

## The Question of NATO Expansion

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### Introduction: Expand or Die?

The continued role and purpose of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has been under question since the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact Treaty and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Some have argued, most notably from the political and military establishments in post-Soviet Russia, that NATO *could* have no further role since it had achieved its historic objective – the defence of Western Europe from the Soviet military threat. Since the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact Treaty Organisation no longer existed, logically this meant that NATO should also be rapidly disbanded. Its continued existence was, on this line of argument, an anachronistic relic of the Cold War, whose *raison d'être* presupposed a threat which had disappeared.<sup>1</sup>

However, the states which constitute the membership of NATO have strongly resisted this proposal of NATO's irrelevance. In part, this has involved a pragmatic defence of the organisation. In its forty years of existence, NATO has developed as the most, if not the only, effective multinational military and security institution which can be mobilised to deal with major threats to international peace and security. NATO's role in the Gulf War, and most recently in the Implementation Force (IFOR) in the former Yugoslavia, have confirmed this critical function which has perhaps become even more crucial in the uncertain strategic environment of the post-Cold War period.

But, there are also more substantive arguments which have been promoted to defend NATO's role. These revolve around the belief that NATO also has important political functions over and above its military and strategic objectives. NATO continues to play a critical role as the principal forum for the transatlantic relationship between the United States and Europe. NATO, as an institution, embodies the US commitment to European security and the forum where the US and Europe discuss and resolve issues of bilateral concern. Following from this is the underlying consensus that the Atlantic Alliance is not an *ad hoc* alliance in the Bismarkian nineteenth century mould but a real "*community of values*"

with a common commitment to support liberal democratic practices and to provide the security framework for promoting prosperity and freedom.

Thus, on this understanding of NATO's historic role, the end of the Cold War is not a time for disbanding the organisation; rather, it is an opportunity for expanding the members of the "*community of values*" so that they can also secure the benefits which the existing members have enjoyed under the protective and nurturing framework provided by the North Atlantic Treaty.

This, at heart, is the argument in favour of expanding and enlarging NATO membership into Eastern and Central Europe. After forty years of authoritarian rule and a highly inefficient socialist economy, these countries have firmly committed themselves to the process of liberal economic reform and democratic governance. NATO membership is clearly important as a powerful guarantee against any resurgence of Russian neo-imperialism, which cannot be completely discounted given Russia's domestic economic, political and social instability.

But, perhaps more important, is NATO's symbolic function as an entry card into the Western and European "*community of values*". As Strobe Talbot, the US Deputy Secretary of State dealing with this issue, has stressed in defending the principle of NATO enlargement, the prospect of entry into NATO provide these countries "*with incentives to strengthen their democratic and legal institutions, ensure civilian command of their armed forces, liberalise their economies and respect human rights.*"<sup>2</sup> NATO enlargement is, alongside the enlargement of the European Union, a critical mechanism for ensuring that the countries of Eastern and Central Europe successfully make the transition from their communist past.

## The Process towards NATO Expansion

Inevitably, translating this theoretically desirable objective into reality has proven to be a delicate and problematic issue. No institution, let alone NATO with its highly integrated structure and central role in European security, can make radical changes to its membership and organisation without considerable preparation and careful negotiation. In addition, full membership of NATO is not a gift; it requires from prospective candidates significant internal pre-conditions – such as civilian control of the military and willingness to participate in the full spectrum of NATO missions – which the aspirant former communist countries will take time to address satisfactorily.

There is also the sensitive issue that, since new members can only be admitted gradually, it is vital that such admissions do not create new artificial borders in Europe and increase the insecurity of those countries excluded from membership. In this regard, the Russian reaction is critical, since a highly negative response from Moscow could undermine the gains made from extending NATO guarantees to only some of the Central and East European countries.

In order to manage these difficult policy dilemmas, NATO has adopted a carefully balanced and deliberately ambiguous policy. On the one hand, NATO has extended its institutional links and programmes of engagement on an inclusive basis, involving all states of the former Warsaw Pact, including those in Central Asia, as well as other states in Europe; on the other, whilst NATO has committed itself to welcoming new full members and indicating criteria for membership, it has avoided specifying which candidates will be the first to be admitted.<sup>3</sup> Although it is widely understood that the Visegrad countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and perhaps Slovakia) will almost definitely be the first potential entrants, this has nowhere been officially or explicitly stated.

The first act of enlargement made by NATO was in December 1991, when the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) was established to promote dialogue, cooperation and partnership between NATO and the former members of the Warsaw Pact. However, this arrangement was fairly rapidly judged to be unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. First, the large number of members of NACC which now includes 38 states, and the fact that each member has been formally treated as equal, has resulted in a large and ineffective forum

which has appeared to have little function other than to provide a diffuse talking shop.

Second, NACC has offered more in terms of dialogue and cooperation than in genuine partnership, in particular providing no mechanism for offering more substantive ties with those countries seeking a closer relationship with NATO, such as the Visegrad countries, as against those with a more guarded and less enthusiastic attitude, such as Russia and the Central Asian states. Not unsurprisingly, the Visegrad countries have perceived NACC to be a device to avoid the issue of enlargement of NATO and have been offended by the perceived failure of NATO to make any distinction between “*historic victims and aggressors.*”<sup>4</sup>

Third, the weakness of NACC accentuated disquiet in the United States that the Europeans were failing to rise up to the security challenges of the post-Cold war period, which was also reflected in the US-European divisions over policy towards the Bosnian crisis. A strong sentiment emerged in Washington that NATO should “*expand or die*”, with the implicit warning that the US might not be willing to underpin European security unless NATO moved in this direction.

The Partnership for Peace (PFP) proposals which were unveiled in the NATO Summit in January 1994 sought to address these perceived deficiencies in the earlier NACC arrangements. However, the PFP did not break with the principle of inclusiveness; in fact, it widened it by including not only all members of NACC but also all members of the CSCE (Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe) as potential candidates for partnership with NATO. The Summit did formally confirm that it was committed to extending full NATO membership to new countries, but the decision-making process for determining this was kept separate from the PFP. Nevertheless, the key innovation of PFP was to provide a mechanism for more intensive relations with NATO, which permitted a *de facto* process of differentiation through the decisions of each country to determine the level and degree of cooperation and partnership with NATO. Implicitly, it was recognised that those countries which developed the closest and most intensive relations within PFP would also be the most suitable first candidates for NATO membership.

PFPP offered five objectives which, it was hoped, would ensure “*this new programme goes beyond dialogue and cooperation to forge a real partnership.*”<sup>5</sup> These were:

- to facilitate transparency in national defence planning and budgeting;
- to ensure democratic control of defence forces;
- to maintain capability and readiness to contribute to UN authorised operations;
- to develop cooperative military relations with NATO, in particular for purposes of peacekeeping and humanitarian missions;
- to develop, over the longer term, forces better able to operate with NATO.

There are now 27 members of PFP but each country has been able, through what are called Individual Partnership Programmes, to agree to their own programme of activities with NATO and to develop their Partnerships at their own speed and within their desired scope. Thus, a process of self-differentiation has been built into the PFP programme, which nevertheless does not directly undermine the principle of inclusion and of formal equality of all Partners.<sup>6</sup>

More critically, PFP also provides real measures for enhancing operational cooperation and joint NATO action, principally through mechanisms to develop a multinational peacekeeping capability. Creating such a capability involves non-NATO forces learning to operate with and being trained adequately to work with NATO forces. Through these mechanisms, PFP promotes interoperability between NATO and Partner forces which is the most stringent and difficult pre-condition for entry as full member of NATO.

Although PFP and NATO membership have been formally kept apart as distinct and separate processes, there is a considerable degree of intermeshing and interconnection. During 1994, a number of criteria were established for membership, which also broadly mirrored the commitments made by those joining PFP. These included such elements as a commitment to democracy and a market economy; resolution of border and minority-rights disputes; civilian control of the military; and assumption of appropriate share of expansion costs.<sup>7</sup> The *Study on NATO Enlargement*, which was initiated by the December 1994 NATO foreign ministers’ meeting and completed in September

1995, envisaged a strong role for PFP in preparing countries for partnership. The study also promoted a continuing role for PFP in the event that new members are accepted, so as to preserve the goal of a unified Europe and to overcome the potential alienation of those left outside NATO.<sup>8</sup>

However, the inescapable fact is that, despite all the most creative ambiguities and the definite advances made by the PFP, NATO has still not made any explicit commitment to offer membership to any specific country or set of countries. As such, NATO enlargement still remains on the backburner.

### Why has NATO Enlargement not taken place?

There are a number of reasons which can be forwarded for why the sixteen current NATO members have been reluctant to bite the bullet of welcoming new members. The first constraint has been the underlying perception that the strategic environment does not warrant such a move. Russia is certainly experiencing a profound domestic crisis, with powerful nationalist and communist forces seeking to undermine the transition to democracy and a market economy and to steer the country towards a more assertive and aggressive foreign policy. Nevertheless, any strategic assessment has to include the present weakness of Russia, its greatly enfeebled armed forces which cannot even crush the internal Chechen revolt, and the economic and political problems which dissipate most of Russia’s energies.

Moreover, this is not just the assessment of those securely embedded in the North Atlantic Alliance. Poland, the most insistent aspirant for NATO membership, has signed multiple agreements and collaborated in many fields with Russia. In addition, rather than increasing its defence capabilities, Poland is disbanding divisions and reducing the size of its armed forces and has plans to reduce the period of conscription. Hungary and the Czech Republic are following similar policies and it is difficult to marry this with a heightened threat perception of Russia. Given this, it has been difficult to persuade NATO to accept new members as a vital step to counter what is, in practice, perceived as a distant and insubstantial threat by those very countries requesting membership.<sup>9</sup>

There remain, though, the arguments that enlargement would nevertheless be beneficial for deepening the democratic and economic reforms being undertaken in Central and Eastern Europe. Reservations to this line of argument can be made by questioning whether NATO is the most appropriate mechanism for such political, social and economic consolidation and whether the European Union is not much better placed for this task. It can also be argued that NATO membership would only have a marginal impact on such processes, which far more reflect the domestic struggles within these states.<sup>10</sup> However, a more fundamental problem is that those countries which are the most likely first members – the Visegrad states – are precisely those which have been most successful in strengthening democratic institutions and developing a market economy. They are already politically and economically stable and irreversibly orientated to the West.

Logically, it is somewhat perverse to extend NATO membership to the most stable countries of Central Europe and to exclude those countries which are having far greater difficulty in making the transition from their communist past and which are far more ambivalent to the West. Such an enlargement would inevitably increase the sense of alienation and would accentuate their feeling of instability, particularly if Russia were to respond in the negative manner it has promised. It is difficult to conceive how enlargement on these terms, which included the Visegrad countries but excluded the rest, would increase the overall stability of Central and Eastern Europe.

A second separate issue is connected to the extension of Article 5 to new members, which is the collective defence provision of the North Atlantic Treaty. Although it is rarely stated, there is naturally considerable reservation amongst NATO members to provide new members with what is normally associated with Article 5, including for example the US nuclear guarantee.

But, the issue of Article 5 highlights the more fundamental issue of the relationship of military-security institutions and their constituent member states. It is often mistakenly considered that institutions like NATO have a life and a dynamic independent of the states which provide resources to them. In reality, though, defence and security institutions are at the service of the militarily most powerful of their members and not the other way around. In recent times, this has been graphically confirmed by the Gulf war and Yugoslav conflict, where it was the great powers which made the

determination of whether, when and how to intervene and used institutions such as NATO to implement their decisions with members participating on an *ad hoc* basis.

Such conditional and *ad hoc* arrangements would almost certainly apply if a genuine threat to international security were to emerge in Eastern and Central Europe. It would, thus, be mistaken to believe that an institutional guarantee such as Article 5 would, on its own, impel the United States to intervene if it was not perceived to be in its national interest to do so. Given these considerations, the PFP provisions which require NATO to consult with Partners over any perceived threat to their political independence or territorial sovereignty, and which provide effective mechanisms for Partners to join forces and operate with NATO, offer as many security guarantees as can be practically be expected. Certainly, obtaining Article 5 security guarantees would have important symbolic value for East and Central European countries but would, in practice, provide little extra security in a major crisis.

One final factor which can be identified as weakening the drive towards eastward expansion has been the remarkable return to health of NATO during 1995 and 1996. This contrasts with the period from 1992 to 1993 when the transatlantic dispute over the Bosnian crisis, in particular the US-European dispute over the policy of “*lift and strike*,” severely fractured the Atlantic alliance. As NATO appeared impotent on the sidelines of the wars of succession in the former Yugoslavia, many frustrated senior US politicians demanded that NATO expand into Central and Eastern Europe if the Atlantic Alliance were to be preserved intact. NATO’s reluctance to contemplate fast action on this score was, in their eyes, only another nail in its coffin.

By late 1995, however, NATO had regained its vitality and had asserted a new relevance. The Bosnian thorn was relieved by the US-forged Dayton Plan which represented a pragmatic compromise of the US position on Bosnia with the *realpolitik* advocated by the European actors. NATO, though, was the main beneficiary as it confidently intervened into the former Yugoslavia as the UN peacekeeping forces retreated in humiliation. An extra fillip to NATO came in December 1995 when France announced that it would participate fully in the NATO Military Council, reflecting a striking new *rapprochement* of France with the Atlantic alliance.<sup>11</sup> As a result of these developments, NATO has never seemed

healthier, in stark contrast to the early period of the 1990s. As NATO's relevance has been re-asserted, the argument that NATO needs to expand eastwards to justify its *raison d'être* has become far less plausible.

### Future Prospects for NATO Expansion

Given its central role in the security framework of the Cold War, NATO has necessarily found itself in need of a radical rethinking of its role, function and activities in the new post-Cold War strategic environment. One of the greatest challenges it has faced has been to preserve and nurture the unification of Europe - East and West - which had been attained principally through the efforts of the peoples of East and Central Europe. For this purpose, NATO has expanded its activities eastward, initially through NACC and subsequently in the provisions offered by the Partnership for Peace programme. PFP has offered substantive forms of cooperation and partnership, which include helping Partners towards interoperability and collective joint action with NATO forces. These are, as argued above, significant advances and should not be rejected as mere "window dressing."<sup>12</sup>

However, the current members of NATO have not moved towards accepting new members. Although President Clinton has publicly stated that it is not a "question of if but when," the Alliance has avoided making any explicit commitment to any one or set of states, even to the Visegrad countries which are generally accepted as the most probable first candidates. As has been argued above, there are a number of powerful constraints against making this specific commitment and thereby undermining the present inclusiveness of NATO's relationship with the former Warsaw Pact countries. Given that these constraints will probably remain unaltered, it is likely that the decision of 'when' to accept new members will be postponed as long as possible.

At some point, though, the credibility of the United States and the major European members of NATO, particularly Germany, will be severely strained if the applications of countries like Poland or the Czech Republic are consistently rejected. At that point, a difficult choice will have to be made either to extend NATO membership, with all its potentially destabilising consequences, or, in effect, to break the promises that have been made. Unless the strategic environment in East and Central Europe were to change dramatically, it would not be surprising if the latter option were ultimately exercised.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lieven, A. (1995) 'Russian Opposition to NATO Expansion', *The World Today*, 51, (November): 10.
- <sup>2</sup> Talbot, S. 'Why NATO should Grow', *The New York Review of Books*, 10 August 1995.
- <sup>3</sup> With the Partnership for Peace Programme in 1994, NATO extended its links to both former Warsaw Pact countries and to countries in the Conference (now Organisation) on Peace and Security in Europe.
- <sup>4</sup> On this issue, see Brzezinski, Z. (1995) 'A Plan for Europe', *Foreign Affairs*, 74, (January/February): 1.
- <sup>5</sup> NATO Press Communiqué, M-1(94)2, 10 January 1994.
- <sup>6</sup> For more details on this, see the excellent article by Williams, N. (1996) 'Partnership for Peace: Permanent Fixture or Declining Asset?', *Survival*, 38: 1.
- <sup>7</sup> 'NATO Expansion: The Criteria Conundrum', *Strategic Comments*, 4 May 1995.
- <sup>8</sup> 'Study on NATO Enlargement', Brussels, 1 September 1995.
- <sup>9</sup> *The Military Balance, 1994-95*, London: Brassey's for the IISS, 1994.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, Brown, M. E. (1995) 'The Flawed Logic of NATO Expansion', *Survival*, 37: 1.
- <sup>11</sup> Grant, R. P. (1996) 'France's New Relationship with NATO', *Survival*, 38: 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Brock, G. (1994) 'A Military Kabuki Lesson', *Spectator*, 1 October.

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