



NATO-Enlargement After the Riga Summit

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Although the subject of NATO enlargement will not take central stage at the NATO Riga summit, the membership question remains on the agenda. Since the last accession round in 2004, three countries are still official candidates for admission: Albania, Croatia, and Macedonia. The American advocacy in favor of Ukraine and Georgia has introduced two additional countries into the membership debate. Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro are also working over the long-term for an eventual admission to the Alliance.

In the past, the enlargement question was the subject of intense debates with Russia as well as within the Alliance. Today, meanwhile, the question hardly meets with a response. This does not absolve the Alliance from the responsibility of formulating a clear position on the progression of the 'open door' policy. This is all the more true given that NATO already has a summit meeting planned for spring 2008, which is supposed to center on the enlargement question. Three central questions may help in finding consensus:

- What lessons can be taken from the previous enlargement rounds?
- What are the implications of the United States' recent advocacy for the rapid accession to NATO of Georgia and Ukraine?
- What are the consequences of future membership decisions?

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I. The enlargement process: lessons from the past

Thinking back to the debates within the Alliance between advocates and adversaries of NATO enlargement, it is clear in retrospect that at least two arguments on each side have been revealed as unfounded.

The enlargement opponents' fear that admitting new members would complicate the decision-making process within the Alliance and thus cripple the ability of NATO to act decisively proved to be unfounded. The Alliance reached its most difficult decision to date – air strikes against Belgrade as part of the response to the Kosovo crisis – despite the fact that three countries (Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic) had joined the Alliance just days earlier. Problems in reaching consensus in the years since then have primarily arisen from the 'old' NATO member states, and only rarely from the new ones.

The apprehension that NATO enlargement would lead to a long-term confrontational relationship with Moscow proved to be equally spurious. On the contrary, it was possible for NATO to develop a sustainable cooperative relationship with Russia, even while admitting new member states. The current tensions over an increasingly authoritarian Russia, are not the result of NATO enlargement.

The arguments of the supporters of enlargement were also faulty in at least two ways:

1. Despite the widespread optimism surrounding enlargement, the integration of the new members – even if they were regarded as advanced on the transformative path towards democracy – was much more difficult than anticipated. Even the military adaptation of the majority of the acceding countries to the armed forces standards of NATO was exceedingly problematic.
2. In addition, the reality of enlargement hardly conformed to the commonly postulated 'win-win' situation in which NATO and the new member states would profit in equal measure. The contribution of some new members to the Alliance remains extremely limited. Furthermore, after the 2004 enlargement round it became evident that large parts of the old "nomenclature" were still turning up in the political structures of certain new members. NATO is thus confronted with basic problems concerning the use of confidential communication and secret information.

Three conclusions can be drawn from these experiences, useful for the future enlargement discussion:

1. There is no optimal, pre-determinable size for NATO. As in other organizations, the ability of the Alliance to act decisively depends on efficient decision-making structures as well as a sufficient convergence of interests of the Alliance partners. It has little to do with the number of member states per se.
2. Russia's size and political weight make it a decisive NATO partner. Moscow's political or strategic priorities, however, are not a criterion for the enlargement decisions of NATO.
3. The admission of new members is not an end in itself. Instead, the accession of applicant countries must depend on the capacity of the applicant to strengthen the Alliance as a whole. This was already one of the core demands of the 1995 NATO enlargement study, which, however, was not always implemented since then.

II. Implications of the conflict over the accession of Georgia and Ukraine

Since 2005 Washington has been advocating the rapid admission of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO, justified primarily by the strategic importance of both countries. Behind this reasoning, however, there was also the desire to send a political signal of support for freedom movements in these regions and Washington's hope of bringing additional pro-American partners into the Alliance. Even though Poland and a few other NATO partners supported these demands, the majority of NATO states rejected them. Four reasons spoke against it:

1. Both countries are far from ready for accession. Especially Ukraine, as the second largest country in Europe after Russia, would be difficult to integrate. The most recent political developments in Ukraine (the 'Yanukovych turn') have shown that a majority of both the public and the political elites are not interested in NATO accession.
2. Should Georgia join the Alliance, the question would be raised of NATO's commitment to protect all its members under Article 5 of the treaty, given Georgia's extremely dicey relations with Russia. The Alliance could be drawn into a military altercation with Russia given these tenuous circumstances.
3. For Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO would hardly be possible from a political standpoint without renewed consideration of the candidates Albania, Croatia, and Macedonia, all of which have been striving for accession for many years. Thus there would likely (again) be five new countries joining NATO, even

though the last so-called 'big-bang' of seven new member states occurred only in 2004.

4. The process of transatlantic rapprochement after the past years of crisis would be jeopardized once again. Simply stated, constructive cooperation of NATO partners on both sides of the Atlantic was based on an unspoken agreement: Washington would no longer view NATO as a 'tool box' and would take part in developing common transatlantic positions. In return, the European member states (France once again is an exception) accepted the American idea of a globally geared Alliance and the 'Global Partnership'. If Washington were to burden one side of the agreement with a controversy over divisive candidates for accession, this would tip the painstakingly found balance.

In the meantime the Allies have successfully asserted their concerns, and the Bush administration has stated that it will at least suspend the active promotion of the accession of Ukraine.

The debate over the potential membership of Ukraine and Georgia has clearly demonstrated that the question of NATO enlargement is too important to the future development of the Atlantic Alliance for it to be exploited as a political instrument for evincing sympathy or for broadening a basis of support within NATO.

III. The conclusions for future enlargement decisions

A number of conclusions pertaining to future membership decisions can be taken from the experiences of previous enlargement processes as well as the currently active reorientation of the Alliance:

- In the past, the admission of new members into the Alliance was primarily used as a regulatory policy for transforming Eastern Europe. After September 11th, the goal of widening the circle of allies in the fight against terror became an additional priority. The military capabilities of new members played a secondary role in both cases.
- In the meantime NATO has developed from a Euro-centric defense alliance to a global stability provider with increasing demand on the global stage (there are currently five major NATO operations: Afghanistan, the Balkans, the Mediterranean, Darfur, and Iraq). Thus the criteria for the success and sustainability of the Alliance has less to do with the democratization of Eastern Europe and more with NATO's performance in running military operations.

- For the admission of new accession candidates, this means that each future *enlargement* must also mean *enrichment*: the value of membership must not just be enjoyed by the new member, but must be recognizable for current and future NATO missions as well.
- NATO enlargement is complicated yet further by developments at the EU level. The 'enlargement fatigue' felt in EU-Brussels could lead to a de facto ban on new members for the foreseeable future following the accession of Bulgaria and Romania. Thus the strategic coupling of EU membership with NATO membership is no longer granted; an accession to the North Atlantic Alliance would not automatically lead to the prospect of EU admission. The incentives to accelerate concrete development and change in candidate countries could thus lose some appeal.
- It is therefore all the more important that NATO hold fast to the criterion of "added value" in its enlargement considerations. If candidate states cannot deliver such capability in the foreseeable future, NATO should not dangle the prospect of imminent accession. The argument that a country has been working on membership for many years cannot be sufficient.
- Of the three official candidates, Croatia at best demonstrates a certain readiness for accession in the sense described above. Macedonia and especially Albania most definitely do not. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia or Montenegro are also not likely to achieve membership readiness all too soon. This picture is likely to remain fixed until the preparations for the summit meeting in 2008.
- Georgia and Ukraine represent another class of potential candidates. While the Atlantic Alliance has committed itself to the long-term goal of stability in the Balkan region – not the least through the carrot of NATO accession for all Balkan countries – such a commitment does not exist for Ukraine and Georgia (the Alliance has established a special relationship to Ukraine parallel to the NATO-Russia Council).
- Consequently, Germany should act reservedly in dealing with the enlargement question. Notwithstanding the canvassing of individual aspirants and the NATO members supporting them, it would be imprudent to offer any overhasty political promises. Past experience has shown that the enlargement discussion develops a dynamic all its own, which can be difficult to control. This is true for the three official accession candidates and for the rest of the Balkan countries, but especially for Ukraine and Georgia. Only in relation to Croatia should cautious, positive signals currently be given.

- In the press and in academic circles, the idea is occasionally broached – independent of the current enlargement debate – NATO should strive for the admission of members outside of Europe. Even a NATO membership for Israel is suggested with regularity (usually always from the same authors). Despite the fact that it occasionally emerges given the current political situation of any given day, this option does not seriously come into question. For one, Article 10 of the NATO treaty clearly states that NATO may unanimously admit *European* states into the Alliance. Enlargement steps beyond the geographic realm of Europe would thus require a change of the Washington treaty, for which there is no realistic prospect. Furthermore, in the case of Israel, for example, there is no serious readiness to take NATO membership into consideration.

NATO has declared its intention to take on the question of enlargement with renewed vigor in 2008. The 'open-door' policy should and indeed must be continued in the future. This does not, however, indicate that invitations *must* be sent out for beginning accession negotiations. A reticent NATO with less openness for additional member states may be disappointing for some applicants, but it may well be necessary for the sustainability of the North Atlantic Alliance.

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