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THE ORIGINS OF THE SECOND COLD WAR

COURSE V ESSAY


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The following essay, which loosely follows the format of a "case study," is written from the perspective of a military historian or national security analyst around 2008, exploring a crisis situation set some six years earlier. The study examines the dilemma faced by policymakers who are presented with the means to resolve a problem, in this case through effective employment of military capabilities, in a situation where the U.S. interests at stake are ambiguous.

Introduction

In November 2002, the administration of President Colin Powell was confronted with one of its worst strategic nightmares as a waking reality: the massing of Russian military forces in the area bordering the Baltic nations and Poland, in direct response to the expansion of the NATO alliance to admit Poland and the Czech Republic as new members. Unable to resolve the crisis diplomatically, Powell and his key advisers faced two fundamental decisions during a pivotal meeting in the White House Situation Room: first, *could* U.S. military force be used to deter or reverse a Russian advance into Poland or the Baltics, and second, assuming the capability existed, *should* U.S. forces be employed in an area where the U.S. had no vital interests at stake? A failure to act would almost surely sound the death knell for NATO, still reeling from the 1999 debacle in which some 1500 of its troops were killed or wounded after being caught in a flare-up of ethnic fighting between Hungary and Romania. But U.S. and Allied military planners, forced to use Polish territory as a staging ground earlier than foreseen, confronted political and operational problems that cast some doubt on the ability to "fight and win." In a supreme irony, the first crisis to test the new NATO was bringing pressure to bear directly on the weakest link of the alliance: its newest, untested member.

Background: A 'Threat-Based' NATO Expansion

Pressures to extend membership in NATO to some of the Central European States had increased throughout the 1990's. In the early years of the decade, in the wake of the demise of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the USSR, calls for the admission of Poland, Hungary and Czechia (then still called the Czech Republic) were heard frequently. The Clinton administration and other NATO governments sought for political reasons to portray the expansion as a natural element of the evolution of a new post-Cold War European order -- a response to these states' desire for closer security integration with Western Europe.

Just beneath this thin veneer of diplomatic plausibility, however, lurked the *real* reason for NATO's expansion. fear of recrudescence Russian militarism The surprise election of nationalist General Aleksandr Lebed as Russia's second president in 1996 had sent the world's financial markets into a nose-dive the Dow Jones Industrial average dropped from 5500 to 4769 over three sickening days, sparking similar plummets in Tokyo and London. Within his first hundred days in power, Lebed declared a halt to ongoing privatization of Russian industries, including the conversion of defense industries to civilian production Border security was increased and electronic surveillance was stepped up to identify and stop the flight of capital from the country, with the revenue confiscated used to begin a steady buildup of Russia's conventional military might The revival of police state techniques under Lebed made conscription once again a viable method of filling the rank-and-file of the Russian army; by 1999, some two million men were again in uniform¹

Russia's Resurgent Military

Lebed's program to rebuild the Russian military prompted a cut-off of all military cooperation programs with the US and other Western nations, development assistance was also halted. By early 1999 it was widely acknowledged that Russia had for all intents and purposes abandoned the experiment with democracy and market economics begun under Yeltsin. This led to a serious recasting of Washington's policy toward Russia during President Clinton's second term Whereas Clinton and Yeltsin had held five summit meetings 1993-1995, after the Russian election in 1996, Clinton and Lebed met only once -- a chilly encounter at the 1997 OSCE summit in Stockholm which ended after 35 minutes, nearly an hour *ahead* of schedule.

But it was in the military context that Russia's reversion to its old ways had the most far-reaching impact on the West With the premature termination of Nunn-Lugar assistance for

¹ Lani Kass and Mel Goodman, *Russian Military Power at the Millennium* (Washington: NDU Press 2001) p 445 Criticized internationally, the buildup won widespread support for Lebed inside Russia as the augmented troops patrolled the streets and, within eight months stopped the tidal wave of street crime

dismantling its nuclear arsenal. Russia was left with some 4000 warheads, including tactical nuclear weapons estimated to number in the 500's. Added to this strategic concern were worries associated with Moscow's conventional force, which was beginning to spread territorially in tandem with its numerical growth. In July of 1998, Lebed visited Minsk and signed a formal agreement incorporating Belarus into the Russian Federation as an autonomous republic. Within six months, Belarus was home to four Russian mechanized infantry divisions. 140 kilometers to the north, one airborne division and two air force squadrons were shoehorned into Kaliningrad, the patch of noncontiguous Russian territory perched between Lithuania and Poland.

U.S. Cutbacks Impede Efforts to Counter Russia

U.S. military planners, lulled by the prospects for a post-Cold War peace through the mid 1990's and facing severe resource pressures from Democratic majorities in both houses after the 1996 elections,² had scaled back the more ambitious force structure contingency of the mid-1990's ("two major regional contingencies [MRCs] nearly simultaneously"³). By 1998, the smaller, restructured force was deemed capable of fighting and winning a only a single MRC independently. In the event of more than one major conflict, U.S. forces were expected to join with allied or coalition militaries to ensure victory. In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee in February 1999, Assistant Defense Secretary Patricia Antsen was grilled by skeptical SASC members concerning U.S. forces' readiness to counter the growing Russian conventional threat. "We maintain the capability to deter Russian aggression," she responded, "through the growing synergy of an expanding NATO and WEU forces"⁴

² The Republican electoral strategy suffered a fatal setback in 1996 after Presidential candidate Bob Dole was incapacitated by a stroke following a lackluster performance in his second debate with Clinton. The party failed to coalesce around Dole's running mate Richard Lugar as a replacement candidate, and with Colin Powell's refusal to enter the race, a messy write-in effort for Pat Buchanan fizzled under a Democratic landslide. Freshmen democrats in the House (dubbed the 'anti-Army army' by pundit Robert Novak) targeted defense spending cuts as a top priority. By FY 00, the defense budget stood at \$199.3 billion.

³ *National Military Strategy of the United States of America 1995* (Washington: G.P.O., 1995), p. 11.

⁴ Suzanne Schaeffer, "Pentagon Depending on WEU," *Washington Post*, 11 Feb 1999, p. A26.

Antsen's assertion was based more on hope than fact. It was true that Western European Union forces had undergone significant augmentation in 1997 and 1998, with the accession of Austria, Slovenia, Finland and Norway to the WEU command structure. But full integration with NATO was still years away. And NATO itself was still "studying" the issue of admitting new members, due in large part to conflicting views within the alliance on how expansion would be viewed by Russia. Even after Clinton's aborted meeting with Lebed in 1997, which led to a harder U.S. line against Moscow, German Chancellor Kohl argued forcefully against moves which might "incite" the volatile Russian leader. Czechia, Poland and Hungary (regarded as the three states most likely to be in the first tranche of new NATO members) saw the situation somewhat differently. Former Czech President Vaclav Havel, addressing graduates at Stanford University in June of 1998, called on the NATO alliance "to safeguard the hopes and dreams of the new generation of Europe, that they may drink long and well from the cup of freedom and independence."⁵

Campaign 2000: The Bidding War Over Poland

In the United States, meanwhile, national security policy was becoming entangled in electoral politics. In the mid-term election of 1998, Republicans campaigned against Democrats on a "who lost Russia?" platform, regaining control of the House and denying Democrats a veto-proof majority in the Senate. The presidential election campaign of 2000, pitting Al Gore against Colin Powell, developed into a bidding war vis-a-vis defense and Russia policy, as the candidates presented competing plans for countering the Russian threat. A crucial moment came in October, during the second Gore-Powell debate in Chicago. Seeking to up the ante on Gore's assertion that Poland was "highly eligible" for NATO membership, Powell declared:

We have studied and studied and studied this question to death. Mr Gore, Poland is more than 'highly eligible' to be a member of NATO.

⁵ Vaclav Havel *Exit to Power* (London: St. Martin's Press 2002) p. 763

Poland is ready to join *right now*, and after my election, I will call for a NATO summit to ratify the Polish accession by May 1, 2001 at the latest ..⁶

Assessing Threats...

On February 18, 2001, one month after his inauguration as the forty-third president, Powell chaired a meeting of the National Security Council to review a global threat assessment prepared by the interagency community. There was broad consensus across State, Defense and the intelligence community that the primary threat to peace and stability in the world emanated once again from Moscow. The Russian Federation's *intentions* had been suspect for several years, and now the slow, steady pace of rearmament had reached the point where Russia's military *capabilities* were again a source of legitimate concern. Especially worrisome was the buildup in the region bordering the Baltics, as Russian nationalists continued to charge Estonia and Latvia with "gross human rights violations" against their large ethnic Russian minorities.

Russia was not the only potential troublemaker confronting U.S. planners, however. Throughout the latter half of the 1990's, Iran had pursued a quiet buildup of its conventional forces via large purchases of Russian and Chinese military hardware. The sale to Tehran of a Russian nuclear reactor, and the surreptitious transfer of centrifuging and related technologies, left Iran at century's end with an undeclared but widely credited nuclear capability -- further destabilizing the already volatile political-military equation in the Middle East. The situation in Asia was the sole bright spot in the dismal global picture. The Koreans had reunified without bloodshed in 1998,⁷ while China and Taiwan had established a *modus vivendi* that had sharply lessened tensions throughout Asia.

⁶ Susanne Schafer, "Powell Pledges Poland To Join NATO by Next May" *Washington Post* 14 October 2000 p. A1. The pledge was credited with giving Powell enough votes to eke out wins in both Illinois and Michigan, yielding a decisive 44 electoral votes in Powell's razor-thin margin of victory over Gore.

⁷ Korean military leaders had briefly seized power following Kim Jong-Il's bizarre attempt to defect during an inspection visit to the DMZ in 1997. More moderate civilian leaders gained the upper hand in the ensuing power struggle and immediately sued for peace with the South.

...and Vulnerabilities

As Powell and Defense Secretary Richard Armitage assessed U.S. military capabilities, a number of vulnerabilities were readily apparent. On the plus side, the military had adapted well to the changing international environment in the 1990's, helping to promote stability through regional cooperation and constructive interaction with states and militaries around the world. In peace enforcement operations, from Bosnia in the mid-nineties to the Quebec-Canadian conflict at century's end, U.S. forces were widely regarded as second to none. However, the priority focus on these OTW missions, combined with the lack of the plausible enemy following the USSR's demise at the end of Cold War I, had led to a serious deterioration in U.S. warfighting capabilities. U.S. overseas presence in Asia had been sharply curtailed; only a token force of some 27,000 men remained. Troop strength in Europe was somewhat higher at 75,000. Their capabilities and readiness had eroded, however, because of the demands of peacekeeping duties in Europe and the residual mission in the former Yugoslavia. The hoped-for enhancements in strategic mobility that were expected to provide theater reinforcement had been whittled away as Congress and the administration pushed through a series of recissions aimed at meeting the goal of a balanced budget, the cornerstone of the president's second term. Increased airlift capacity survived, thanks to strong defense contractor lobbying for the C-17; improvements to sealift capability and the Ready Reserve Force did not. At the conclusion of the meeting, Powell glumly accepted the conclusion of National Security Adviser Robert Kimmit that the U.S. would be hard-pressed to meet even the "2 MRC in coalition" capability that had become the core requirement of U.S. national military strategy by the late 1990's.⁸

⁸ Susanne Schafer, "Key Officials Bearish on U.S. Force Capabilities," *Washington Post* 19 February 2001. The leak of the NSC meeting's outcome enraged Powell, but it succeeded in accelerating the new Congress' focus on deficiencies in military readiness and power projection. A supplemental defense appropriation of \$17.2 billion for FY 01 cleared the House and Senate within two months, before many sub-cabinet appointees had even been confirmed in their new jobs at the Pentagon.

NATO Expands -- and Russia Responds

True to his campaign promise, Powell flew to Brussels in late May 2001 to preside over an extraordinary NATO summit called to admit Poland and Czechia as the newest members of the alliance. European opposition to enlargement had largely been neutralized during the last year of the Clinton administration, due to resurgent U.S. leadership of the Alliance and an activist U.S. role in Europe. The 1997 announcement that Czechia, Poland and Estonia were candidates for full EU membership by 2002 had given added legitimacy to the notion of expanding NATO in the same time frame.

As NATO's enlargement towards the East became a reality, a few lonely voices in the West continued to warn of the dangers of provoking Moscow.⁹ Others, equally vociferous but far greater in number, argued that NATO's enlargement was vital to establish a bulwark against a resurgent Russia. Acknowledging the validity of the concerns expressed by the former group, NATO heads declared in their summit communiqué that the alliance would station no nuclear weapons on the territory of new member states. They made no such commitment, however, regarding the forward stationing of NATO *troops* -- an omission that did not escape Moscow's notice. In a speech at the Frunze Military Academy later that summer, Russian President Lebed decried NATO's "reanimation of the doctrine of hostility" toward Russia, vowing to react "with appropriate countermeasures to any encroachment" by the alliance or its new members.¹⁰ U.S. intelligence analysts almost immediately began to track a major reinforcement of the air force units in Kaliningrad, and a "heavying up" of the motorized rifle divisions in Western Belarus.

⁹ See, e.g., George Kennan's commencement address to the 1999 graduating class of the National War College ("Those Who Cannot Remember the Past ..."). Kennan's observations (sent in written form due to the 95-year old diplomat's failing health and read during the ceremonies by NDU President Branford McAllister) predicted with remarkable precision Russia's invasion of the Baltics as a consequence of NATO enlargement.

¹⁰ *Krasnaya Zvezda* 30 August 2001.

Crisis in Europe, War in the Gulf

U S and Western attention was diverted from this buildup by two major crises in the winter of 2001-2002. The first, shorter in duration but by far more costly to the United States, was the Transylvanian crisis. Throughout the nineties, the prospect of NATO membership for Hungary and (at least theoretically) for Romania had kept both countries on their best behavior concerning Hungary's ethnic population in Transylvania. The lid blew off quickly after the admission of Poland and Czechia. by early October, Hungarian forces had crossed the border and were involved in several large scale engagements inside Romania. OSCE mediation brought a cease-fire and the deployment of NATO peacekeepers while an agreement was negotiated. But the deployment proved premature and more than 1500 NATO troops -- including 319 Americans -- were killed or wounded before a permanent end to the fighting was secured in March, 2002. Congressional critics blasted Powell for allowing U.S. forces to be "trapped in a European slaughterhouse." U.S. public opinion was also sharply critical of the president: even after the peace settlement was signed, 70% of Americans polled said the U.S. should stay out of ethnic conflicts in Europe.

The second crisis of that long winter was the Iranian invasion of Iraq. Tehran, correctly assessing that the 67-year-old Saddam Hussein was losing his grip on power and the Iraqi military was vulnerable, drove across the border in a blitzkrieg movement that took Baghdad -- and much of the world -- by utter surprise. Although the U.S. joined in the international condemnation of Iranian aggression, Washington maintained scrupulous neutrality in this second Iran-Iraq war. Because of the potential threat to Israel, Saudi Arabia and other U.S. interests in the region, however, two carrier battle groups were deployed to the Middle East to patrol the eastern Mediterranean and guard the Straits of Hormuz. Given fears of Iran's nuclear capacity and the means to deliver it, U.S. theater missile defenses were deployed in Saudi Arabia and

Israel, while battle groups and the ongoing ground force exercise activities in Kuwait increased from battalion to brigade size

From Peacetime Engagement to Conflict Prevention

As the fighting between the Iraqis and Iranians settled into a predictable cycle of offensive-counteroffensive in the spring of 2002, U S policymakers refocused on the deteriorating situation in Russia. The reversal of market economic reforms had caused an inflationary spiral that President Lebed's central planning ministries were unable to stem. Lines for bread, not seen in Russia for a decade, reappeared. Popular discontent was kept in check by the heavy hand of Russia's state security organs, but when Lebed declared a state of emergency in April 2002 and canceled elections scheduled for July, violent demonstrations broke out in Moscow and Novosibirsk. Lebed and nationalists in the Russian parliament blamed "new agents of NATO" -- a thinly-veiled swipe at Poland and Czechia -- for "provocational activities inside of Russia."¹¹ At the same time, the government-controlled Russian press revived the campaign charging the Baltic governments with "European apartheid" vis-à-vis their ethnic Russian populations. In tandem with this rhetoric, the steady buildup of Russian military forces in Western Belarus and Kaliningrad took on an especially ominous air.

National Security Adviser Kimmit convened a top secret meeting of the Principals Committee at the White House on April 20, 2002 to define U S policy toward the growing threat. Secretary of State Richard Lugar, freshly returned from a fruitless round of meetings in Moscow to try to defuse the crisis diplomatically, advocated a strong show of U S force. His conversations with Lebed and other Russian leaders, Lugar said, had left him convinced that Moscow doubted the U S. would act to protect the Baltics: Lebed had even questioned NATO's commitment to defend Poland "before Warsaw had even paid its first dues as a new member." Defense Secretary Armitage and CJCS Wesley Clark concurred strongly in the emerging

¹¹ *Pravda* 30 April 2002, p 1

consensus that CINCEUR be charged with a new strategic mission to deter and if necessary defend against a Russian move on Poland and the Baltic States. This was the start of "Operation EUROSHEATH."

CINCEUR Builds a Response Force

In the months since Poland's accession to NATO membership, CINCEUR Martin Dempsey and U.S. Embassy officials had been working non-stop with Polish officials over the final details of NATO's forward deployment in eastern Poland. The looming crisis with Moscow accelerated and expanded that process. By late June 2002, the Polish President had agreed to pre-positioning rights over and above the standard NATO agreements. In addition to a NATO tank battalion under U.S. command, Dempsey and the Embassy won Polish acceptance of an additional brigade set of Army POMCUS equipment to be sited in Bialystok -- just 50 km from the Belarusian border. The resultant increase in U.S. operational reach would be a decisive factor in countering any Russian attack. Manning that equipment in a crisis would be difficult, however, because of cutbacks in the Ready Reserve and the commitment of manpower in and around the Persian Gulf. Polish forces, already well trained up to NATO standards after nearly a decade of Partnership for Peace activities, would need to step into the breach if and when the crunch came.

Gathering Stormclouds in Northcentral Europe

By October 2002, the deployment and buildup phase of EUROSHEATH was largely complete. The bellicose rhetoric out of Moscow continued unabated, as Russian forces carried out large scale maneuvers that intelligence analysts identified as consistent with final preparations for a major joint offensive operation, either westward, into Eastern Poland, or northward, into the Baltics. President Powell consulted frequently with his UK, German and French counterparts to ensure that the four key allied members of NATO were in synch on the strategic goals. There was broad agreement that NATO would have to defend the territorial

integrity of Poland in the event of a Russian attack. But there was no consensus on what NATO's response should be if the Russians bypassed Poland for an all-out or partial invasion of the Baltics. British PM Blair and French President Chirac were disinclined to involve NATO in hostilities "out of area" in a region that, to their eyes, fell well within Russia's sphere of influence.¹² German Chancellor Kohl was irresolute, torn by his desire to ensure stability throughout greater Europe and his aversion to any form of appeasement to a hostile power.

In the fateful meeting of his National Security Council on November 3, with Russian forces in a high state of readiness, President Powell reviewed the stakes. Operation EUROSHEATH had left U.S. joint forces well-placed to lead NATO in the defense of Poland, SecDef Armitage and CJCS Clark reported, especially with Polish forces shouldering a large share of the manpower burden in defense of their own territory. The situation in the Baltics was less clear cut, but Armitage and Clark cited CINCEUR's remarkable success in building a combined joint force in Poland to buttress their contention that a Russian advance into Latvia and Lithuania could at least be blunted, if not completely reversed. As Powell later recalled,

We had asked our military to stretch itself beyond the bounds, to find a way to make less somehow do more in the Middle East and Europe, and now they were reporting back to the Commander-in-Chief with their customary assurance. 'not a problem, sir.' And for once, I was convinced it was not bravado. The forces were there on the ground, well trained and equipped, and expertly commanded. I had no doubt they would fight and win if I gave the order. And ironically, that fact made the ultimate decision I faced twice as difficult.¹³

Powell queried his key political advisers, National Security Adviser Kimmit and Secretary of State Lugar: what vital U.S. interests would justify placing American forces in harm's way to defend territory that had been part of the Russian and Soviet empires, with only sporadic interruptions, since before the American Revolutionary War? Lugar argued that the U.S. had a

¹² Roy Stafford *Statist Ambitions: The Origins of the Second Cold War 2001-2002* (Washington: NDU Press 2004), vol. 2, p. 592.

¹³ Colin Powell, *My American Odyssey 1994-2004* (Palo Alto: Microsoft Multimedia 2006) p. 117.

vital interest in repelling the first show of aggression by a resurgent Russia for the demonstration effect of the action alone -- especially since much of the world community would side with NATO and the U.S. in condemning the Russian action, whatever the outcome. Kimmit countered that Lugar's argument would hold only if the Russian action were successfully stopped or reversed -- a proposition he was less persuaded of than others in the room. As his advisers argued, Powell reflected on his experiences as a company commander in Vietnam and as CJCS during Desert Shield/Desert Storm. But as he later described the moment, it was a more recent memory that influenced his ultimate decision: his encounter at Dover air force base with the grieving families of the U.S. personnel killed in the Romanian peacekeeping operation.¹⁴

Epilogue

In the end, Powell directed that U.S. forces -- and thus, effectively, all of NATO -- should not take offensive action in the event of a Russian invasion of the Baltics. Even before word of the decision was leaked to the Washington Times five days later, Russian forces had rolled northward out of Belarus, while transports, bombers and fighters flew countless sorties out of Kaliningrad. Within another week, following fierce but futile resistance from Baltic partisans, Riga and Vilnius fell as Moscow installed pro-Russian regimes in both capitals. The U.S. and most Western nations broke off relations with the Russian Federation. UN efforts to levy sanctions or otherwise punish Moscow for its action were vetoed by Russia and China. Eleven short years after the collapse of communism spawned hopes for a new era of global stability, the Second Cold War had begun.

President Powell was defeated in his bid for a second term in 2004 by former Senator (D-NJ) and Secretary of State Bill Bradley. Ironically, Michigan and Illinois, which had carried Powell to victory in 2000, proved to be his downfall in 2004. Both states -- home to the largest concentrations of Baltic-Americans in the United States -- went narrowly for Bradley.

¹⁴ *Ibid* p 120