

Assessing Russia's "Zero Sum Game": Tennessee Congressman John Tanner and the Presidency of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly

Brian K. Clardy, Ph.D.

Introduction

"I quickly learned, and I think this is a generality, but its overall true: the Russian mentality is a zero-sum game, or by what I found to be a zero-sum game. In other words, if it's good for America they thought it automatically had to be bad for Russia."¹

United States Representative John Tanner, from Tennessee's Eighth Congressional District was president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly from 2008 to 2011. During his term in office, a number of crucial events occurred that tested the metal of NATO, the Parliamentary Assembly, and the larger Western Alliance. Whether it was the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, the aggressive bullying of its former satellite states (e.g., Poland, the Czech Republic), or its intermeddling in the affairs of Eastern Ukraine, Tanner's presidency of the Parliamentary Assembly occurred at a critical time as the West had to navigate within a volatile policy environment. This article seeks to examine Tanner's role in formulating policy towards Russia during that vital period.

Throughout his Congressional career, Tanner balanced his strong support for West Tennessee agricultural and economic development interests, while providing guidance on foreign policy making, even when his Democratic Party was in the electoral minority in the House and his region (and his state) was quickly becoming a Republican majority region. His ability to work across the proverbial "aisle" gave him the gravitas to make an important contribution to the larger foreign policy dialogue.

Many political observers got their first impression of John Tanner from his brief appearance in Michael Moore's docudrama "Fahrenheit 911" where Moore challenged him to support an effort to enlist the children of members of Congress to serve in the Iraq War (2003-2011). Tanner's relaxed and non-committal response to Moore's aggressive questioning added a bit of levity to a seeming somber scene in the film. However, Tanner was already an important figure in foreign policy circles as a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and of the

¹ Clardy, Brian. Interview with John Tanner (Transcribed by Jonathan Dunning). Personal telephone interview. Union City, Tennessee/Murray, Kentucky, August 15, 2017, 2.

House Ways and Means Committee.² Tanner had voted in favor of granting George W. Bush the authority to use force in Iraq, as he was considered to be a moderate to conservative voice on military and foreign affairs.³

John Summers Tanner was born on September 22, 1944 in Halls, Tennessee, the son of Emerson “Buzz” and Edith (nee Sanders) Tanner. A 1962 graduate of Union City High School, Tanner received his bachelors’ degree from the University of Tennessee in 1966 and a law degree from the UT College of Law in 1968. After graduation, he joined the U.S Navy and served until 1972. A practicing West Tennessee lawyer, Tanner was elected to the Tennessee State House of Representatives in 1976 after the incumbent, Larry Bates failed in his effort to defeat Congressman Ed Jones (D- Seventh/Eighth District, 1969-1989) for the Democratic nomination.⁴ Tanner was re-elected to the state house in 1978, 1980, 1982, 1984, and 1986. It is important to note that four of those general elections were favorable to Republicans on the statewide ballot, while Tanner (a Democrat) won his re-election bids handily.

When Jones decided against seeking re-election in 1988, Democrats voted overwhelmingly to grant Tanner the nomination for the U.S. House, one of his opponents being a former Tennessee Governor previously convicted for mail fraud and selling liquor licenses while in office. Tanner went on to win the general election defeating Republican attorney Ed Bryant by 25% of the popular vote.⁵ Tanner often ran to the ideological center of his party by supporting gun rights and a strong military and against such legislative measures as partial birth abortions. Yet, he was a staunch supporter of the policies of the Bill Clinton Administration, as well as the statewide Democratic candidates in Tennessee, including Harold Ford, Jr.’s historic bid for the United States Senate in 2006 and the presidential candidacies of Vice President Albert Gore, Jr. and Senators John Kerry and Barack Obama.

Because of his ability to maintain the support of his West Tennessee Democratic Party base, and to attract conservative independents and moderate Republicans, Tanner easily won re-election in 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008. The only race in which he had a serious challenger was in 1994 when Republican Neil Morris opposed him during a period when the policies of the Clinton Administration had fallen out of favor with many voters in the Eight District. Furthermore, the Republican base was energized by a series of proposals

² John Tanner with Michael Moore and Corporal Abdul Henderson (USMC). *Fahrenheit 911*. DVD. Directed by Michael Moore. Lionsgate Films, Santa Monica, California, 2004.

³ H.R. Joint Resolution 114 Authorization for Military Force against Iraq Resolution, 2002. 107th Congress (2001-2003), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-joint-resolution/114>.

⁴ John Tanner. *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774-Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=t000038>.

⁵ This election is significant in that Republican presidential nominee, Vice President George H.W. Bush, carried Tanner’s district by a similar margin, defeating Democratic candidate, Governor Michael Dukakis.

called “The Contract with America” crafted by leading national conservative Republicans including Georgia Congressman Newt Gingrich. While Tanner easily defeated Morris by 28 percentage points, voters in Tennessee were trending in favor of the Republican Party. In 1994, the Democrats lost an open gubernatorial race, a special US Senate election, a regular US Senate election, and the open Third Congressional District seat previously held by a Democrat, Marilyn Lloyd.⁶

One of the most important developments coming out of the 1994 midterm elections, and going into the formation of the 104th Congress in January 1995, was the establishment of the “Blue Dog” Democratic Coalition in the U.S. House. The major function of this group of southern Democratic House members was to change the ideological direction of the national party from a decidedly liberal stance to a more practical and moderate path. One of the areas in which the “BlueDogs” was to become involved in national security and defense and to dispel the notion that the Democratic Party was weak on foreign policy, in the hopes that the electoral momentum would be shifted from the Republicans.

For the duration of his Congressional career, John Tanner would become a leading voice of the “Blue Dogs” in the area of national defense and foreign policy. His membership on the powerful House Armed Services committee, and later in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly would give him the standing to get involved in shaping the diplomatic conversation. Consequently, dramatic events in Europe, especially in the area of U.S.-Russian relations would provide him the opportunity to participate in the formulation of policy.

An Analysis of the Literature

In many ways, the literature in this area of Congressional foreign policy decision making is new in the sense that these were recent events, and the current state of Russia’s relationship with the West is an unfolding drama. However, Tanner’s involvement with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly continues a trend of American legislators who were elected from districts/states in the American South who have expressed an interest in shaping international affairs.

For example, Joseph Fry’s work, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, is a historical analysis of U.S. Southern politicians’ involvement in foreign affairs from the early national period to the Vietnam War era. The book places this topic into context and informs the reader about the

⁶ For a clearer discussion of the changing nature of Tennessee politics, and the electoral environment in which Tanner had to navigate, see Michael Nelson, “Tennessee: Once a Bluish State, Now a Reddish One,” in Charles S. Bullock (ed.) *The New Politics of the Old South* (Landham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2013), 181-206. In addition, see Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Southern Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Nicol C. Rae, “The Democrats’ ‘Southern Problem’ in Presidential Politics,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 22 (1) 1992, 135-151.

regional and electoral factors that undergirded the legislators' involvement. Appeals to nationalism and patriotism often served as motivating factors in southern legislative involvement in U.S. foreign policy. In addition, the low electoral turnover rate (in the post-World War II context) allowed these politicians to become chairs and ranking members of powerful committees (e.g. Armed Services, Foreign Affairs), thus enabling them to have a greater voice in foreign policy deliberations and decision-making.⁷

The biographies of influential southern legislative leaders also play an important part in contextualizing their historic roles in foreign policy making. However, the reader must be careful to separate their controversial opposition to civil rights legislation from their interest in foreign policy because their motivations in pursuing both ends sometimes varied. Don Thompson's recent study of the life of Mississippi Democratic Senator John Stennis explores his pragmatism in containing the spread of Communism, in addition to his passion for a strong and well-equipped US Navy.

While most authors tend to focus upon Stennis' harsh criticism of the roles of the judiciary and the presidency in promoting racial segregation in the 1950s and 1960s, Thompson takes a more focused approach in placing Stennis at the forefront of post-World War II foreign policy statecraft.

In addition, Randall Bennett Woods' study of Arkansas Democratic Senator J. William Fulbright takes a very similar approach in giving the reader a glimpse into the motivations behind his approach to diplomacy. Fulbright's aristocratic background, coupled with his stellar educational credentials (including matriculation at Oxford University and the George Washington University School of Law) prepared him to become a major voice in the formation of post-World War II diplomacy. By the time that Fulbright was elected to the U.S. House in 1942, he had already gained a reputation as an astute observer of military and diplomatic trends and was on the fast track to becoming a significant voice in promoting U.S. national security interests. He was elected to the Senate after one term and became chair of the influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1959.

Woods' study of Fulbright's career demonstrates the professionalism that Fulbright brought to his foreign policy goals. Whether it was designing U.S.- Soviet policy in the late 1940s, or urging discretion in prosecuting the War in Vietnam, Woods demonstrates the often erudite and distinguished approaches that Fulbright took to foreign policy, often dispelling the caricature of Southern politicians as being loud and brash racists with no sense of the larger world. While Fulbright was a powerful opponent of civil rights, he took a practical electoral approach to this complex subject while maintaining his courtly posture as an expert on vital national security affairs, thus making him a formidable national figure.⁸

⁷ Joseph Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S Foreign Relations, 1789-1973* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

⁸ Randall Bennett Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography* (New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1995), 20-32, 110, 330-4. Woods' coverage of Fulbright's erudite approach to world affairs are found in Fulbright's own

And finally Sally Russell's recent biography on Georgia Democratic Senator Richard B. Russell is an essential part of the literature on influential Southern legislators and their influence on U.S. foreign policy making. This work takes the same approach of Woods' towards Fulbright, in that it seeks to place Russell's electoral considerations in opposing racial integration into context while examining the professionalism that he brought to the formation of American diplomatic and military objectives. Like Fulbright, Russell was an astute lawyer and politician with an interest in the formation of conventional military power and a cautious approach to military force. Having served in the U.S. Navy for a brief time during World War I, Russell brought his military and legal background into his tenure as a U.S. Senator in 1933, later becoming chair of the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee in 1955. Sally Russell describes his direct involvement in significant diplomatic and military developments from the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis to his levelheaded approach to the use of ground forces in South Vietnam.⁹

While the literature on Southern Congressional leaders' involvement in U.S. foreign policy is rich and evolving, there are a number of differences between those works and the one under consideration. First, unlike Stennis, Fulbright and Russell, Tanner was not a segregationist and as such, Tanner's record needs not a bifurcated analysis that separates his legislative record. Additionally, Tanner's long standing direct involvement with the U.S. Navy, as active duty, and later as a Colonel in the Army National Guard, gave him the unique qualifications to address foreign policy from a practical perspective. Second, Tanner was never a member of the U.S. Senate, but a long time member of the U.S. House. This factor alone makes Tanner's record worth examining. Third, while Tanner did not enjoy the celebrity of Stennis, Fulbright, and Russell (and there is no indication that his work had a direct bearing on overall foreign policy outcomes), it is important to note his service and contribution to the larger foreign policy conversation at the start of the Twenty-First Century.

Towards a New Cold War? : The Crucible of Russia 1992-2010

The breakup of the Soviet Union in late 1991 was a development that stunned even the most seasoned political observers. While the reforms of Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev promoted innovations towards openness and relaxed tensions with the United States, very few people would have predicted the fragmentation of the entire Soviet state and the emergence of a

work, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Random House, 1966) and in "The Most Important and Significant Activity I Have Been Privileged to Engage During My Years in the Senate," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 424 (1), 1-5 (1976).

⁹ Sally Russell, *Richard Brevard Russell, Jr.: A Life of Consequence* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2011). For a full discussion of Russell's practical stand on U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, see Caroline Ziemke, "Senator Richard B. Russell and the 'Lost Cause' in Vietnam, 1954-1968," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 72 (1), 30-71, 1988.

weakened Russian Federation. However, in the early to mid-1990s, there was a glimmer of hope that a democratic and an economically vibrant Russia would be a valuable partner in maintaining stability in the Balkans and allowing greater opportunities in trade and energy exploration. This diplomatic optimism was further encouraged by a landmark deal between the United States and Russia (crafted by U.S. Senators Democrat Sam Nunn of Georgia and Republican Richard Lugar of Indiana) that facilitated bilateral cooperation in securing “loose” nuclear materials, thus keeping those dangerous resources out of the reach of rogue states and non-state actors.¹⁰

However, the failure of the economic reforms of Boris Yeltsin, coupled with the notion that Russia had lost its standing and security in the face of an emerging Western Europe (and a powerful NATO) led to a crisis in confidence of the democratically elected government in Moscow. As a result, President Yeltsin resigned his office on December 31, 1999 and his successor Vladimir Putin, a former official in the Soviet-era KGB, would take Russia on an ambitious path towards restoring its former “glory,” even at the risk of renewed political (and potentially military) conflict with its Western counterparts.¹¹

The ascendancy of Vladimir Putin to the presidency of the Russian Federation in December 1999 marked a major transition in US/NATO-Russian relations from a peaceful and cooperative relationship to a potentially hostile one. As Moscow spent massive amounts of money on its conventional forces, and acted aggressively towards its former Cold War satellite countries, many in the West sounded alarm bells that Cold War II type conditions were starting to manifest themselves across the broader diplomatic spectrum. Moreover, NATO was transitioning from a larger post World War II defensive organization to a peacemaking organization in the mid-1990s. The organization became an active participant in prosecuting the War on Terror after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 when it invoked Article V for the first time in its history.¹² With a resurgent Russia in the early 2000s, NATO and the West faced new and unprecedented challenges as tensions reached a seeming boiling point.

¹⁰ Stephen F. Cohen, *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000). See also John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War: Implications, Reconsiderations, and Provocations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). The scholarship on Nunn-Lugar is rich in that the nuclear proliferation literature is evolving in national security academic circles. For a greater discussion of this development see William Perry, *My Journey at the Nuclear Brink* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2015) and Amy F. Woolf (ed.), *The Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Programs* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2003).

¹¹ Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2014), 1-75.

¹² Phillip H. Gordon and Jeremy Shapiro, *Allies at War: America, Europe and the Crisis Over Iraq* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 1, 59, 63; Brian K. Clardy, “The Fallacy of Unilateralism: Anti-Terror, Banking, and the Future of the Transatlantic Alliance” (presentation, Oxford Roundtable on US/EU Relations, St. Anthony's College, University of Oxford, 2004), 2; Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster), 176.

Consequently, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, created in 1955, was in a very precarious position as it debated these issues during this critical period. Like the larger umbrella organization in Brussels, it needed to formulate a workable solution in a manner that would not back Moscow into a proverbial diplomatic corner by being overly aggressive, but that would bolster the aims of the Western Alliance. As Moscow's ambitions for renewed dominance in Eastern Europe were made clear, the Parliamentary Assembly had to construct firm dialogue and pragmatic decision making into its calculus in a manner that would force a potentially catastrophic military showdown.¹³

In the early part of Putin's tenure, the Russian relationship with the West was seemingly non-descript. While Western leaders had reason to believe that Putin's policies would be more nationalistic, compared to Yeltsin's, there was no need for alarm or concern. During a June 2001 press conference in Slovenia with U.S. President George W. Bush, the tone was cordial and respectful, leading Bush to intone, "I was able to get a sense of his soul." Furthermore, Russia joined with many nations in supporting the United States following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and in the bid to force Iraq to relinquish its alleged illicit weapons stockpiles. For a brief moment, it seemed as if Russia was poised to be a valuable, albeit prickly, ally to the West. But within a matter of years, the tone quickly changed in the opposite negative direction.¹⁴

The Russian Federation was concerned about NATO's plans for expansion into its former satellite nations. Moreover, the U.S. goal of abrogating the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and pursuing a missile defense system made Moscow leery as this could possibly give the United States a first strike potential. And in 2007, the United States announced plans to place nuclear weapons in Poland and the Czech Republic, sending alarm bells throughout the Kremlin.¹⁵ The following year, Putin stepped down as president, but accepted the role as Russian Prime Minister, leaving his protégé Dmitri Medvedev in "power" in Moscow. Russia's attitude towards the West, and its Eastern European neighbors took a decidedly harsher turn.¹⁶

¹³ For a clear discussion of NATO's diplomatic dilemmas over expansion, and its conflict with the Russian Federation, see Mark Smith, *NATO Enlargement During the Cold War: Strategy and System in the Western Alliance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000), 11-22, 162-177.

¹⁴ Gale A. Mattox, "Resetting the US-Russian Relationship: is 'Cooperative Engagement' Possible?" *European Security* 20 (1) 2011, 103-116. Lucas, *The New Cold War*. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 103, 116, 129-130.

¹⁵ Bruce I. Konviser, "U.S. Missiles in Eastern Europe Opposed by Locals, Russia," *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/27/AR2007012701370.html> .

¹⁶ Luke Harding, "Putin Ever Present as Russia Becomes President," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/may/08/russia>; George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Broadway Books, 2011) 431, 433-434.

The former Soviet republic of Georgia, like other Soviet satellites, received their independence from Moscow in 1991, but the country quickly deteriorated into conflict as pro-Russian separatists in South Ossetia demanded autonomy from the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. As the Putin government in Moscow became more interested in a closer relationship with its former satellite countries, tensions in Georgia reached a boiling point. On August 1, 2008, South Ossetian forces began shelling targets within Georgia, and a week later, Russian troops were sent in to aid South Ossetia and joined the attack.¹⁷ Leaders in the United States and NATO were outraged. This signaled a major doctrinal shift in Moscow's policy and added to the growing perception that Moscow sought to reconstitute its former "empire." Moreover, it gave the impression that any hope or hint of cooperation with Russia would be complicated and fraught with tension.

In January 2009, Barack Obama had become president. Upon taking office, he began fulfilling his campaign promise of a more cooperative relationship with Moscow. In fact, the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton famously offered a gift of a red push button to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that symbolized a proverbial "reset" in U.S./West-Russian relations. However, these were merely token gestures. Russia's relationship with the West deteriorated further resulting in the greatest tensions between East and West since the height of the Cold War.¹⁸

It was into this policy environment that Congressman John Tanner assumed the Presidency of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and as such, contributed to the dialogue concerning the West's policy towards an ambitious Russia.

John Tanner, Russia, and the Presidency of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (2008-2011)

As a member of Congress, Tanner became involved in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Brussels during the early 1990s as he viewed the work of NATO to be essential to U.S. National Security interests and promoting regional and global stability. While the United Nations provided its member countries with a forum to air grievances, and promote novel approaches to diplomacy, Tanner believed that the work of the Parliamentary Assembly could provide more pragmatic approaches to deal with conflict resolution, particularly with its stated military component in place. Tanner intoned:

The work that the Parliamentary Assembly did was interesting to me, and I always thought I'd still do. NATO is invaluable to the United States in this regard; it is the only truly international organization that has the wherewithal to

¹⁷ Charles King, "The Five Day War: Managing Moscow after the Georgia Crisis," *Foreign Affairs*, 87 (6) (November/December 2008), 2.

¹⁸ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 230-234; Jonathan Alter, *The Center Holds: Obama and His Enemies* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 10-11.

back-up policy with some sort of military capability. The UN, if we didn't have the UN, we'd have to invent one for people to go and blow off steam and talk and raise Cain, hell. But, it (UN) has no teeth and probably never will the way it's set up. It's necessary for the peaceful, robust argument, but that's about it. NATO on the other hand is an international organization with a commitment to the defense of its member nations, Article V being the lynchpin of the alliance.¹⁹

While Tanner was not wholly dismissive of the United Nations, he placed emphasis upon the more practical recommendations that the NATO Parliamentary Assembly could place before military and political decision makers in times of crisis.

The tone of Tanner's discussion turned starker, however, when asked about the challenges that the organization faced during his term as president. Tanner took office on the heels of the Russian invasion of Georgia and the subsequent cyberattacks on the former Soviet Baltic republics, both of which were viewed by the West as Moscow's flagrant use of force and overbearing aggression. However, Tanner's adroit diplomatic track assured that the conflicts would not escalate into an even broader conflagration. "When I was President of the Assembly from '08 to '11, I always had a bilateral meeting with the Russian Duma members who were invited to the NATO meetings. They had no voice, but we thought it was constructive to have a bilateral with them before we went into our regular session."²⁰

This fact raises an important element of Tanner's work with the Parliamentary Assembly: while Brussels and the other Western capitals were disturbed by Moscow's frequent antics, they were not going to completely ignore the role that cooperative diplomacy can play in resolving conflict. Blustering, bravado, and the collapse of direct communication were not viable policy options. Rather, Tanner articulated a practical and balanced posture. Speaking at the organization's Spring 2010 Plenary Session in Riga, Latvia, Tanner called for a "team work" approach to conflict. He argued, "For the team to win, each individual team member must do

¹⁹ Clardy, Brian (Transcribed by Jonathan Dunning). Interview with John Tanner. Personal telephone interview. Union City, Tennessee to Murray, Kentucky. August 15, 2017, 1. Article V of the NATO charter pledges total cooperation in the event that one member is attacked by a non-member nation. The codicil has only been invoked once since the founding the organization in 1949: when the United States was attacked by terrorists on September 11, 2001. Woodward, *Bush at War*, 176; Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 286. Lawrence Kaplan, *NATO Divided, NATO United: The Evolution of An Alliance* (Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004).

²⁰ Clardy interview with Tanner, 2.

his or her part, no matter how big or small. In the end it's not how successful each of us is individually, but what each individual contributes to the success of the team."²¹

This balanced "teamwork" approach was highlighted before Tanner's Congressional colleagues in a July 2010 speech following successful meetings with his counterparts in Latvia and Montenegro. Tanner explained the often-tumultuous nature of the relationship with Russia, against the backdrop of the latter's aggressive shift in policy. Addressing the efficacy of a measured approach to relations with Moscow, Tanner said:

Officials from some member states within the Alliance express concern that NATO has not taken a strong enough stance against assertive Russian behavior. Others have attempted to view Russia as a 'strategic partner' and call for more pragmatic cooperation and engagement. Our delegation contributed to a number of forceful discussions, including with our Russian counterparts, on the future of NATO-Russia relations. We emphasized that NATO should by no means recognize Russian spheres of influence outside Russian territory or tolerate Russian behavior that threatens the territorial integrity of independent nations. At the same time, we pointed out the importance of developing a unified approach toward Russia within the framework of a broader Alliance policy toward the east.²²

However, Tanner's observations of Russia's seeming paranoia about NATO expansion was at once telling, prescient, and linked to a larger historical narrative. From its days as an emerging empire in the late eighteenth century to the post World War II period, Russia has been apprehensive about what it considers to be the expansionist aims of the West. This has been especially true since the formation of NATO in 1949.

Even in the absence of a discernable strategic threat from the Western powers (read: The United States), Moscow always saw itself in a permanent defensive posture. Therefore, any attempt for Brussels (or the United States) to expand their influence in Europe among the former Soviet satellites would be viewed as a provocation by Moscow, thus stifling diplomatic cooperation.²³ In Tanner's view, this spirit of mistrust was at the heart of conflict with the Russian Federation. He pointed out that this often stymied even the most sincere efforts at

²¹ Speech of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly President (The Honorable John Tanner) to the Plenary Spring Session. Riga, Latvia. June 1, 2010, Box 38, File 7, The John Tanner NATO Parliamentary Assembly Papers, The Paul and Martha Meek Special Collections, The University of Tennessee at Martin.

²² John Tanner. Floor Speech on the Congressional Delegation to NATO Parliamentary Assembly Meetings in Latvia and Bilateral Visit to Montenegro. Washington, DC. July 30, 2010. <https://votesmart.org/public-statement/539742/congressional-delegation-to-nato-parliamentary-assembly-meetings-in-latvia-and-bilateral-visit-to-montenegro#.WePZBjtry70>.

²³ John Lewis Gaddis, *Russia, The Soviet Union and the United States: An Interpretive History* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), 192-193.

striking a conciliatory tone. Describing this complication as a “constant irritant,” Tanner opined:

[D]espite constant assurances that NATO is a purely defensive organization that has no designs on invading Russia, purely defensive. Members who, or member nations or nations that wanted to join had to go through a fairly rigorous process to join. Georgia, for example, never could make it. Macedonia didn’t at the time and neither did Ukraine, even though they tried while I was there. But Russia looked at that as being surrounded by countries who belonged to the NATO alliance led of course by the military might of the United States. So, I can see to some degree their nervousness. If, for example, Russia was annexing into the old Soviet Union, if it still existed, Mexico and Canada we’d be a little nervous about that too I’d imagine, even though they said “we had no design on the United States.”²⁴

This comment was indeed striking as Tanner displayed perhaps one of the most important characteristics of effective diplomacy: the ability to empathize with a potential adversary.

Tanner left the Presidency of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in 2011, as he decided against seeking another term in the US House of Representatives in the 2010 election. During his time in office, he was able to work cooperatively with his global counterparts, the Russians, and with leaders of his own country in helping to promote a balanced policy towards an aggressive Russia and, in the process, played a role in promoting an astute but firm policy that assured global stability, if only in the short term.

Analysis and Conclusions

While this article examines the balanced and erudite approach that Tanner brought with him to the presidency of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, several issues remain unanswered. First, did he have direct communication with the Obama Administration and members of the National Security community in helping to disseminate information upon which policy decisions could be reached? How regularly did he consult with individual members of Congress and did this influence his work on the House Armed Services Committee? Was he able to serve as a direct conduit with high level NATO officials, as well as the leaders of the Russian military and political establishment? Was he given the type of security clearance to have high level discussions with members of the NATO and the United States intelligence services and did he have access to classified materials?

²⁴ Clardy interview with Tanner, 2-3.

The definitive answer to those questions will come with the final compilation and distribution of the John Tanner Congressional Papers, which are still being processed and are, hence, unavailable. Subsequently, future researchers will need an opportunity to further examine declassified policy memoranda and diplomatic communiques sent to all of the policy principles upon which policy towards Russia was debated, formulated and implemented.

John Tanner, a native of a small town in Western Tennessee, joined the giants among southern politicians who displayed an interest in diplomatic affairs and played a valuable role in constructing a sensible foreign policy. Like his Senate predecessors before him (and in a similarly tenuous period on the world stage), Tanner brought with him a practical home-spun intelligence, coupled with his cooperative ability to reach across an ideological divide, and real world military experience in order to become a major diplomatic figure whose influence on world affairs will be felt for generations to come.

Dr. Brian K. Clardy is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at Murray State University.