bn (89% | 25%)	$7,070bn (91% | 25%)	$7,420bn (91% | 25%)	$7,830bn (92% | 26%)	$8,330bn (93% | 26%)	$8,780bn (93% | 26%)	$9,260bn (94% | 27%)
World	$24,800bn	$24,900bn	$26,000bn	$27,300bn	$28,700bn	$30,500bn	$32,200bn	$33,400bn	$34,900bn

*In current US$, 2003

SOURCE: Figures are from the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency's *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfer Database* (WMEAT) 1999-2000 (2003). The source and figures are different from Table 2.3 to replicate Mearsheimer (2001, 74)'s methodology.

Measures of latent power indicate a balance in favour of the United States in the post-Cold War era. However, Mearsheimer argued that when two or more great powers have "survivable nuclear retaliatory forces," a security competition takes place and the key component of power will remain the balance of land power.[98] As Russia inherited the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal, the two states' respective weapons equalized the dynamic between them and increased the importance of land power. In that regard, Table 3.2 shows that the United States did not have overwhelming dominance—until 1995, Russia still had a larger army and even after that maintained a larger potential reserve. Even taking into account the technological disparity and budgetary problems, Russia was still a potentially threatening foe.[99]

[97] Andrey A. Sushentsov and William C. Wohlforth, "The tragedy of US—Russian relations: NATO centrality and the revisionists' spiral," p. 436.

[98] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 128-129.

[99] Johanna Granville, "The Many Paradoxes of NATO Enlargement," *Current History* 98, no. 1 (April 1999): p. 167.

TABLE 3.2

Military Personnel of the United States and Russia, 1991—2001

Active (Reserves) | Not applicable

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Russia		2,720,000 (20,000,000)	2,030,000 (20,000,000)	1,714,000 (20,000,000)	1,520,000 (20,000,000)	1,270,000 (20,000,000)	1,240,000 (20,000,000)	1,159,000 (20,000,000)	1,004,100 (20,000,000)	1,004,100 (20,000,000)	977,100 (20,000,000)
United States	2,029,600 (1,721,700)	1,913,750 (1,784,050)	1,729,700 (1,842,200)	1,650,500 (2,048,000)	1,547,300 (2,045,000)	1,483,800 (1,880,600)	1,447,600 (1,711,700)	1,401,600 (1,350,550)	1,371,500 (1,303,300)	1,365,800 (1,211,500)	1,367,700 (1,200,600)

SOURCES: Figures for all countries are from the 1991 to 2001 issues of the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *Military Balance* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991-2001).

This distribution of power between the two states was not conducive to war as neither great power had the confidence, despite the United States' latent dominance, that it could defeat the other.[100] Robust offensive realist theory suggests that, in those conditions, given the chance, the United States should, would, and did press its advantage by seeking to increase its power. NATO enlargement was one way of achieving this, as it was considered to be a policy conducive to ensuring the United States' preeminence from 1990 onward.[101] The relative weakness of Russia meant that it could not occupy the same place the Soviet Union had as a bulwark against further American expansion in Europe.— In essence, Russia's difficulties removed a constraint on the United States' *domineering maximization*. By domineering maximization, the author means a great power's opportunistic and revisionist increase of its power relative to its rival when the latter is in decline or shows weakness.

This new concept stems from Layne's robust offensive realism and from Krickovic's concept of *domineering revisionism*, when "ascending hegemons" take advantage of their "preponderance of power to remould the world in their image."[102] It is by combining both authors' insights along with Mearsheimer's theory that a persuasive offensive realist account of NATO expansion can be formulated.

[100] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 186.

[101] Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "Eastbound and down: The United States, NATO enlargement, and suppressing the Soviet and Western European alternatives, 1990—1992," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 6-7 (2020): p. 819.

[102] Andrej Krickovic, "Revionism revisisted: developing a typology for classifying Russia and other revisionist powers," p. 627.

Accordingly, NATO enlargement served two purposes: increasing American power and limiting Russia's potential growth by removing from its sphere of influence countries that had previously fueled the Soviet Union's ascent. It was a logical offensive realist byproduct of the United States' dominance.[103] The power maximization theory is also supported by the empirical record, as US officials believed it would make the new Eastern Europe conducive to their country's interests.[104] A counterargument that is often presented to the rationality of the United States' domineering maximization is the idea that NATO enlargement represented a considerable security liability for the Translatlantic alliance that actually weakened the United States' position in Europe. Lanoszka (2020) demonstrated that this criticism is not empirically or logically grounded as the new members are easier to defend than what is argued by skeptics.[105]

The Counterfactual Alternatives to Nato Expansion

What if NATO had not expanded? Would an alternative pan-European security arrangement have emerged? Would it have placated Russia and transformed it into a collaborative non-revisionist partner of the United States? Asking and answering these questions yields two important counterfactual arguments that give strength to the robust offensive realist narrative of NATO enlargement from the US perspective. The alternative to the Transatlantic alliance's push toward the East would have probably been an independent European security organization, as the fears and uncertainties that drove the former Soviet satellites into the arms of NATO would not have disappeared.[106] In the logic of offensive realism, European integration efforts meant that the possibility of an alternative to American power could represent the emergence of a new potential competitor. Thus, enlargement was a way for the United States to keep

[103] Barry R. Posen, "European Union Security and Defense Policy: Reponse to Unipolarity?" *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): pp. 156-157; Christopher Layne, "The Waning of U.S. Hegemony—Myth or Reality? A Review Essay," pp. 148-149.

[104] Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion," *International Security* 40, no. 3 (2016): p. 37; Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "NATO enlargement and US foreign policy: the origins, durability, and impact of an idea," *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (2020): p. 350.

[105] Alexander Lanoszka, "Thank goodness for NATO enlargement," p. 452.

[106] Johanna Granville, "The Many Paradoxes of NATO Enlargement," p. 170.

European states married to its interests,[107] undercut potential security challengers,[108] maintain NATO's relevance,[109] and safeguard its global primacy within the system. NATO enlargement thus fits with a robust understanding of offensive realism.

The second counterfactual relates to whether or not Russia would have remained friendly with the West had NATO not expanded East. The underlying assumption that is embedded in this argument is the idea that NATO enlargement is what drove Russia toward a revisionist and rivalrous stance.[110] Therefore, had NATO simply maintained its Cold War-era borders, Russia would have remained a productive partner, bringing in benefits substantially superior to those NATO enlargement brought. But this account is wrong on the facts. Indeed, as previously explained, Russian revisionism and dissatisfaction with the US-dominated status quo preceded NATO enlargement.[111] As Lanoszka argued, had the United States not promoted NATO enlargement, it would have found itself in a potentially relatively similar position to now, but without its new European allies.[112]

As such, a robust offensive realist theory of international relations that considers that all states can gain advantages embracing revisionist strategies to maximize their share of the world's power yields good insight into the factors that led the United States to promote NATO enlargement. I suggest that it was an act of domineering maximization that sought to opportunistically exploit Russia's weakness during the 1990s to increase the United States primacy. An analysis of the distribution of power and two counterfactual arguments also supports this statement, as the policy also

[107] Rajan Menon and William Ruger, "NATO enlargement and US grand strategy: a new assessment," p. 371.

[108] Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "NATO enlargement and US foreign policy: the origins, durability, and impact of an idea," p. 350.

[109] Dale A. Vesser and Zalmay M. Khalizad, "Extract from 18 Feb 1992 DPG Draft," *National Security Council* (1992), accessed on 14 April 2022, https://www.archives.gov/files/declassification/iscap/pdf/2008-003-docs1-12.pdf; Robert J. Art, "Why Western Europe Needs the United States and NATO," *Political Science Quarterly* 111, no. 1 (1996): pp. 9-27.

[110] John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," p. 2.

[111] Kimberly Marten, "NATO enlargement: evaluating its consequences in Russia," p. 401; James Goldgeier and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "Evaluating NATO enlargement: scholarly debates, policy implications, and roads not taken," p. 291.

[112] Alexander Lanoszka, "Thank goodness for NATO enlargement," p. 452.

served the United States security interests by keeping Europe under its influence, avoiding the emergence of a new challenger, and undercutting Russia in its backyard. All of those goals are consistent with an offensive realist explanation for NATO enlargement, provided Mearsheimer's logic of relentless maximization is brought to its coherent conclusion.

Conclusion

NATO enlargement is one of the most controversial and fiercely debated issues in contemporary international relations. Many critics have sought to argue that it was an act unsupported by neorealist theories. They claimed vindication in 2014 when Russia seized Crimea. This article has argued that, on the contrary, NATO enlargement is consistent with a neorealist understanding of international relations. It has detailed how an *expansive* and *robust* offensive realist theory coupled with Walt's balance of threat theory offers great insight into what drove Eastern European states to seek NATO membership, and what pushed the United States to be in favour of their adhesion. The account that emerges is one in which Eastern European states balanced against Russia *and* bandwagoned with the United States through NATO enlargement. From the US perspective, it was an act of domineering maximization that sought to solidify its primacy and superiority against potential rivals. Three implications of this argument can be mentioned:

1) A robust and expansive offensive realism provides good insights into the behaviour of states as it goes beyond the original theory's self-imposed, restrictive and illogical limitations, especially when it is applied with the balance of threat theory.

2) Since Russia's revisionist turn preceded NATO enlargement, it was a prudent move of power maximization that put the United States in a better position to react to Russian revisionism than it would have been otherwise (for more arguments to that effect, see Lanoszka).

3) According to this version of offensive realism, domineering maximization is what we should expect from an ascending great power when it is in a position to opportunistically profit from its rivals' misfortunes.

Notably, the point of this article was not to argue that offensive realism is right or the definitive theory of international relations. It took the theory's assumptions at face value without challenging them. Instead, this article establishes how some of its theoretical tools can succeed in explaining systemic and structural forces at play in the world when they are properly adapted and brought to their logical conclusion. Despite its flaws, offensive realism does provide some key and relevant intuitions, especially when applied in conjunction with Walt's balance of threat theory. A future avenue of inquiry that stems from this demonstration that could be explored is whether the Russian perspective also fits within this version of offensive realism.

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