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NATO ENLARGEMENT IS NO THREAT TO U.S.—RUSSIAN RELATIONS

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Fears that the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic will disrupt ties between the United States and Russia are unfounded. Russia needs Western investment, technology, and cooperation to integrate into the global economy. In addition, the Western media overemphasize anti-NATO sentiment among Russians. Polls show that Russians worry more about payments of chronically delayed wages, low living standards, crime, and corruption. Russia's real security concerns, moreover, are with its Islamic neighbors and the People's Republic of China, not with the democratic West. Finally, even the Yeltsin administration, which vehemently opposes NATO enlargement, admits that the major threats to Russia are domestic, and that no foreign country currently endangers Russia's security.

Investment to Modernize Russia. Russia needs Western investment and technology to modernize its economy and society. A vitriolic anti-American campaign and an offensive military posture hinting at a new Cold War will scare off foreign investors and might jeopardize multilateral economic assistance. Russia will not risk access to the benefits the West can offer just to derail Polish, Czech, and Hungarian membership in NATO. Russian reformers understand that enhanced stability and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe are in Russia's interests.

Russian reformers also understand that Russia can benefit from cooperation with NATO on such issues as civil-military relations, fighting crime and

corruption in the military, protecting the rights of enlisted personnel, and cutting the military budget and manpower. NATO has expertise in these areas that it will share willingly with Russia.

The Battle Within. Strong opposition to NATO expansion comes from the Russian foreign policy and security elite, a group composed almost entirely of Soviet-vintage Cold Warriors. Anti-Western leftists, imperialists, and nationalists—the so-called Eurasianists—see Russia as a unique imperial entity spanning Europe and Asia, dominating its former vassals and opposing the United States, possibly in an alliance with China and Iran. They have attempted to use the NATO enlargement debate to draw Russia away from the West. If NATO expands to the east, Eurasianists fear the imperial option of Russia's renewed domination in Eastern and Central Europe could be foreclosed forever.

Such democrats as former acting prime minister Yegor Gaidar, however, and even the populist-nationalist General Alexander Lebed have asserted that NATO enlargement is the business of NATO

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(and the new members), and that Russia has nothing to fear of the West. Reformers eventually would like to see Russia as a part of the West, and possibly, a partner in NATO.

A positive step toward this goal was taken in the Founding Act on Relations between Russia and NATO signed in Paris on May 27, 1997. In that document, Russia and NATO created a bilateral council and permanent missions that are now working in Moscow and Brussels. The council gives Russia an opportunity to be part of all discussions on issues of mutual interest, and gives Russia a voice, but not a veto, in NATO decisions. This arrangement will make Russia a genuine part of the European security equation.

The Average Russian Does Not Care. The battles of the policy elites have had little effect on the average Russian. The general public paid little attention to the NATO debate, rightly considering it an “inside-the-Moscow-Beltway” issue. United States Information Agency (USIA) polls conducted in October 1996 and April 1997 showed 78 percent of the broad public knew little or nothing about the pending enlargement. Of those polled, less than 40 percent opposed enlargement, placing concerns over wages, the economy, crime, and corruption far above foreign policy and defense issues. And 70 percent of the Russians polled also indicated their belief that the special relationship with NATO would be in Russia’s interests.

No Real Threat. Some Russians oppose NATO enlargement because they are reminded of the long history of invasions from the West. They fear that the move eastward might be the prelude to another attack. Gennady Zyuganov (leader of the Communist Party of Russia, which boasts the largest faction in the State Duma) repeatedly has compared the pending NATO enlargement with the eve of the Nazi invasion in 1941. Ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy often invokes the specter of a U.S. attack on Russia.

The comparison with the Nazis, of course, is ludicrous. NATO has no expansionist designs on Russia; as a defensive alliance, it has no capability to achieve them. In addition, there is no common border between Russia proper and the new members (except for the small enclave of Kaliningrad—known as Königsberg before 1945—locked

between Poland and Lithuania) from which to launch an attack.

Moreover, the Yeltsin administration’s official national security doctrine, which was published in December 1997, clearly states that foreign countries currently do not pose a threat to Russia’s security. Crime, corruption, a poorly managed economy, poverty, and social malaise are the real dangers.

Most Russians, too, understand that their most significant security challenges today lie elsewhere. For example, China is pouring half a million immigrants a year into the largely empty Russian land between Lake Baikal in Siberia and the Pacific Ocean. Chinese economic and technological growth has outstripped Russia’s by far. Friction with Islamic neighbors in the northern Caucasus, such as the Chechens and possibly others in the future, and bloody entanglements in faraway places like Tajikistan demonstrate where the real threats are. With conflicts possible to the south and east, Russia should be interested in securing its western borders by having democratic neighbors—and especially Germany, which twice in this century sparked world wars—in a stable, democratic alliance.

What the West Can Do. Eventually bringing Russia into the Western orbit will benefit both Russia and the United States. Post-communist Russia needs to be engaged—not isolated—on the global scene, including on issues of European security. Russian objections to the current round of NATO enlargement are not widespread popular sentiments but rather a facet of Moscow’s political games. The United States should mount a comprehensive program, using the USIA and other avenues of public diplomacy, to explain the truth about NATO enlargement to Russia’s media and general public. Once the facts are known, Russians will understand that the ascendancy of the new members into the alliance in no way prevents the United States from continuing to work with Russia to enhance bilateral and multilateral security cooperation.

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