

# THE U.S. DECISION TO ENLARGE NATO

BY JAMES M. GOLDGEIER

On March 12 U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stood with the foreign ministers of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in the auditorium of the Truman presidential library in Independence, Missouri, and formally welcomed these three countries into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Czech-born Albright, herself a refugee from the Europe of Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin, said quite simply on this day: “Hallelujah.”

Not everyone in the United States felt the same way. The dean of America’s Russia experts, George F. Kennan, had called the expansion of NATO into Central Europe “the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era.” Kennan, the architect of America’s post-World War II strategy of containment of the Soviet Union, believed, as did most other Russia experts in the United States, that expanding NATO would damage beyond repair U.S. efforts to transform Russia from enemy to partner.

The controversy over NATO’s enlargement sprang from contending visions of post-Cold War Europe. Some who favored enlargement, following in the footsteps of President Woodrow Wilson, believed that developing democracies and market economies in Central and Eastern Europe could create peace and

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# How, When, Why, and What Next?



prosperity there. They thought that the prospect of membership in the West's premier security institution would be a powerful incentive for continued reform. Other supporters focused more on the need for stability along Germany's eastern border, arguing that unrest there might lead Germany to believe that it had to undertake unilateral security efforts in Eastern Europe. Still other enlargement supporters, wary of the threat from Moscow, saw in the Cold War's end an opportunity to extend NATO's geostrategic reach in case Russia should ever again seek to dominate its European neighbors.

Passions ran just as strongly on the other side. Those who envisioned a chance to cooperate with Russia to reduce the dangers of nuclear war by dismantling and storing thousands of Russian nuclear warheads were appalled by NATO expansion; they believed that Moscow would regard NATO's inclusion of former Warsaw Pact nations as a direct affront and would drop its efforts to cooperate with the West. Still others, convinced that NATO had become the most effective military alliance in history, feared that adding new states in the east would impair its ability to address problems that might arise in Europe and elsewhere.

Given such controversy, enlargement of the Alliance was a highly uncertain prospect when the Clinton administration began discussing NATO's future in the summer of 1993. The new American president had won his election by focusing on the economy, not by promising to extend America's most solemn commitment to defend others. Inside the legislative and executive branches in the United States, there were few committed proponents of NATO enlargement. With the Cold War over and resources for foreign policy diminishing, only a handful of members of Congress showed any interest in NATO's future, and even fewer were thinking in terms of adding new members. Meanwhile, within the bureaucracy, officials who worked on NATO or Russian affairs were almost completely opposed to expansion, fearing its effect on the Alliance and on U.S.-Russian relations.

How did the handful of supporters of NATO enlargement within the Clinton administration prevail? Why did a Republican-controlled Senate give overwhelming support to a national security initiative put before it by a Democratic president? And what does round one of a process that NATO has promised will continue suggest for the future?

## **The Battles within the Clinton Administration**

In October 1993, the Clinton administration and its NATO partners announced that they would unveil at the January 1994 NATO summit a new initiative to reach out to the east: the Partnership for Peace. The Partnership, a military cooperation program, was the product of bureaucratic battles over how NATO should respond to the Central Europeans' desire to join the Alliance. To the Pentagon, the Partnership was the perfect program—one that could build military relationships, involve all European countries, postpone the need to offer new security guarantees, and avoid confrontation with the Russians.

As 1994 unfolded, however, enlargement supplanted the Partnership for Peace as America's primary NATO policy. During a

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visit to Prague in January, President Clinton stated flatly that “the question is no longer whether NATO will take on new members but when and how.” Six months later, in Warsaw, he added, “Now what we have to do is to get the NATO partners together and to discuss what the next steps should be.” In both capitals, urging the president to be clear about his intentions for NATO was National Security Adviser Anthony Lake, the most important of the early enlargement supporters. Clinton’s speeches in Prague and Warsaw gave NATO enlargement a big push forward—though, in the absence of any formal decision meeting, most of his bureaucracy did not notice.

Clinton’s interest in NATO enlargement had been sparked in April of 1993, when Czech President Vaclav Havel and Polish President Lech Walesa, two giants of Central Europe, had visited Washington and appealed to Clinton to erase the line drawn through Europe by Soviet dictator Josef Stalin. Shortly after their visit, Clinton and Lake articulated a vision of American foreign policy centered on the need to enlarge the community of market democracies. NATO, Lake suggested, could assist this effort in Central and Eastern Europe. Domestic political pressure from conservative Republicans and from the U.S. ethnic communities gave this broad strategic objective added resonance with a White House that always had an eye on the requirements for reelection.

Waving pages from the president’s Prague and Warsaw speeches in the air in late September of 1994, newly installed Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Richard Holbrooke told a stunned group from the Pentagon that the president had stated his support for enlargement and that it was up to them to act on it. Over the next three months, as skeptics inside the administration realized that the president, vice president, national security adviser, and secretary of state all supported NATO enlargement, the bureaucracy fell into line behind what emerged as a two-track policy to enlarge NATO while at the same time enhancing cooperation with Russia.

### The Congressional Push

Meanwhile, on Capitol Hill, a handful of enlargement supporters had begun to prod the administration to move faster. Benjamin Gilman (R-NY) and Henry Hyde (R-IL) introduced legislation in the House of Representatives, followed by Paul Simon (D-IL) and Hank Brown (R-CO) in the Senate. Other vocal supporters included Republicans Richard Lugar (IN) and William Roth (DE). Their efforts culminated in the



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inclusion of NATO enlargement as part of the Republican Contract with America in September 1994 and, a month later, passage of the NATO Participation Act, giving the president authority to provide military aid to help the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia make the transition to NATO membership. For Republicans, the goal was largely to secure the victory of the Cold War by protecting new democracies from a future Russian threat.

Legislators in general tended to be indifferent to enlargement. Outside of a few vocal supporters, most were largely ignorant of European security issues. They may have felt generally positive about the Alliance’s role in the Cold War, but in the electoral environment of 1992–94, the vast

majority of congressmen and senators saw no reason to squander their time on an issue about which few constituents cared.

### The Politics of Enlargement

The Clinton administration faced a variety of crosscutting political currents in the next phase of the enlargement process. Although the president had decided that NATO should expand at some point, he feared that moving too fast would jeopardize his single most important national security objective: assisting reform in Russia. While Boris Yeltsin’s seemingly precarious domestic position and Russian outbursts against enlargement pushed in one direction, Central Europeans and Republicans pushed in the other. The president could not be seen as holding Central Europe hostage to Moscow, but neither could he afford to undermine Yeltsin. Political logic dictated that Clinton could not be explicit about an enlargement timetable before the July 1996 Russian presidential election. But he had to say something concrete before his own reelection bid in November to reap the political benefits from his policy. Meanwhile, as long as the war in Bosnia raged, the United States could not hope to push the Alliance to enlarge.

By October 1996, conditions were ripe for an announcement. Yeltsin had been reelected. The 1995 Dayton accords had brought peace to Bosnia. Two weeks before the U.S. election, the president went to Detroit and, before a large audience of Americans of Central and Eastern European descent, proclaimed his support for new members to enter NATO in 1999.

Constitutionally, however, the process was just beginning. As the Clinton administration began seeking Senate advice and consent in 1997–98, some senators would want to be assured that Russia accepted this first wave; others would fear any arrangement that gave Russia too much influence. All

would want to believe that the costs of expansion would remain low.

### The Senate Vote

In April of 1998 the Senate voted 80–19 in favor of admitting the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to NATO. Several factors were crucial. First, with cost estimates low and Russia having been given a voice (but not a veto) in Alliance affairs through the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act, enlargement critics were mollified. Second, the administration's specially created NATO enlargement ratification office waged an effective national campaign, assisted by leading members of the Senate NATO Observer Group, by the Central Europeans and their ethnic supporters, and by Republican heavyweights in the U.S. Committee to Expand NATO. Endorsements poured in from business, labor, state and local governments, Jewish organizations, veterans, and leading former officials and retired military personnel. Columnists and academics who opposed enlargement on the op-ed pages and in leading journals had no comparable effort.

Finally, Senate Republicans believed that they—not Bill Clinton—had been the engine driving enlargement. Republicans had written enlargement into the Contract with America in 1994. They had driven the legislative process from 1994 to 1996. That Senate Republicans could claim this issue as their own made their consent far more likely than if the initiative had been seen as Democratic-inspired.

### The Future of Enlargement

NATO's enlargement makes sense only if it delivers on the Clinton administration's open-door promise. Stopping after taking in three new countries merely redraws the line in Europe a bit further to the east, undermining Clinton's vision of NATO as the foundation of a unified, democratic, peaceful Europe. Political and economic reform in Central and Eastern Europe has proceeded largely because of the possibility of Western acceptance. Poland has developed civilian control over its military; Hungary has settled its border issues with Romania peacefully; the Czechs have carried out economic reform. Other aspirants, like Slovenia, Lithuania, and Bulgaria, have all adopted Western political and economic norms and institutions in a bid to become full members of the prosperous and peaceful Western order. Reform will be more likely to fail and instability to increase if NATO's first round of expansion is believed to be its last.

But while logic dictates that the process continue, future rounds will be more contentious. Three thorny issues that were finessed during the Senate debate of 1998 will have to be addressed as NATO looks beyond the first round. The first is Russia's reaction to enlargement. While some NATO aspirants, such as Slovenia and Romania, are not particularly threatening to Russia, any second round puts the Baltic issue to the fore. The Russians have repeatedly stated their visceral opposition to

including any former Soviet republic. If Lithuania were to meet Alliance membership criteria, it would be hard to explain why its claim should be less valid than the claims of others. Still, supporters of enlargement in round one who were able to set aside their misgivings about its effect on Russia would find it harder to vote yes in future rounds that raised a Baltic candidacy and thus led NATO onto the territory of the former Soviet Union.

The second issue, potential financial costs, must become more salient in a second and any subsequent rounds, because more members mean more costs, and the U.S. Senate made clear during its ratification debate that it did not want to spend significantly more on NATO. The final problem that will cause concern is potential dilution of the Alliance. Those who fear that enlargement means the end of NATO as a collective defense organization (and its transformation into a collective security pact) will want to see what effect the three new members have on the Alliance before expanding further. That, of course, would delay the second round.

The war in Kosovo has exacerbated all three concerns. Russia's reaction to NATO's attack on Yugoslavia has caused greater despair among those who already feared that expansion could lead to a new Cold War in Europe. Paying for the war will crowd out money for other purposes. And talk of the difficulties of warring by committee will heighten doubts that a larger alliance can function as an effective military machine.

In the first round of NATO enlargement, the United States demonstrated its leadership of the Alliance, and it reassured Germany that its eastern border would remain stable. NATO also granted Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic the security they have never known. And NATO demonstrated through enlargement (as it did by launching the war against Yugoslavia) that it is as much an institution of shared values as it is an alliance to defend shared interests.

Less clear is, first, what the future holds for the NATO–Russia relationship and, second, what will happen to the countries that still aspire to NATO membership. The answers to these two questions hold the key to a future Europe that is undivided, peaceful, and democratic. A truly cooperative relationship between a new NATO and a new Russia requires that NATO convince Russia that neither taking in new members nor adopting new missions is directed against it. It also requires that Russia convince NATO that it will stay on the right track politically and diplomatically.

As for those countries still aspiring to NATO membership, President Clinton and his NATO colleagues decided at NATO's 50th-anniversary summit in April that the Alliance would review the process no later than 2002, thereby postponing the issue of a second round for the next president of the United States. While it was Bill Clinton who argued that NATO could serve as the foundation for a unified, peaceful, and democratic Europe, it will be his successor who decides if NATO's future enlargement is not a question of whether, but of when and how. ■