

Gordon and Steinberg

NATO Enlargement: Moving Forward

The question of whether and how to expand the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) membership is one of the many important U.S. foreign policy issues that must be seen in a new light following the September 11 terrorist attacks. Prior to those attacks, there were strong indications coming from Washington that the Bush administration was planning to support a wide enlargement, notwithstanding strong opposition from Russia and from longstanding domestic opponents of the process. Many of those opponents will now argue even more forcefully that NATO enlargement should be put off or stopped altogether, particularly because Russian cooperation in the war on terrorism is now so crucial.

The case for enlargement, however, is stronger now than before. Enlargement will contribute to the process of integration that has helped stabilize Europe over the past fifty years and promote the development of strong new allies in the war on terrorism. And while cooperation with Russia on terrorism is indeed critically important, the September 11 attacks have also served to remind Russians of the common interests they have with the United States and Europe. Far from backing away from NATO enlargement, the Bush administration should welcome all those European democracies whose political stability, military contributions, and commitment to NATO solidarity would be assets to the Alliance. Now more than ever, Alliance leaders can and should pursue a wider, integrated NATO and a strong and cooperative relationship with Russia at the same time.

From Clinton to Bush: Common Goals for NATO

For all the differences between the foreign policies of the Bush administration and the Clinton administration, policy toward NATO enlargement has been one area of significant continuity. The core of the Clinton strategy was to promote peace and stability on the European continent through the integration of the new Central and Eastern European democracies into a wider Euro-Atlantic community, in which the United States would remain deeply engaged. A revitalized NATO was an important tool for the maintenance of American engagement and leadership, and its expansion to the new democracies—especially given the delays in their efforts to join the European Union (EU)—was a key part of the strategy.



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Expanding the Alliance and

President Clinton expressed his support for enlarging NATO as early as 1994—following the creation of NATO’s “Partnership for Peace,” designed to strengthen relations with the former Warsaw Pact states—and at the Madrid summit in 1997, Alliance leaders decided to invite Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary to join. The process was continued at NATO’s April 1999 50th anniversary summit in Washington, D.C. There, leaders not only welcomed the new members but pledged to leave open the possibility of expansion to more countries and offered to help them prepare for membership.

President Bush has largely picked up where Clinton left off. Bush committed to the enlargement strategy on his first official trip to Europe in June 2001, putting an end to speculation during the 2000 presidential election campaign that he might withdraw American troops from the Balkans and back away from NATO enlargement in an effort to secure Russian acquiescence to missile defense. The new president not only reiterated the Clinton “in together, out together” pledge in the Balkans but forcefully made the case for NATO’s continued expansion. In a major speech in Warsaw, Poland, on June 15, Bush asserted that “all of Europe’s new democracies,” from the Baltics to the Black Sea, should have an equal chance to join Western institutions. He suggested that the failure to allow them to do so would amount to the moral equivalent of the World War II Yalta and Munich conferences and appealed to NATO leaders to take a forward leaning approach to enlargement at their November 2002 summit in Prague. At America’s urging, Alliance leaders agreed to allow NATO Secretary General George Robertson to announce that NATO expected to launch the next round of enlargement at the Prague Summit in 2002.

Russia’s reaction to the new momentum behind NATO enlargement has not been as hostile as many expected. Indeed, just 24 hours after the Bush speech, Russian President Vladimir Putin warmly embraced the American president at a summit in Bled, Slovenia, strongly implying that he did not intend to let enlargement undermine the potential for U.S.-Russia cooperation. Later in the summer, Putin took a further step toward acknowledging the inevitability of enlargement by expressing the view that Russia might itself want to join NATO, as an alternative to his preferred option of seeing NATO disappear. Putin went even further in October 2001, as Russian-American cooperation on terrorism was moving forward, saying that if NATO were to continue “becoming more political than military” Russia might reconsider its opposition to enlargement. This was hardly an expression of Russian support for enlargement, but it was the strongest signal yet that Moscow wants to find a way to accommodate a development that it does not like but knows it cannot stop. At their November 2001 summit in Crawford, Texas, Putin did not press Bush on the issue.

In this context, the question of whether NATO will enlarge next year seems to have been answered. Important questions remain, however, concerning who should get in, how

Completing Europe's Integration

NATO should go about taking them in, and how to deal with Russia. Although the formal decisions will not be taken until next year's Prague summit, the need to reach consensus among NATO's 19 members well in advance (probably by summer 2002) will require the Bush administration to reach decisions and develop a strategy as early as this winter, so that it can begin the long and difficult process of building consensus among Allies and engaging Congress and the American people.

Enlargement Options for the Next Round

There are several ways NATO can move forward as it tries to meet the challenge of reaching consensus among its members while not alienating important players like Russia. The main options include:

A Pause. Opponents of NATO enlargement—who have consistently argued that it needlessly provokes Russia, costs too much, dilutes Alliance unity, and distracts NATO from its original mission—will argue that it is not too late to halt the process now, or at least that it should be suspended. After countless pledges by Alliance leaders—both individually and through the Alliance—that NATO's door remains open to all of Europe's new democracies, a decision to stop the process now would badly damage NATO's credibility and have a devastating impact on a region that has been let down by the West in the past. To the extent that the "pause" seemed to be a reaction to Russian threats or the need for Russian cooperation on terrorism, it would arguably only encourage future threats. Given recent pledges, it is nearly certain that NATO will invite at least one new member—and probably many more—next year.

Limited Enlargement. A more likely approach that might appeal to leaders still cautious about taking in a large number of countries at once would be to invite a limited number of candidates to join. Among them, Slovenia is seen to be the most viable, given its relatively advanced processes of economic and political reform, geographical contiguity with other NATO members, and lack of political tensions with Russia. Slovakia, for many of the same reasons, is also often mentioned as a likely new member, though the prospect of former authoritarian Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar replacing the current reformist government next year could undermine its chances. More controversial would be extending membership to the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Whereas only a few years ago Baltic membership in NATO had little support, their prospects have risen dramatically as a function of their remarkable progress toward economic and political reform (with significant help from their Nordic neighbors) and the logic of the open door process.

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The Baltic states are significantly more developed economically than some of the Southern European candidates, and they have handled the sensitive question of treatment of their sizeable Russian minorities well enough that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has decided to close its human rights monitoring mission in all three countries. The Baltic states have significant political support in the United States, led by Senators Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and John McCain (R-Ariz.). Even leaders concerned about the impact of Baltic enlargement on Russia will find it difficult to make the case that they should be excluded from NATO because of their illegal and unrecognized incorporation into the Soviet Union from 1940-1990. On a trip to the Baltic states in July 2001, French President Chirac made a forceful case, similar to Bush's, that the Baltic states should have the right to choose their own alliances.

To avoid a potential crisis with Russia over Baltic membership, some observers have suggested possibly taking in just one Baltic state, usually envisaged to be Lithuania because of its relatively small Russian minority and geographical contiguity with NATO. But the logic of this approach is hard to sustain. Taking in one Baltic state but not the others would cause tensions among the Baltic states, which would undermine the goal of regional cooperation and lead to continuing tension with Russia over the issue of Baltic membership for years to come. If the decision is taken to accept the Baltic states, assuming continued economic and political progress, they should all be invited to join at the same time.

Enlargement to include Romania and/or Bulgaria would not provoke Russian opposition in the same way that Baltic enlargement would. It would also send a strong signal about NATO's long-term commitment to southeastern Europe and represent a tangible acknowledgement of Romanian and Bulgarian contributions to the Alliance's efforts to bring the Kosovo conflict to a successful conclusion. On the other hand, despite considerable efforts on the part of reformers in both countries, doubts remain about their political and economic prospects. Romania in particular has had difficulty sustaining political and economic reform.

The major problem with this limited approach to membership is reaching consensus on whom to accept, given the relative strengths and weaknesses of all the candidates and the differing interests of current NATO members. Taking in the northern candidates without the south, for example, would almost certainly be opposed by France and Italy, who unsuccessfully backed Romania in 1997 and have said that it must not be ignored this time. At the same time, however, taking in the southern countries while leaving out the Baltic states would be hard to defend according to any objective "criteria" and would be politically difficult for the United States and northern NATO members. Splitting the difference and taking in, for example, one Baltic state and either Bulgaria and Romania might seem a reasonable compromise, but would probably only lead to tensions among candidates in both those regions, leaving frustration and dissatisfaction all around.

The “Big Bang.” Because of the difficulties of deciding who should get in, some analysts have concluded that the best approach is to accept all (or nearly all) of the candidates at once. The advantage of the Big Bang approach is that it avoids competition among candidates as well as the potential for intra-Alliance disputes, including between supporters of the northern and southern candidates. Extending invitations to all nine of the current candidates could also help to avoid protracted tension with Russia over membership for the Baltic states. The nine official candidates for NATO membership are Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

But the Big Bang is also problematic, even beyond the potential tension with Russia. One risk is including in the Alliance a candidate that might seem stable and cooperative now, but might pose problems later if political and economic reform suffers a major setback. Another is that

NATO may not be ready to accommodate 27 members before it has even learned to work well with 19. A further issue is the impact that a big (and implicitly “final”) wave of enlargement would have on those countries that did not get in—perhaps Macedonia, Albania, Croatia, Serbia, Ukraine, Belarus, and of course, Russia. Finally, the Senate might hesitate to ratify a sweeping enlargement especially if it appeared that NATO standards—either on democracy or military capabilities—were lowered for certain candidates simply so that the process could be completed early. Trying to include marginally prepared candidates in a membership wave could imperil the entire process if it failed in the U.S. Senate or in another NATO parliament.

The “Regatta.” To avoid the difficult choices of deciding on membership now, some analysts have conceived of an alternative approach—often called the regatta—that would declare NATO’s intention to eventually accept all the candidates, but limit the number taken in next year to just a few. Proponents of this approach—modeled on the European Union’s (EU) approach to enlargement—argue that it creates the best of all worlds by reassuring candidates that they will one day join NATO without provoking Russia or diluting the Alliance by being part of an immediate, sweeping enlargement. At the same time, the regatta—as least as implemented by the EU—carries the potential disadvantage of having to articulate now just which European countries are potential candidates, and which ones are to be told that they can never join NATO. Such an approach (as the EU discovered when it denied Turkey a path to membership at the 1997 Luxembourg Summit) creates the very divisions that enlargement was meant to help erase. If a regatta approach is adopted, NATO leaders should make clear that those not included in the original batch of participants will still be eligible for future membership.

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Given the need to keep the pressure on all candidates to perform, NATO cannot and should not now decide or announce just who will get in, a decision best left for next summer or even later. At that time, the best approach may turn out to be some combination of the regatta with the extension of a limited number of memberships—for example, by accepting Slovenia, Slovakia, and the Baltic States; making clear that Bulgaria and Romania will also be invited to join in the near future, assuming continued political, economic, and military reform; and making clear to the other candidates and potential candidates that the door remains open.

Dealing with Russia

Whatever approach NATO chooses, it will need to be accompanied by a Russia strategy. While fears that enlargement would provoke a new cold war were always greatly exaggerated, it remains the case that enlargement will be most successful if it can be accomplished without driving a wedge between Russia and the West. The latest signals from Moscow seem to suggest that Russia is finally seeing that an enlarged NATO—even to the Baltic states—need not be a threat to Russian national interests. Indeed, whereas opponents of enlargement argue that Washington's need for Russian cooperation in the war on terrorism gives Moscow added leverage in its dealings with the United States, the reverse proposition is more persuasive: Russia's desire to be part of the Western anti-terrorism coalition will lead it to seek a *modus vivendi* on controversial issues like enlargement. Like all wars, cold or hot, the war on terrorism has the potential to bring former adversaries together.

These new dynamics—together with NATO's continued adoption of a more "political" role and the gradual disappearance of NATO-Russia differences in the Balkans—suggest that efforts to strengthen NATO-Russia ties are more likely to work in the future than they have in the past. The Russia-NATO Permanent Joint Council (PJC)—set up in 1997 but never adequately used because of disputes over Kosovo and other issues—could now become a forum to discuss seriously a range of political and military issues, including terrorism, civil defense, and weapons of mass destruction proliferation. This process could be supplemented by new initiatives such as the recently agreed ties between NATO and Russian parliamentarians and the ad hoc body to study joint Russia-NATO relations suggested by Secretary General Lord Robertson and welcomed by Putin. Washington might also consider calling for more frequent meetings of the PJC at the national leaders level, somewhat like the G-7/G-8. To the extent that September 11 truly has transformed the relationship between Russia and the West, an enlarged NATO need not prevent strong NATO-Russia cooperation.

An even more interesting question is the possibility of Russia's own eventual NATO candidacy. To be sure, today's Russia is not ready for NATO. It is not able to meet the criteria rightly being applied to other candidates—fully democratic governance, civilian control of the military, peaceful relations with its neighbors, respect for minorities at home, and military forces that can work with the rest of NATO's. Russia's foreign policy orientation is still too different from that of NATO's current members. One need only imagine how NATO would have functioned (or more

likely, not functioned) throughout the Balkan crises of the 1990s had Russia already then been a veto-wielding member of the Alliance. Moreover, Russia's long border with China and Central Asian states would require NATO to adopt special provisions—such as a defense guarantee limited to Russia's Western regions—before full membership could even be considered.

Being unready for membership today, however, is very different from being rejected as a potential candidate, and it would be a mistake for NATO to permanently shelve the idea of Russian membership. The prospect of eventual Russian membership—while no doubt a long way off—could potentially have the same constructive effect on Russia that it has had on NATO candidates throughout eastern Europe, many of which have resolved border disputes, improved treatment of minorities, and streamlined their armed forces as part of their efforts to qualify. The symbolic message of a NATO open to Russia would at a minimum underscore the point that NATO has been trying to make for over a decade—which may finally be sinking in after September 11—that NATO and Russia both need to get beyond the cold war mindset of the past and work together for peace across the continent.

Finally, pursuing a better NATO relationship with Russia cannot mean ignoring the importance of a stable and independent Ukraine. Ukraine is currently nowhere near ready for NATO membership, and practically speaking, it is hard to imagine it ever joining before Russia. But the door to membership should be held open to Ukraine just as to Russia or any other potential candidate, and the NATO-Ukraine Council should be used to ensure that Kiev also has a voice in European security affairs.

Conclusion

Far from undermining the case for NATO enlargement, the September 11 terrorist attacks make it both more desirable and more feasible. First, NATO's role in the response to those attacks has shown the degree to which the Alliance has evolved since the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty was signed. Whereas the original NATO essentially meant the United States taking on defense commitments for its European allies, the Alliance can now work the other way around—as the first invocation of Article 5 in 52 years has shown. The political importance of 18 U.S. allies declaring their solidarity with the United States and pledging a range of military assets—even troops—was considerable. The recent experience demonstrates that membership is now a two-way street.

Second, as already noted, NATO enlargement after September 11 is no longer likely to be as damaging to relations with Russia as previously feared. In fact, even before September 11, Russia was beginning to realize that NATO was going to back away from its view that free democracies should be allowed to choose their own security alliances. The new coalition against terrorism further diminishes the relative importance of Baltic NATO membership

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in Russian eyes and makes it more likely that NATO can enlarge and build a positive relationship with Moscow at the same time.

Finally, the September 11 attacks bolster the case for NATO enlargement because they bolster the case for NATO in general, particularly in the United States. When the cold war ended in 1989, many observers questioned whether NATO had a future with its original mission gone. The Balkan wars of the 1990s largely answered that question, showing that American military power, U.S.-Europe solidarity, and inter-operable NATO forces were still critically important to ensuring stability and security on the continent. Today, the political and military solidarity of NATO countries in the aftermath of an attack on the United States further demonstrates the importance of a strong and integrated Alliance. The decision next year to include in that Alliance all those European democracies willing and able to accept the responsibilities of membership will be an important addition not just to Europe's security, but to America's own.

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