Ordering the “Crush Zone”:
Geopolitical Games in Post-Cold War Eastern Europe

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Biography

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the Cold War, no consensus has emerged in American political circles on a replacement for the containment geopolitical code of the 1945-1990 era. Various geopolitical paradigms are on offer, each emanating from a world-view that is heavily coloured by domestic political ideologies. Seven of these paradigms are described and considered in light of the momentous geopolitical decision in 1998 to expand NATO into Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe has been considered a “crush zone” by political geographers for over a century and the region has been intimately connected with the geopolitical re-orderings of this century. Strenuous avoidance of geopolitical issues, including long-term relations with Russia, was notable during the NATO expansion debates. The stark contrast of “chaos” (Russia and its neighbours in the former Soviet Union) to “cosmos” (the European Union and three new central members of NATO) dominated the NATO enlargement debate. The end-consequence of recent NATO and U.S. foreign policy decisions will be a re-drawing of the geopolitical divide across Europe from the eastern Baltic to the Black Sea. Fear of being placed on the eastern side of this new “iron curtain” has caused many East European states to re-discover their “European” credentials and claim entry to the West.
"The mentality of the people in Central and Eastern Europe is characterized by a collective existential fear of a real or imaginary threat of national destruction due to loss of independence, assimilation, deportation or genocide" (Alexy Miller).

Since 1989, one of the main regional foci of post-Cold War geopolitical debates has been Eastern Europe.

After nearly five decades of ossification induced by the bi-polar bloc system that descended on Europe in the late 1940s, the “crush zone” between the large states of Germany and Russia has once more become a zone of contention. The new geopolitical quarrels within the Western strategic community and between pro-NATO and pro-Russian commentators have spurred a renewed interest in the legacy of a debate that reaches back to the end of the last century. At that time, separatist aspirations in the multi-national empires of Austro-Hungary and Russia were growing and the great power rivalry between Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia and the United States was reaching new levels of military spending. Though much has changed in 100 years, especially the replacement of autocracies by democracies and the effacement of imperial borders, three geopolitical issues of the late 20th century Eastern Europe would looked familiar to an informed citizen of the late 1800s - great power rivalry, the correspondence between national territories and state borders, and the delimitation of the eastern boundary of “Europe”.

Some of the earliest and most influential geopolitical writings by Sir Halford J. Mackinder, Rudolf Kjellén and Karl Haushofer concerned the newly-independent states of Eastern Europe that emerged from the battles, truces and forcible settlements of World War I. While these protagonists offered deeply contrasting policies for their respective countries, they agreed that the region between Berlin and Kiev was a lynchpin in the quest for control of Europe and that the Great Powers would continue vie for dominance in this borderland. The continued strategic importance of Eastern Europe was echoed in the opinions of a later generation of geopolitikers, writing in the chaos and aftermath of World War II. Then, American strategists such as Nicholas Spykman, Robert Straus-Hupé and George F. Kennan had entered the geopolitical fray and
centred their attention on the “denial principle”, that Eastern Europe should not fall under the influence of a power that was inimical to American interests. Despite their efforts, the Yalta agreement of 1943 sealed the lines of dominance and Eastern Europe was firmly placed in the Soviet zone of influence and geopolitical interest in the region waned as the superpower contest moved to the more chaotic domains of the Third World. In 1989, the geopolitical game was renewed as a result of the unexpected collapse of the Communist regimes and subsequently, by the blatant attempts by the new post-communist regimes to play their national cards for the greatest territorial, economic and military advantage. We have thus re-entered an era of geopolitical uncertainty as major domestic and international debates about issues such as NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) expansion and Russia’s relations with her neighbours in the “Near Abroad” (countries formed from the republics of the former Soviet Union) draw pundits from all perspectives.

In this paper, I will revisit a key debate of the early years of political geography – how to fit a place into a geopolitical order. I will connect the geopolitical visions of external actors, in this case, that of American policy-makers and commentators, with the specific development of foreign policies of contemporary East-Central Europe. Earlier geopolitical study, like the writings of Mackinder, Bowman, Haushofer and Fairgrieve, always connected the macro-perspective of geopolitics to the micro-scale policies for borders and territories. Whilst not advocating a return to ethnocentric, state-centred geopolitical study, the linkage of geopolitical critique and policy analysis must continue. This paper is a return to classic geopolitical traditions without the national-patriotic baggage that has accompanied earlier as well as contemporary works.

My review of the contemporary debates in American foreign policy indicates that controversies ebb and flow according to the nature and emphasis of the domestic agenda. Other feedback effects emanate from unanticipated developments in strategically important zones and in global economic relations. The short debate from late 1996 to early 1998 in the United States about NATO expansion into Eastern Europe helps to highlight current political positions and geopolitical perspectives on offer. One of the dramatic features of the NATO debate was the relative lack of attention to historical antecedents and alternative
perspectives. Though Russian opposition to NATO expansion to the border of the former Soviet Union was noted, the great diversity of opinion in that country was generally simplified or noted in a condescending manner. Further, the geographic mosaic of Eastern Europe was simplified in the debate and a simple dichotomy of qualifiers and non-qualifiers for NATO membership ended whatever attention was paid to the diversity of countries, regions, peoples and politics in the zone between the German and Russian borders.

**Geopolitical Controversies in the American World-View.**

As the Western triumphalism of the post-1989 period wanes with growing recognition of territorial disputes remained unresolved, a decade-long search for a new geopolitical paradigm in the United States has not yet uncovered one capable of "ordering" a complex world-system. This complexity, hidden to U.S. strategists and policymakers blinded by the ageographic lens of the Cold War paradigm, now stands revealed; the U.S. establishment, despite a wish to reorder the post Cold War world, has not yet uniformly accepted a geopolitical code. The kind of domestic political consensus that emerged in the late 1940s around the "containment" strategy is not yet evident for any of the proposals for the post-1989 world. Various new paradigms (e.g. Huntington’s "civilizational" model) recognising global complexity and a new multi-polarity of power but none have broad political support. U.S. geopolitics of the late 1990s resembles that of the 1920s with indecision and uncertainty in the aftermath of a victory in World War I. Despite victory in the Cold War, the realisation of expectations that have accrued and the limits on foreign policy activities posed by domestic constraints (not the least of which is the disinterest of most Americans in the world outside the borders of the U.S.) have complicated rather than clarified the U.S. role in the world.

In an attempt to distinguish and highlight current debates, seven “paradigms” are portrayed in Table 1. In my definition, a paradigm is a general world perspective that is moulded both by the strength and variety of American domestic interests and by the state of international relations and the international political economy. Moreover, a paradigm is associated with each presidential administration and becomes personalised by the global visions that each holder of the highest office brings to power. Many of the
“mental maps” are strongly influenced by early personal experiences of Presidents, whilst others are changed by unexpected global shifts. More than anything else, a paradigm offers a fairly-abstract blue-print for dealing with international relations and determining the extent and level of U.S. engagement with the world outside its borders.

In contrast to the general perspective, a geopolitical code is defined as “a set of strategic assumptions that a government makes about other states in making its foreign policy.” Whilst highly ethnocentric and oriented to the perceived needs and interests of the state, geopolitical codes are nevertheless worthy of attention in the interpretation of foreign policy actions. Codes are the spatial expressions of geopolitical efforts to transform a “global space into fixed perspectival scenes, and as a two-dimensional register of space (they) would reveal some eternal truths about geography’s relationship to politics.” Thus, in order to understand the actions of the U.S. in post-1989 Eastern Europe, we need to examine the place of the region in the competing geopolitical codes of the U.S. Each of the respective geopolitical codes that are in vogue, under discussion or recently debated in Washington has a clear implication for the nature of U.S. response to changes in Eastern Europe consequent on the collapse of Communism in 1989. Though Brown notes how post-war U.S. strategists like Dean Acheson, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Allen Dulles, Dwight Eisenhower, Alexander Haig, George F. Kennan, Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon, Paul Nitze, and Walter Rostow were influenced by geopolitical theories, a position also held by Sloan, the case for the influence of these theories on U.S. policymaking or plans seems stretched, anecdotal and not yet subject to rigorous analysis. More likely, the general Weltanschauung of the times influenced both the geopolitical theorists and the policy-makers and generated a geopolitical code that seemed theory-based but was more strongly linked to the operating paradigm in Washington.

The best-known geopolitical code is “containment” and because its use in Europe and the Middle East in the early days of the Cold War is generally viewed as a success of American foreign policy, containment’s legacy is powerful and capable of projection to other times and places.

Table 1: American Foreign Policy Paradigms and Geopolitical Codes in the late 1990s.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradigm</th>
<th>Geopolitical Code</th>
<th>Policy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “noblesse oblige”</td>
<td>Global reach with countries differentiated by need; idealist; e.g., JFK inaugural address</td>
<td>Promote U.S. principles (democracy and the market): U.S. military power and money.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. “U.S. first”</td>
<td>Identification of “rogue” states; anti-globalization: isolationist; e.g., Buchananism</td>
<td>Highly differentiated world with big commitments to a few key allies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. “declinist”</td>
<td>Shared effort with allies; careful selection of commitments; U.S. as “primus inter pares”; e.g., Clinton</td>
<td>Withdraw troops; local allies pay; consult and enlarge the engagement; e.g., Bosnia and Kosovo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “contingency”</td>
<td>U.S. as global balancing wheel; no geopolitical code; every situation requires “ad hoc” response.</td>
<td>Respond to crisis after it develops; e.g., Somalia or Kosovo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “Eagle triumphant”</td>
<td>Globalist; force without diplomacy; world still dangerous; Cold War style geopolitics; Pentagon view most important.</td>
<td>“Be prepared”; continued high military expenditure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “world of regions”</td>
<td>Identify key regions; regionalist view; focus on places that are important to U.S. welfare; money, allies and troops.</td>
<td>Focus on West and Central Europe; Middle East; North-east Asia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “anti-imperialism”</td>
<td>Focus on future power emergence; exceptionalism; Russia as a threat; e.g., NATO strategists</td>
<td>Continue containment of Russia and China; expand NATO.</td>
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Paradigms are not as separate and non-overlapping as a simple list might suggest. Instead, one can find examples of different paradigms in the speeches of policy-makers in the same U.S. administration and over time, from the same politicians. Many foreign-policy speeches will contain elements of different paradigms in order to try to bolster the public support for the action. President Ronald Reagan, for example, combined the “eagle triumphant”, “world of regions”, “anti-imperialist”, and “noblesse oblige” paradigms in his televised addresses in the 1980s that argued for support of the Nicaraguan Contras against the Sandinista regime.

The first paradigm in Table 1, “noblesse oblige”, takes its title from a report of the Carnegie Endowment National Commission on America and the World. “Twice before in this century, the United
States and our allies triumphed in a global struggle. Twice before we earned the right to be an arbiter of a post-war world. This is our third chance." \(^{14}\)

The general view of the American "great and good" (the Eastern foreign policy establishment) is that "only the United States can do it"; ultimately, only the U.S. can save the various peoples of the world from disasters of their own making. After a lot of dithering, the "noblesse oblige" theme was prominent in President Clinton's 1995 national address at the time of the decision to send troops to Bosnia; "it's the right thing to do". \(^{15}\)

A similar perception seemed to have propelled the surprising intervention of the Bush administration in Somalia at Christmas 1992. As trial balloons, some Clinton appointees have suggested that there are some places of the world where the U.S. should not be taking the interventionist lead (e.g. West Europeans should be in the vanguard in Bosnia and Kosovo) and only after the allies have dropped the ball, should the U.S. step in. Current examples of the idealist paradigm in action are the direct American promotion of peace negotiations in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, and Kosovo.

The supreme example of this kind of "obligations and burdens" rhetoric and approach to world affairs is President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address in January 1961 when he promised that the United States would "pay any price, bear any burden" in defence of American values and support of "freedom". Earlier, in February 1947, President Truman declared that the U.S. would help any anti-Communist movements anywhere in the world that requested American help. The approach relies very much on the notion of American exceptionalism and the support for programs and policies that expand the number of countries that share American principles of free markets and free, democratic societies. Dick Arney (Republican majority leader) in June 1995 (proposing a much reduced foreign aid bill) said "In the history of the world, no nation has ever so much loved freedom that their nation's people have been willing to risk their own peace to secure freedom for other nations.... We are willing to put some part of our treasury behind the dream of freedom and peace for all the world's people" But rhetoric and reality frequently do not match. The debate about foreign aid is a good example. Recent surveys show that American respondents believe that it accounts (on average) for 15% of the federal budget. The actual figure is about 1% and interestingly, the average level of support, according to the survey respondents, should be 5%. \(^{16}\)
In the U.S., the level of interest and concern with foreign questions is now at an all-time low since World War II. Normally over 10% will cite a foreign policy issue as a response to the question "What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?" The most recent figure is 2%. On the other hand, 65% of the respondents to a recent Chicago Council on Foreign Relations poll believe that the U.S. should play "an active role" in world affairs. Since the “obligations” can occur in any region of the world, there is no specific geopolitical code associated with this paradigm. Instead, U.S. reach stretches to all corners of the earth, even to previously invisible (in the U.S. public consciousness) states such as Somalia.

The second paradigm is often associated with Pat Buchanan, the right-wing Republican Presidential candidate noted for his opposition to the North American Free Trade Area and other perceived infringements on U.S. autonomy. We can ascribe this paradigm as “anti-internationalism” and its catch phrase seems to be “no aid, no casualties”. With deep and wide support in the Republican party beyond the right-wing, the world-view is deeply suspicious of international institutions and especially of the United Nations. While some Americans, especially the militias, are rabidly suspicious of non-American agencies and actors and can be stereotyped as "know-nothings", the paradigm goes beyond isolationism. As noted by Lawrence Eagleburger, former Under-Secretary of State “Isolationism means a pox on both your houses, don't get involved. I don't think that is what most (Americans) are. They have no real knowledge (of foreign affairs). They don't care about it. They're focused on domestic problems". The suspicious basis of this paradigm is well illustrated by the statement by Senator Phil Gramm (R-TX), a former Presidential candidate, on foreign aid. "The U.S. is like a little rich kid in the middle of a slum with a cake, handing out slices yet receiving in return resentment rather than gratitude." He proposed, instead, that the U.S. keep the cake but share the recipe of democracy and market economics.

The liberal Democratic faction is also not immune from similar views. Another former presidential candidate, Rev. Jesse Jackson, has complained of the cost to U.S. taxpayers of the stationing of American troops overseas and how the money could be better used for domestic programs. One result has been the successful pressure on countries to pay part of the costs of the stationing of troops in their country. The
practical geopolitical output of this approach to foreign affairs is strong loyalty to a few favourite states (Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan) and neglect of the rest since either they do not register as important places in the U.S. geopolitical orbit or they are rich enough to pay substantially for the stationing of U.S. troops (Japan, S. Korea and Germany).

The third paradigm starts from a "declinist" view that sees the U.S. as having slipped from its immediate post-war dominance, needing the support of allies to promote its global aims. Though the evidence for decline is mixed and it is clear that the U.S. stands alone as the military hegemon, there is a widespread perception that the U.S. can no longer afford the "burdens" that President Kennedy was willing to assume in 1961. Consequently, the U.S. promotes a shared global leadership. As a leading paradigm in Washington D.C during the Clinton administration, it holds that the U.S. is still "primus inter pares". Since the global conditions have changed with the growing relative parity of many of the U.S. allies and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the paradigm holds that other countries of the Western camp must share in the global costs of management of the world-system in the interests of democracy and free enterprise. The clearest expression of this position was former Secretary of State Warren Christopher's enunciation of four principles. "First, America must lead. Second, we must seek to maintain productive political and economic relations with the world's most powerful states. Third, we must adapt and build lasting institutions to enhance cooperation. Fourth, we must support democracy and human rights to advance our interests and our ideals." Like the "noblesse oblige" paradigm, the declinist perspective has no specific geopolitical code though events in countries close to the U.S. and in Europe attract more attention.

The notion of "shared leadership" in a kind of regionalised world has been mentioned many times, especially in connection to Bosnia. For over two years, 1993-1995, Clinton administration officials claimed that this conflict was intrinsically a "European question" and the European states should take the lead in resolving the conflict. In the US, idealists called for more U.S. actions to stop the fighting and for open support for the Bosnian government at a time when the UN and European Union negotiators were trying to ensure a cease-fire. The "declinist school" has been heavily criticised by the "American Firsters", who believe
that this approach relies too heavily on "multilateral institutions" of whom they are deeply suspicious. However, the overwhelming majority of Americans (74%) believe that "the U.S. should play a shared leadership role."  

The eventual cease-fire in Bosnia in 1995, propelled by U.S. air bombing and U.S.-European ground troops, is typical of the approach to crises that will likely emanate from this paradigm.

The fourth paradigm does not start from a fixed position but treats each situation de nova. Each situation is viewed as "contingent" and therefore, no geopolitical code can be predetermined. Dismissed as "ad hocery" by critics such as former Senator and Republican Presidential nominee, Robert Dole, it is partially a result of the evident impasse in Washington D.C as Congressional power in foreign affairs continues to grow. Until World War I, Congress was hardly visible in foreign affairs as such issues were considered essentially to be a presidential prerogative. After blocking U.S. entry to the League of Nations in the early 1920s, Congress began to become increasingly more assertive. Despite President Bush's claim of a "New World Order" at the end of the 1991 Gulf War, the current American administration is visibly dismayed by the chaotic nature of the world system in all its varied regional manifestations. The foreign policy outcome is thus a kind of "contingency" paradigm rather than an imposition of some sort of global vision on the complex world mosaic. For the first two years of the Clinton administration, the President was focussed on domestic affairs and so was the public. The phrase "It’s the economy, stupid" echoed through the 1994 re-election campaign. Lawrence Eagleburger said it best in 1991, after the U.S. was victorious in the Gulf War, "it (the U.S.) finished the war out of breath." The contingency paradigm can be considered as an extension of the previous declinist view that assumes that local "policemen" will resolve regional issues and only after they fail, will the U.S. step in when the conditions and events demand. Somalia and Bosnia are good examples of this progression as these situations were viewed in the U.S. as humanitarian crises as a direct result of UN failures. The U.S. came riding to the rescue after other options expired, and therefore, no geopolitical code is needed. The actions of the U.S. in this regard are those of a "lite power, with a lot of airy rhetoric in its diplomacy and not much kick."
The fifth paradigm can be termed “eagle triumphant” and offers a globalist perspective on a “dangerous world”. It portrays a continued Cold War-style geopolitics accompanied by high military expenditures. It retains a classic “force without diplomacy” policy, which can be as ineffective as "diplomacy without force", supposedly the dominant foreign policy instrument of the early years of the Clinton administration. As a blunt foreign policy instrument, the globalist view is not now in vogue in Washington and its most visible recent expression was the sounding of the “triumphalist” notes at the end of the Gulf War (victory parades etc). The “Vietnam Syndrome” (the public opinion restraint on U.S. military actions) was supposedly ended at the end of the Gulf War when President George Bush declared: "We have finally kicked the Vietnam syndrome". But the Somalia episode questions whether the Vietnam syndrome has indeed been kicked. Use of cruise missiles (as in the August 1998 attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan) is especially attractive to the proponents of the globalist paradigm as it offers power projection without casualties. The political instability in the former Soviet Union and continuing civil strife in over 40 locations provides “evidence” for the dangerous world perspective. But without a clear and consistent presence of an archenemy, like the Soviet Union during the five decades of the Cold War, this paradigm is hardly credible or sustainable. The geopolitical code associated with the globalist paradigm is global in scope but differentiated by the relative importance of the allies and foes of the United States. The geographic externalities of foreign policy actors in these states are explicitly considered and the code does not differ much from that of the Reagan presidency in the 1980s.

A sixth paradigm offers a regionalist alternative to the globalist view and identifies the key regions of Europe, Middle East and North-east Asia as places most important to the United States. This regionally-differentiated world view harks back to the perspective of George F. Kennan in his "X" article in 1947. It is especially neglectful of the rest of the Third World and is motivated by the major concerns that were identified in a recent national survey. Key threats to the U.S. were identified as nuclear attack (72% named this item), high immigration (72%) and international terrorism (69%). Asked to identify the places where the U.S. has a “vital interest”, respondents in 1994 listed Japan (85%), Saudi Arabia (83%), Russia (79%), Mexico
(76%), Canada (76%), Great Britain (69%) and China (68%) as the top seven countries whilst states such as Egypt (45%), France (39%), Ukraine (35%) and Poland (31%) were well down the list. Four regions matter consistently on the surveys - North-east Asia (the two Koreas, Japan, China); the Middle East (Saudi Arabia above all other states including Israel); Europe, both Central (including Russia) and Western; and the Caribbean, including Mexico. The rest of the world has little importance except as "emerging markets" for U.S. products. Senator R. Dole expressed the linkage between important regional interests and U.S. welfare. For him, the core interests of the U.S. are “preventing the domination of Europe by a single power; maintaining a balance of power in East Asia; promoting security and stability in our hemisphere; preserving access to natural resources especially in the energy heartland of the Persian Gulf; strengthening international free trade and expanding U.S. access to global markets; and protecting American interests and properties overseas.” The continued centrality of Europe, including Eastern Europe, in this paradigm is a mainstay of a differentiated geopolitical code and recognises both global complexities and the varied relevance of foreign places to the United States.

The final paradigm in Table 1 returns to a world of “great powers” and treats the United States as the leader of the Western bloc coming into conflict with a resurgent Russia and an assertive China. In a sense, it is a return to the bipolar world order of the Cold War years, but the identification of the “other” is not yet revealed. In any case, it would require ringing the opponent with allies and a containment ring. With the growing uncertainty of the success of the economic and political transitions in Russia and the growing belief that Russia is a “third world country with nuclear weapons”, there is ample opportunity for a return of the "anti-Sovietism" of the Cold War years. This scenario is even more plausible if the Russian leaders strongly favoured by the U.S. (the cabal gathered around President Yeltsin) fail to win continued support of the population and are replaced in an election or a coup d'etat. This alarmist view of Russia is predicated on the belief that contemporary Russia is the inheritor of the expansionist Russian tradition of hundreds of years. It is especially concerned to push NATO expansion to the borders of Russia despite the strong opposition of Russians of all political stripes. It anticipates Cold War redux and has a geopolitical code based on a bipolar
and simple world order. In a return to containment, the U.S. should fit countries into a geopolitical code that expresses again the half-moon of the Cold War distribution of American support and emphasis.

Various commentators trying to understand the foreign policy of the United States in the post Cold War years have typically noted the lack of clarity and consistency. Examining the geopolitical codes of Madeline Albright, Clinton’s second Secretary of State, Jan Nijman notes that, in comparison to American-born policy-makers, those of European origin (Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Albright) have a more nuanced, cynical and less idealist perspective. A British journalist, Martin Walker, dismissed the Clinton administration’s foreign policy as the “geopolitics of casual sex” claiming that it involved the “promiscuous and irresponsible use of U.S. military force without lasting commitment.” Force would only be used in places where quick, casualty-free wins would be certain. Recent cruise missiles attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan (“force without diplomacy or casualties”) supports Walker’s contention.

Major foreign policy debates have not been prominent in Washington or more broadly in the American body politic since the end of the Cold War. Domestic issues have not only dominated political debate but the sense of peace and security induced by lack of a visible and sustained threat to Americans at home has not been undermined by terrorist threats to U.S. citizens and troops overseas or from so-called “rogue states” such as Iraq, North Korea or Libya. While the military budget and overseas troop numbers are down significantly in the past decade (a decrease of about one-third, from an expenditure of 375 billion dollars (1995 dollars) to 260 billion dollars). U.S. force levels in East Asia (about 100,000 personnel, mainly in Japan and South Korea) are to be maintained, as are those in Europe (nearly 100,000 plus amphibious forces). The objective, however, remains to be “capable of prevailing in two nearly simultaneous regional conflicts” in the words of the 1998 U.S. Department of Defense Budget Statement.

**Geopolitical Codes and Eastern Europe.**
As domestic events in the United States continue to dominate public attention, East Europeans jockey for geopolitical positioning in international fora. The impending division of Europe into a “fast-track” incorporation into the Western institutions of the European Union and NATO versus “the others”, who are either put into long membership queues (the fate of Turkey for over a decade) or deemed not to have the free markets and polities necessary for membership of the “West”, is widely anticipated. A recent visit by an East European leader to the EU summit in Vienna clarifies the risks, strategies, options and obstacles inherent in the pending classification of countries as eligible and ineligible. President Leonid Kuchma of Ukraine, like other East European leaders, sees EU membership as “an absolute priority for Ukraine” and wants Ukraine to become an associate member of the EU immediately, an option that would reduce tariffs on Ukrainian exports to the EU. For his part, Kuchma tried to portray Ukraine as making steady progress towards a market economy. Significantly, Kuchma opposed a new visa regime on the Polish-Ukrainian border that would treat Ukrainians in the same way as Belarussians and Polish border guards currently treat Russians. Poland, already firmly in the queue for both EU and NATO membership, is evidently part of “Europe” and Kuchma complained that “the trouble does exist and it troubles us from the point of view of this new splitting of Europe”. Further, Kuchma emphasised Ukraine’s non-aligned status with respect to NATO enlargement but believed that Ukraine must “move to Euroatlantic structures and the EU as the only alternative to a return to the past.”

Fears and aspirations such as Kuchma’s are found from Tallinn to Sofia. To strengthen the case, the depth and length of the European legacy of each country is stressed in the new history and geography texts now appearing. In Ukraine, rapprochement with Poland and the other central European states is viewed as an intermediate step towards incorporation into the West and towards separation from Russia. In contrast, the states emerging from the former Austro-Hungarian empire stress their Western democratic credentials and fear that the economic problems of the countries to the east might be contagious. Thus, they work to preserve their differences with Ukraine. Overlooked in the triumphalism and joy that accompanied the destruction of the Iron Curtain, the important boundary that separated the Soviet Union from the other East
European states remains largely intact, with barbed-wire fences and severe restrictions on the movements of goods and people. The post-Soviet governments in Belarus and Ukraine have also maintained control of the border bottlenecks to generate tariffs and customs duties and engaged in intensive struggles with local power elites for control of the lucrative grey trade.  

For geopolitical students, of course, this debate about the character and orientation of the east European states elicits an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu*. East Europe is a classic borderland in two senses. At the macro-scale, “Europe’s” limits are generally believed to lie somewhere between the Vistula and the Dnieper, as seen prominently in Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* thesis. But at the meso-scale within the region, there are almost innumerable limological uncertainties because of centuries of turmoil, settlement, ethnic cleansing, state-formation and treaties. Applebaum, in a brilliant travel book, notes that at the peace conferences after World War I, borders were to be rationally drawn through plebiscites, treaties, and border-demarcation. In the end, however, “borders in the borderlands were drawn by force. During the five-year course of the Russian civil war, no less than eleven armies...fought for possession of Ukraine.” The linkage between the macro-geopolitics of great powers and the micro-geopolitics of contested territories was clearly made by Karl Haushofer; promoting his notion of “moveable frontiers”. He perceived borders as temporary battle-lines that moved depending on the relative strengths of the competing neighbouring states. Consequent on the weakening of empires (as happened to Germany and Russia in World War I), the borderlands would be able to express their own cultures and identities. There now exists a “minority-free” zone of states where minorities constitute less than five percent of national totals. The zone now covers 15 states (instead of six in 1910), and forms a compact region from the Netherlands to Hungary and from Norway to Slovenia. Conversely, the number of minorities in the European states (Atlantic to Urals) is now 150, 40% higher than it was in 1910 as increasing numbers of states have generated more minorities left on the wrong side of the boundaries. 

The apposition of land-powers to sea-powers has a century-long legacy in political geography, though Halford Mackinder traced it back to classical writings of Greeks and Persians. Like Mackinder, (“who
commands eastern Europe commands the Heartland.\(^{39}\), Fairgrieve identified east Europe as a buffer zone. Fairgrieve applied the “buffer zone” principle, developed by Lord Curzon, based on personal experience in Central Asia and the principle of separating the Russian and British empires. Before and after World War I, Eastern Europe was promoted as a buffer to separate the German and Russian empires. Popularised as the “crush zone” by Fairgrieve, the zone of small states in eastern Europe, though separating the two big states, was unstable and precarious after its own fashion. “With the organization of the heartland and the sea powers, a crush zone of small states has gradually come into existence between them…. With sufficient individuality to withstand absorptions, but unable or unwilling to unite with others to form any larger whole, they remain in the unsatisfactory position of buffer states, precariously independent politically, and more surely dependent economically. This zone of states… has included Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, …the Balkan states…. Central Europe, unorganized and broken into small and antagonistic communities, essentially belongs to the crush zone, but organized and powerful is in a very different position.”\(^{40}\) Turning the idea of the buffer zone on its head, Saul Cohen has recently argued that Eastern and Central Europe can be an emerging Gateway region, a transitional zone that could facilitate contact and interchange between the two realms (Maritime and Continental).\(^{41}\)

The boundaries of “Europe” have been gradually moving to the east since 1900. The Russian Empire first and the Soviet Union later were unable to make the imperial project stick in the Central European area and the end result was a proliferation of small states west of Russia. “The territory of Russia is now smaller than it has been at any time since the late seventeenth century.”\(^{42}\) Anticipating Huntington’s “clash of civilizations”, the Germanophile geopolitiker, Rudolf Kjellén, referred to the divide between Europe and Russia as the “Great Cultural Divide” and talked about a union of small Central European states under German leadership (German-Slavic Union of States) sitting in opposition to the Russian empire.\(^{43}\) For many westernised Russians, this sort of divide is particularly troublesome. Vladimir Lukin, former Chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the Russian Duma noted that “the already tense situation is aggravated by the attempts of some presumptuous circles in the Ukrainian political elite to draw a new de facto
border between the West and the East – somewhere along the Don River as the ancient Greeks did – thus making Ukraine into some kind of ‘front line of Western civilization.’

Various geopolitical models for ordering international relations have been proposed since the end of the Cold War and assorted geopolitical codes emanate from their spatial expressions. Among the most interesting is the replacement of the bipolar world of the Cold War by “a power-political hierarchy with its centre in Brussels – or perhaps in several major West European capitals – with concentric circles extending outwards from the central West European cosmos to the increasingly chaotic regions in the periphery. This interpretation sees the “Friend-Foe” divide replaced by a “Cosmos-Chaos” divide separating the cosmos of the EU or NATO from the chaotic Eastern Europe and Russia. In relation to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Russia also appears as a cosmos and Moscow as the centre, with concentric zones of dominance and influence.

Unlike the Cold War years, the “other” is not an implacable foe but “chaos”, more threatening in many respects because the expectation and norms of the great power geopolitical games do not apply. The geopolitical code of EU and NATO expansion is thus not territorial-aggrandisement, as is normally the goal of geopolitical manoeuvrings, but instead promoted an economic and political agenda, to be close to the centre – Brussels – and thus close to the favoured states of central and eastern Europe. Russia, above all, constitutes the chaotic alternative and if Europe turns its back on the Orthodox/ Eurasian/ Russian world, we move firmly to a “cold peace.”

Viewed from the east, the debate over NATO membership and the associated delimitation of the “West” has had the appearance of a one-sided discussion. Though the United States and the other NATO states issued numerous assurances that enlargement was not directed towards containing Russia, Russian public opinion was not convinced and the suspicions of NATO intentions have reached across the ideological divides. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, one general perspective and four broad geopolitical tendencies can be identified in Russia. The idea of Russia as a Eurasian country (a world onto itself, neither east nor west) is growing beyond its traditional adherents. The grand debate in Russia about whether Russia is part of the European-Western world or the centre of a separate Eurasian sphere has
generated four opinion blocks. The “westerners”, such as Vladimir Lukin, want to be part of the Atlantic-European community though the opponents (nationalists) see westernism as the root of Russia’s problems (“neo-democrats” in the language of Brzezinski and Sullivan). The perspectives of the centrists and Communists are less dogmatic but veer towards the western and the Eurasian ideologies, respectively.48 A shared belief that NATO enlargement institutionalises a new European wall and brings it closer to Russia’s border links the otherwise-disparate perspectives.49

The western debate about NATO enlargement, short and cursory as it was, took little account of Russian divergent opinions or the historical background of east-central Europe. Its proponents stressed the benefits to the alliance and to the three countries (Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary) selected from the list of applicants and would-be aspirants, while continuing to promise that other countries can join in the future. A crystallisation of geopolitical codes was expected during the NATO enlargement debate, especially in the United States, but the debate seems to have no lasting impact in an era of “parachute journalism.” As will be argued in the next section, a strenuous avoidance of geopolitical metaphors in the U.S. limited the NATO expansion debate to costs (economic and military), the support for new democracies, and new roles for NATO. In a time of no obvious external threats to American citizens, it is difficult to gain the sustained attention of the public and the politicians to foreign policy matters. The NATO enlargement vote in the U.S. Senate was overwhelmingly positive but the legacy of the decision will extend significantly, far more than the focus of the debate.

**American Geopolitical Codes, the NATO Debate and the Legacy of Geopolitics.**

As agreed by NATO members in 1995, prospective member states had to meet four criteria for admission, including a) demonstrating adherence to democracy, b) accepting Alliance principles, including mutual defence assistance, c) showing a capability and readiness to contribute to NATO’s security functions, and d) bearing the responsibilities of NATO membership, including any necessary increases in military spending.
States were invited to apply for possible membership and eleven countries (Albania, the Czech Republic, Estonia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) entered into dialogue with the NATO partners. Ultimately, three states (Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) were accepted for membership in 1999.

In a report to the U.S. Congress in February 1997 on the “rationale, benefits, costs and implications” of the enlargement of NATO, the Bureau of European and Canadian Affairs of the State Department made the case for NATO expansion into the “crush zone” of east-central Europe. Among the myriad of benefits of expansion were listed “the broader goal of a peaceful, undivided and democratic Europe.” Other benefits to the West that were specifically identified were “democratic reforms”, a “stronger defence capability”, “improved burden-sharing”, a “better environment for trade, investment and economic growth”, and “improved relations among the region’s states”. Of the total costs of expansion, European allies would be expected to pay $18-$23 billion over 10 years whilst the U.S. would be expected to pick up about $9-$12 billion in additional costs. The report to Congress stressed the minimal costs to the American taxpayer of NATO expansion and it also downplayed any extra financial burdens that might be placed on the applicant countries. The report dismissed the opposition of the Russian government and people by stressing that the expansion was not directed against any one country but was designed to assure the stability and democracy of East-central Europe. “Thus far, Moscow has pursued a two-tracked policy. On the one hand, the Russian government and political elite continue to voice opposition to enlargement. On the other hand, President Yeltsin, Foreign Minister Primakov and other senior Russian officials are now engaging in an intensive dialogue with the U.S., other key allies and NATO about the enlargement process and prospects for developing the NATO-Russia relationship”.50 The report further asserted that Russian public opinion was relatively indifferent to the issue of NATO expansion.

Fundamentally, the pro-enlargement argument was based on the “New Strategic Concept” for NATO developed in 1991 which “moved beyond the Cold War NATO stress on positioned forward defense to place a new emphasis on the development of multinational force projection, supported from extended lines of communication and relying on deployable and flexible logistics support capabilities for crisis
management operations. Since then, NATO has taken steps to put these ideas into practice. It has led to the military mission in former Yugoslavia. Only a half-page in the report was devoted to the wider geopolitical implications of the expansion under the heading “Putting geopolitical costs in perspective”. In this section, the main emphasis was on the message that failure to expand would deliver to the NATO applicants, including the assertion that such an action “would falsely revalidate the old and now-arbitrary divisions of the Cold War at a time when Western policy is committed to overcome them. The resulting sense of isolation and vulnerability would be destabilizing to the region.”

Numerous critics in the West of NATO enlargement have also generally avoided a geopolitical argument, emphasising instead the economic, cultural, military and strategic costs. Amongst the anti-enlargement arguments were a) the increased nuclear danger because of the failure of the Russian Duma to ratify the START II treaty, b) the increased military costs of forces’ integration to the new members (Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) and to the United States, c) confusion in the NATO mission as it switches from a North Atlantic to a North American/West and Central European alliance, d) the alienation of populations in countries not offered membership (Bulgaria, Rumania, the Baltic states), e) the strengthening of the anti-West factions in Russia, and f) the further alienation of Russia as future NATO expansion is planned in parts of the former Soviet Union.

The geopolitical argument, that NATO enlargement risks the delimitation of a new dividing line in Europe, was made most forcibly by George F. Kennan. On one side of a new geopolitical divide would be the 19 members of NATO and on the other side, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. With future expansion plans for the Baltic states, this division could become even more controversial because of the presence of ethnic Russians in these states and the growing sense of encirclement that would undoubtedly grow in Russian political circles and the subsequent growing appeal of the anti-West blocs. Kennan called NATO expansion the “most fatal error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era.” As Nijman argues persuasively, the current U.S. administration under the leadership of Secretary of State Madeline Albright, a native of the Czech Republic, has deliberately avoided a geopolitical quarrel and moved the debate instead to geography.
the new members are part of a democratic, capitalist, historic Europe. What was most noticeable was the a-historic nature of the NATO discussion in the United States and the stress on geopolitical traditions by the pro-enlargement Central European émigrés, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger, stood out dramatically.

As was pointed out earlier in this paper, the “crush zone” of East-Central Europe figured prominently in the geopolitical codes of the great powers from the late nineteenth-century to 1945. After a half-century of relative obscurity due to the clear domination of the Soviet Union in the region, the geopolitical strategists once again have the chance to consider Mitteleuropa in all its regional dimensions. Whilst Russian strategists and political leaders clearly want to keep Central Europe as a neutral or transition zone, the West in the guise of NATO wants to incorporate the region firmly into the European world. Rather than accepting or even debating the proposition that the area between the Oder and the Dnieper has always been a “shatterbelt” or “crush zone”, Western leaders, like Madeline Albright, claim that NATO expansion into this region returns it to Europe, in effect releasing the “occident kidnappé”, in Milan Kundera’s phrase. The near-total avoidance of geopolitical language and concepts can be viewed as both clever and short-sighted; historical geopolitical memories in the region may eventually undermine the anti-historic decision to expand NATO or at least, throw up challenges sown by the geopolitical fragments that continue to reside in the region.
Conclusions

Gertjan Dijkink defines a geopolitical vision as “any idea concerning the relation between one’s own and other places, involving feelings of (in)security or (dis)advantage (and/ or) invoking ideas about a collective mission or foreign policy strategy.” Both Dijkink and David Campbell argue that there is a pervasive connection in U.S. foreign policy between the fear of disunity at home and the fear of unrest abroad in countries and regions in which the U.S. has a strategic interest. The end of the Cold War has clouded the clarity of a divide between self and other. Conservative American commentators decry the resulting “hollow hegemony” as the U.S has “lost faith in its own ideals.” To the average American, the world appears more confusing, chaotic and unruly than ever before and no amount of U.S. foreign aid or military assistance appears to be able to bring it to order.

For scholars writing in the critical geopolitical tradition, the foreign policy of the United States provided an easy foil in the years of the Cold War. In the post-Cold War dilemmas posed by the bloody events in Bosnia, Chechnya and other nationalist battlegrounds, the United States has been caught between intervention, now promoted by humanitarians to prevent more “holocausts” and isolationism, supported by most of the public who are fearful of another Vietnam-style “quagmire.” The lack of consensus is clearly reflected in the menu of geopolitical codes that are currently on offer (Table 1). As a consequence of the uncertain global role for the United States, critical geopolitical works have become less “critical” and more speculative. As the foreign policy ground keeps shifting and geopolitical debate is assiduously avoided, critics of U.S. foreign policy finds themselves with little recourse except either to bemoan the lack of attention to foreign events on the part of a great power or to try to comprehend an erratic policy.

Classic geopolitical concepts, such as the “crush zone” or “shatterbelt”, do not change meaning or location, except over the long haul. The absence of geopolitical memory, now endemic in the U.S. foreign policy establishment, requires that political geographers explain the importance of geopolitical precedent and regional legacies. No place has a more troubled and prominent history of local and international conflict than
Eastern Europe and the attempts to patch over the legacy of these wars through the extension of NATO to the Polish eastern border does not resolve the issue of where Europe ends. With the Ukrainian establishment clamouring that their country is (historically) an integral part of Europe and with future plans to extend NATO to the Baltic states, a new geopolitical divide seems destined to appear on either the western or eastern border of Ukraine. The future geography of “Europe” thus remains undecided and there appears little chance that it will ever include the “unruly” Russia. In this historical debate, the U.S. administration has avoided taking a stand whilst sweeping away out of sight the geopolitical debris of past wars and the geopolitical challenges of contemporary foreign relations.
NOTES

1 This research was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation.


3 In this paper, I will refer to the region between the Oder and the Dnieper by various names. Though the term “Eastern Europe” is most-widely used in English to describe the area, other terms that are commonly used include “East-Central Europe”, “Mitteleuropa” and “Central Europe”. By most accounts, the region includes the former Communist countries of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Romania and the three Baltic states (Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania). Though physically part of the Oder-Dnieper world, the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad is typically not included in the region and neither are the Balkan states of the former Yugoslavia and Albania.


For examples of state-centred geopolitical analysis, the reader can look at any issue of Strategic Review, Journal of Strategic Studies or any of the main foreign affairs journals, like Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, Orbis, World Policy Journal, Washington Quarterly or International Organization.

George F. Kennan was a notable exception to this statement. In this opposition to NATO expansion, Kennan emphasised the continuities of Russian fears of encirclement, a fear that he had first highlighted in his famous “X” article, “The sources of Soviet conduct.” Foreign Affairs 25, 566-582.


The definition is from P.J. Taylor, Political Geography: World-system, Nation-state and Locality. 3rd ed. London: Longman, p. 91. Taylor elaborates that a geopolitical code “will have to incorporate a definition of a state’s interests, an identification of external threats to those interests, a planned response to such threats and a justification of that response” (p. 64). This concept is similar to that of “image plans” as described by Henrikson and the term “geopolitical code” was first used by J.L. Gaddis, Strategies of Containment. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.


15 For details on the dilemma facing the Clinton administration in Bosnia, caught between a “quagmire” and a “holocaust”, see G. Ó Tuathail, Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.


17 The figures are reported in J.D. Rosner, “The know-nothings know something.” Foreign Policy no. 101 (Winter 1995-96), p. 124


21 According to the Chicago Council of Foreign Relations poll cited in Kull, op. cit. In a similar poll by the Wall Street Journal reported in the same article, 72% said that the U.S. should let other countries and the United Nations take the lead in solving international crises and conflicts.


23 Maybe it’s been replaced by a “Somalia syndrome” as a result of the death of 18 U.S. troops in a shootout in Mogadishu in 1993. After this firefight, U.S. troops were pulled out immediately though the fact that U.S. troops killed 3,000-5,000 Somalis in that conflict seemed lost on the public with its fetish on U.S. casualties.
As noted by Buzan and Segal, op.cit., p. 3 “the weakening of shared identity means that individuals are not as prepared as in the past to die for their country, although they may be perfectly willing to risk their lives in dangerous sports or by excesses of consumption”. In recent military actions, “America’s impressive demonstration of high-tech military power was offset by its equally impressive desire to avoid both casualties and entanglement.” (Buzan and Segal, p. 8).

George F. Kennan, op. cit.


R. Dole presents his list in “Shaping America’s global future” Foreign Policy no. 98 (Spring 1995), p. 35.


Cited in Ó Tuathail, op.cit., p. 206. In a similar vein, Ó Tuathail reports the jokes of a late-night television comedian: “we do deserts; we don’t do jungles. Or mountains.”


The quotes from Leonid Kuchma are reported in N. Hodge, “Kuchma curries European favor, aid”. Kyiv Post, October 20, 1998, page 1.


34 S. P. Huntington, op. cit.


37 Haushofer, op.cit.


39 The full text of the famous Mackinder aphorism is “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; who rules the World Island commands the World”. It was first published in 1919 in Democratic Ideals and Reality.


43 Kjellén, op cit.


46 Tunander, op. cit., p. 37. Also see O. Waæver, “Imperial metaphors: Emerging European analogies to pre-nation-state imperial systems” in Tunander, Baev and Einagel, op. cit. p. 67 about the concentric circles around Brussels.


Neumann, op. cit., p.171. Y. Borko, “Possible scenarios for geopolitical shifts in Russian-European relations.” In O. Tunander, P. Baev and V.I. Einagel (eds) *Geopolitics in Post-Wall Europe: Security, Territory and Identity*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications, 1997, p. 206 reports that public opinion in Russia is highly variable and is a contrasting mosaic. Most Russians are suspicious of plans for NATO expansion but 33% were favorable to the EU, while 19% were neutral and only 7% had a negative attitude (*Central and Eastern Eurbarometer*, no. 6, 1996).

The State Department also distributed a glossy 24 page brochure titled *The Enlargement of NATO: Why Adding Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to NATO Strengthens American National Security*. Washington D.C, February 1998. The brochure prominently featured the most widely-known quote by Secretary of State Albright: “A larger NATO will make us safer by expanding the area in Europe where wars simply do not happen.” (October 7, 1997).

Bureau of European and Canadian Affairs, op. cit. 6. 10


55 J. Nijman, op. cit.


61 G. O’Tuathail, op. cit., Chapter 6.