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October 13, 1997**MEMORANDUM TO: OPINION LEADERS****FROM: GARY SCHMITT****SUBJECT: NATO Enlargement**

The following memorandum is the second in the Project's series on the topic of NATO's expansion.

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NATO Enlargement: What is "the Threat?"

One of the most common arguments made against the inclusion of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in NATO is that it is unnecessary: from where, the critics of NATO expansion ask, is the threat against these countries supposed to be coming? Although they admit that it is understandable why the three countries would fear Russia given their histories, one need only look at the Russian army's performance in Chechnya — and the Russian public's reaction to the war — to see that this is not a serious threat today. This approach to the question of expanding NATO, however, misunderstands what the alliance is about, and why its expansion is important. To understand the question properly, one must look more broadly at the issue, starting with a bit of history.

During the Cold War, the United States and its allies were focused on the military threat posed by the Soviet Union. And NATO was understood as a response to the massive number of Soviet armed forces deployed in Central and Eastern Europe. Over time, it became natural to look at national security issues from the perspective of the threat being addressed: before any new weapon system was developed, or any new initiative was taken in international relations, it made sense to inquire about the threat to which the action was meant to respond. Hence, it was hardly surprising that, when the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended, many — using an argument similar to the one put forward by the opponents of expansion — thought that NATO should wither away as well.

But this didn't happen. Whatever the proximate reason for NATO's creation, it had come to stand for something more significant. NATO had become more than an alliance whose existence depended on its serving the immediate interests of its parties. Instead, it had evolved into the centerpiece of a community of nations, held together by shared political values as much as common interests.

This community has been variously described: Max Singer and Aaron Wildavsky called it (along with Japan, Australia and New Zealand) the "zone of peace and democracy." [The Real World Order: Zones of Peace/Zones of Turmoil (1993) p. 3.] Former Secretary of State James Baker defined the relationship by observing that war among these states had become, not merely unlikely, but "unthinkable." Indeed, this is merely a special case of the more general proposition, which many international relations theorists have noted, that liberal democracies rarely, if ever, go to war with each other and typically do not resort to war except in response to the aggressive behavior of another state.

Whatever the universal validity of this argument, it is clearly the case that various features of the post-World War II international system have helped keep the "democratic peace." As the example of Japan has shown, the international economic order has been such as to allow nations to prosper while lacking any usable military power whatsoever. And, in Europe, NATO has helped prevent the historic hostility between two of its members, Greece and Turkey, from escalating into actual conflict. This purpose still remains in the post-Cold War period: in fact, the mere prospect of NATO membership has helped damp down tensions between various Central European states (such as Hungary and Romania) whose relations are strained by ethnic issues.

Thus, NATO serves a major building block of world order. For the greater part of the developed world, it helps ensure cooperative relations and the possibility of a common approach to many of the security threats that may arise. Even in regions outside its area of responsibility, it can serve as a framework for common action, as occurred in the Gulf War. In regions closer to its main concerns, such as Bosnia, it is the indispensable mechanism for joint action by the major developed democratic states. Enlarging NATO therefore expands this community and increases the number of potential partners for addressing the entire gamut of national security concerns we face.

NATO's expansion into Central Europe is also of value in helping Russia move toward becoming a member of the "zone of the peace." While critics of the alliance's expansion often point to a possible negative reaction from Moscow, the effect over the long run is likely to be positive. By including key Central European states in NATO, the option of a revived imperialism in that region is effectively taken off the table and, with it, a Russian temptation to ignore or put aside its far more important task of internal reform. From the perspective of Moscow, NATO expansion is the equivalent of the legendary sign in the New York City alleyway: "Don't even think of parking here."

Finally, NATO can serve as an influence on the internal political development of its less stable members. It stands for certain norms of internal behavior, such as democratic civilian control of the military; the military-to-military contacts occur within NATO help solidify these norms with respect to the military organizations of the newly democratic states. Thus, Spain's entry into NATO following the end of the Franco dictatorship not only marked a decision for democracy on the part of the country, but also made it more difficult for the military to try to resist that decision. NATO membership for the new entrants will likewise promote positive trends in their militaries and security services; it will strengthen the hands of those who want to implement Western norms and dishearten those who might still hope to reverse the democratic gains of the past eight years. This inclusion into the "democratic club," as much as any immediate threat, is what drives the new democracies of Central Europe to want to join NATO. It will represent a solidification of the new direction of their politics, as well as a recognition of it by the major Western democracies.

Viewed in this light, NATO's expansion should be considered not in terms of a specific threat (or the lack of) to which it responds, but as a major opportunity to consolidate the expansion of democracy. Any realistic view of future American security policy must admit that we will not shed our responsibilities in the world any time soon. If this is so, then the current situation represents a tremendous opportunity to strengthen the community of nations which can be most useful in our attempts to meet those responsibilities. It would be short-sighted to pass it up.