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

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

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### Russia and NATO Enlargement

In the area of national security affairs, it is not often that a country can "have its cake and eat it too." But that is precisely what is possible in the case of NATO's decision to expand while the U.S. and its allies attempt to establish a sober post-Cold War relationship with the new Russian government.

The majority of those opposed to NATO's expansion claim that moving the borders of the alliance east toward Russia can't help but undermine efforts to fashion a new relationship with Moscow. By supposedly taking advantage of a weakened Russia to expand into Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, NATO will be providing the kindling for a fiery nationalist backlash within Russia. Enlarging the alliance will strengthen Russia's non-democratic forces at the expense of those inside Russia who want to increase ties to the West.

These might have been legitimate concerns at one time, but events of the past three years have shown them to be unfounded. Since NATO has begun discussing plans to expand into parts of the former Soviet empire, there has been no backlash. Polls of Russian public opinion have consistently indicated that NATO's expansion is not much of a concern for most Russians; domestic problems remain a far higher priority. Nor has NATO's decision to expand led to a political revival of Russia's extreme nationalists. If anything, as the decision to expand NATO has moved forward, reformers within the Russian political system have accumulated more power, not less. The extreme nationalists have seen their political fortunes fade since the beginning of 1994.

Russians may not like the idea of NATO moving its borders closer to its own, but it is improbable that the decision to expand will, on its own, generate a serious, negative Russian reaction down the road. The reason is simple: NATO is a defensive alliance and close Russian observation of an expanded NATO's operations, training, and deployments should convince all but the most hide-bound of Russian militants that it has no other role.

Indeed, in time, there is a good chance that many of the more thoughtful Russians will come to appreciate — even if they don't publicly acknowledge — the strategic benefit to Russia that comes from NATO's expansion into Central Europe. From Moscow's point of view, there are only two plausible outcomes for the region in the years ahead: a Central Europe dominated by a defensive alliance headed by a non-European power, the U.S., or a Central Europe in which Europe's other "great power," a unified Germany, has (intentionally or not) the upper hand. Most Russians will prefer the stability provided by the former over possible problems arising from the latter.

Admittedly, these calculations may not satisfy those Russians who remain dissatisfied with the loss of the Soviet empire. But the proper response to this small but intransigent minority is not to cater to them as though they had a legitimate grievance. Any indication that NATO is willing to placate Russian revanchism will only fuel it further.

Among those who, in principal, support NATO's expansion, however, are critics who think that alliance has already conceded too much to Russia in an effort to buy its acquiescence to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joining NATO. In their view, NATO has gone too far in creating a permanent joint NATO-Russian council and by pledging not to station nuclear arms or large numbers of conventional forces in the new member states.

But the critics overstate the implications of NATO's pledges. Nothing in the current European security environment requires the stationing of nuclear arms or a large number of conventional forces in any of the three new members of NATO. Moreover, these assurances are not binding if Russia's military posture toward its Western neighbors changes. Faced with a hostile, aggressive Russia, NATO is under no obligation to continue to restrain itself unilaterally.

As for the joint NATO-Russian council, the worry is that it will provide a forum which will give Moscow an undue say over alliance affairs. There is no way to prove that this will not happen. But the agreement establishing the council explicitly excludes discussion of NATO "internal affairs" from the council's purview. To date, that injunction has been adhered to.

On the other hand, the council reflects the fact that NATO cannot ignore Russia when it comes to European security issues. Although no longer a global superpower, Russia remains a European power whose concerns about European matters must be taken into account even if they are not always acceded to. If anything, the council provides a framework that limits the ability of individual members of the alliance to cut deals with Moscow on European security issues outside of NATO itself. And while the council's creation would have been a serious misstep in the past given the character and strategic goals of former Soviet regime, it seems to be an appropriate one to take now in light of the change in government in Moscow and Moscow's increased (albeit inconstant) willingness to operate by the accepted norms of the international system.

NATO's enlargement can be accomplished without either precipitating a crisis in relations with Russia or providing Moscow with dubious prerogatives over the alliance's governance. To prevent the latter, NATO needs only to continue to exercise a modicum of discipline in the council, keeping in mind that the peace and stability Europe has enjoyed over the past half-century has rested principally on NATO's strength and unity of purpose. As for the issue of precipitating a crisis in relations with Russia, those relations will ultimately be determined by Russia's own progress in becoming a liberal democracy.

The decision to expand NATO will have only a marginal impact on that progress. If the Russian political and economic system shows that it can increasingly meet the material and social needs of its people, then Moscow's experiment in democracy will succeed; if it can't, it won't. At worst, NATO's expansion will be used by a government which has already decided to turn its back on reform as an excuse for doing so. More likely, NATO's expansion will help Russia's reformers argue that the only way to reinvigorate Russia is to address the country's domestic problems and not to try to re-live Russia's imperial past.