

Trump Uses Tiny Nation to Insult Russia

In another affront to Russia, President Trump has signed onto Montenegro's entrance into NATO, as the neocon/liberal-hawk strategy of encircling Russia resumes, writes Ted Snider.

By Ted Snider

Donald Trump has just approved Montenegro's accession into NATO, the latest sign that hopes for a new détente with Russia have been dashed. Though Montenegro is a tiny nation and its inclusion doesn't significantly affect NATO's capabilities, the move does send a clear message to Moscow that Trump is continuing his reversal from his campaign promises of warming up to Russia and cooling off to NATO into the opposite.

The script got flipped, in part, because Democrats and the major U.S. news media battered Trump for months after his election with allegations portraying him as Russia's "Manchurian candidate." Despite the lack of evidence that Trump's campaign had colluded with Moscow, the steady pounding – day after day – took its toll, leading to Trump's capitulation in early April as signified by his missile strike against Syria and his new hostile rhetoric toward the Kremlin.

However, even before Trump's springtime flip-flop, his administration had been signaling that the new President wouldn't change the arc of U.S. foreign policy very much. Immediately upon assuming the role of Secretary of Defense on Jan. 20, retired Marine General James Mattis called NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to assure him of America's commitment to "the fundamental and enduring value of NATO for the security of both Europe and North America."

While they were talking, NATO was building up its forces along Russia's borders as German and Belgian troops moved into Lithuania supposedly to act as a deterrent against Russian "aggression." In mid-February, 500 U.S. troops deployed to Romania and another 120 were deployed to Bulgaria as part of the NATO operation known as Atlantic Resolve.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Alexi Meshkov, revealed Russia's interpretation of the NATO buildup when he said, "This deployment is of course a threat for us."

At the same time, 300 U.S. Marines were arriving in Norway 900 miles from the Russian border. Russia criticized the move as having no military benefit – beyond antagonizing Russia. When Norway joined NATO as a founding member, they made the commitment not to host any foreign forces because of Russian concerns

that Norway could serve as a launching ground for an attack on Russia.

At the end of January, U.S. tanks and armored vehicles – part of a 3,500-troop contingent – fired salvos into the air in Poland. General Ben Hodges, the commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, said, “this is not just a training exercise. It’s to demonstrate a strategic message that you cannot violate the sovereignty of members of NATO ... Moscow will get the message – I’m confident of it.”

Maiden Speech

Days later, Trump’s Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley used her maiden speech in the Security Council to issue a “clear and strong condemnation of Russian actions,” saying, “I consider it unfortunate that the occasion of my first appearance is one in which I must condemn the aggressive actions of Russia.”

She then added that, “The United States continues to condemn and call for an immediate end to the Russian occupation of Crimea. Crimea is a part of Ukraine. Our Crimea-related sanctions will remain in place until Russia returns control over the peninsula to Ukraine.”

By mid-February, that hardline message had moved into the White House with press secretary Sean Spicer declaring: “President Trump has made it very clear that he expects the Russian government to de-escalate violence in the Ukraine and return Crimea.” The next day, Trump took to his official organ of policy announcement, Twitter, and tweeted that Crimea was “TAKEN by Russia.”

In a recent correspondence, Richard Sakwa, professor of Russian and European politics at Kent University and the author of the upcoming book *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order*, said, “The renewed confrontation between Russia and the West is not a replay of the Cold War, although many of its . . . features . . . have been revived. Competition between the Atlantic community and Russia has become entrenched as the ‘new normal’. . . . Profound shifts in global politics are taking place, reshaping the international system.”

Sakwa stressed that, since “International relations today are more perilous than at any time since 1989, . . . we need to understand the dynamics of relations between Russia and the U.S. since 1989.”

The Mouse That Roared

Thus, the significance of NATO membership for the tiny Balkan country of Montenegro, which ranks 161st in size among the world’s nations and is even

smaller than Connecticut. But Montenegro was part of the former Yugoslavia, putting it inside what Russia considers to be its sphere of influence.

There is also Russia's sensitivity about what the Kremlin viewed as a U.S. commitment not to expand NATO eastward as part of Moscow's agreement to let a united Germany join NATO.

At a Feb. 9, 1990 meeting at the Kremlin, President George H.W. Bush's Secretary of State, James Baker, promised Gorbachev that if NATO got Germany and Russia pulled its troops out of East Germany "there would be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction one inch to the east." But, according to Sakwa, this promise specifically meant only that NATO would not spill over from West Germany into East Germany. The promise of not "one inch to the east," meant only that NATO wouldn't militarize East Germany.

But the logic of the specific assurance regarding East Germany implies a larger assurance regarding nations to the east of East Germany. Russia wouldn't have a security concern about East Germany being home to NATO forces if those NATO forces were moving into former Soviet Republics on Russia's borders as is happening now.

So, the question of militarizing east of Germany never had to explicitly come up: it was implicitly understood. Sakwa says, "The question of NATO enlargement to the other Soviet bloc countries simply did not enter anyone's head and was not discussed."

Then-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev says it didn't come up because it was then unthinkable: "Merely the notion that NATO might expand to include the countries in this alliance sounded completely absurd at the time."

The historical record makes the meaning of the promise clear. The promise was made on two consecutive days: first by the Americans and then by the West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. According to West German foreign ministry documents, on Feb. 10, 1990, the day after James Baker's promise, West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, told his Soviet counterpart Eduard Shevardnadze, "'For us . . . one thing is certain: NATO will not expand to the east.' And because the conversation revolved mainly around East Germany, Genscher added explicitly: 'As far as the non-expansion of NATO is concerned, this also applies in general.'"

A few days earlier, on Jan. 31, 1990, Genscher had said in a major speech that there would not be "an expansion of NATO territory to the east, in other words, closer to the borders of the Soviet Union." This public announcement, again, made the spirit of the promise clear.

Former CIA analyst and chief of the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch Ray McGovern reports that the U.S. ambassador to the USSR at the time of the promise, Jack Matlock – who was present at the talks – told him that “The language used was absolute, and the entire negotiation was in the framework of a general agreement that there would be no use of force by the Soviets and no ‘taking advantage’ by the U.S. ... I don’t see how anybody could view the subsequent expansion of NATO as anything but ‘taking advantage.’”

Matlock is referring to the words of President George H.W. Bush who clearly stated that the U.S. would not derive any “unilateral advantage” from the end of the Cold War, or, as Genscher phrased it, there would be “no shift in the balance of power” between the East and the West. As Matlock said, it is very hard to see how the absorption of the former nations of the Soviet Union is not an “advantage” or a “shift in the balance of power.”

Thumb’s Width

Gorbachev says the promise was made not to expand NATO “as much as a thumb’s width further to the east.” In 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin said, “And what happened to the assurances our Western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them.”

Putin then went on to remind his audience of the assurances by pointing out that the existence of the NATO promise is not just the perception of him and Gorbachev. It was also the view of the NATO General Secretary Manfred Woerner at the time: “But I will allow myself to remind this audience what was said. I would like to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr. Woerner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. He said at the time that: ‘the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee.’ Where are those guarantees?”

McGovern says that when he asked Viktor Borisovich Kuvaldin, a Gorbachev adviser from 1989-1991, why there was no written agreement, Kuvaldin replied painfully, “We trusted you.”

In 1999, NATO brushed aside Russia’s protests and absorbed Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The encroachment toward Russia’s borders continued in 2004 by adding Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. In 2009, the Russian sphere of influence was further penetrated with the NATO incursion into Albania and Croatia.

Now, accepting Montenegro into NATO has become a politically popular way for Congress to demonstrate its disdain for Vladimir Putin, even if Montenegro’s

population isn't all that enthusiastic, splitting roughly down the middle on NATO membership.

Though sometimes called "soft on Russia," Secretary of State Rex Tillerson also was cheerleading for Montenegro's admission. Then, on April 11, just days after firing 59 Tomahawk missiles at Russia's Syrian allies in retaliation for a supposed chemical weapons incident and amid White House suggestions that the Russians were complicit in the alleged war crime, Trump signed the paperwork on Montenegro's admittance.

In doing so, Trump added to NATO's encroachment on Russia's borders, dismissed Russia's claim to a sphere of influence – and made clear that his campaign promise of a less confrontational posture against Russia was a thing of the past.

Ted Snider writes on analyzing patterns in US foreign policy and history.
