

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Say No To NATO's Expansion Parade: Adding Georgia, Finland, And More Would Make America Less Secure

Doug Bandow

October 24, 2016

NATO, the alliance informally known as North America and The Others, remains committed to expansion. Powerhouse Montenegro, with 2080 men in uniform, will be the next entrant. Other governments knocking at the alliance door include Finland, Georgia, and Serbia.

Adding these states would violate the purpose of an organization intended to increase American security. Past NATO expansion made the U.S. worse off by multiplying Washington's military guarantees. Newer accessions would do the same, without providing any countervailing benefits. Candidate states range from military nullities, such as Montenegro, to conflict carriers, such as Ukraine.

The transatlantic alliance was created in 1949 to protect war-ravaged Western Europe from the Soviet Union, an opportunistic predator after its victory over Nazi Germany. The threat to America reflected both Moscow's control over Eastern and Central Europe and the U.S.S.R.'s role as an ideologically hostile peer competitor.

The end of the Cold War changed everything. The Soviet subject nations were freed, a humanitarian bonanza. More important, the successor state of Russia went from hostile superpower to indifferent regional power. NATO lost its essential purpose, since the U.S. no longer needed to shield Western Europe from Moscow.

Yet the alliance proved to be as resilient as other government bureaucracies. NATO officials desperately sought new reasons to exist. Explained Vice President Al Gore: "Everyone realizes that a military alliance, when faced with a fundamental change in the threat for which it was founded, either must define a convincing new rationale or become decrepit."

The latter was viewed as inconceivable, not even worth considering. So the alliance expanded both its mission (to "out-of-area" activities) and membership (inducting former Warsaw Pact members). Washington's military obligations multiplied even as the most important threat against it dissipated.

Objections to this course were summarily rejected. Not a single Senator voted against admitting the three Baltic states. Then no one imagined that the U.S. might be expected to fight on their behalf. The alliance was seen as the international equivalent of a gentleman's club, to which everyone who is someone belongs. Those who pointed to possible conflicts with Moscow were dismissed as scaremongers. Expansion was expected to be all gain, no pain.

Alas, Russia did not perceive moving the traditional anti-Moscow alliance up to its borders as a friendly act. Despite coming from the KGB, Vladimir Putin originally didn't seem to bear the U.S. or West much animus. However, NATO compounded expansion with an unprovoked war against Serbia, a traditional Slavic ally of Moscow, and proposals to include Georgia and Ukraine, the latter which long had especially close historical, cultural, economic, and military ties with Russia. Over time Putin, as well as many of his countrymen, came to view the transatlantic alliance as a threat.

Russia's aggressive confrontation with Kiev set off near panic in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. They, along with Poland, have been pressing for "their" allied, meaning U.S., garrisons. And the Obama administration obliged, committing \$3.4 billion to a "European Reassurance Initiative" and an armored brigade for deployment in Eastern Europe.

Last month Vice President Joe Biden visited the region, where he declared: "I want to make it absolutely clear to all the people in Baltic states, we have pledged our sacred honor, the United States of America . . . to the NATO treaty and Article Five." That is, the Obama administration is prepared to take the nation into war against nuclear-armed Russia over three countries which are irrelevant to U.S. security. Since America's safety should be the most important objective policy of any alliance, NATO expansion has turned out to be really stupid policy.

So much for all gain, no pain.

Yet U.S. officials learned nothing from the past. Montenegro already has been invited to join. At least it faces no threats, so it isn't likely to drag America into war. The country simply is irrelevant. With just 2080 men under arms, Podgorica won't be rushing troops to America's defense any time soon. Yet Washington undoubtedly will be paying dearly—financial aid to professionalize the Montenegrin military, at least—for the privilege of welcoming the alliance's latest Balkan member.

Who will come next? When it comes to NATO, the aspirants fall among the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Counting as good are the most ludicrous ideas, since they aren't likely to occur. For instance, there have been proposals over the years to add Russia (what is an alliance that brings in the country against which it was formed?) and China (what security interests does the rising Pacific power share with the "transatlantic" club?). Had both joined NATO could have been renamed the North Atlantic-North Pacific Treaty Organization.

Russia's aggressive confrontation with Kiev set off near panic in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. They, along with Poland, have been pressing for "their" allied, meaning U.S., garrisons. And the Obama administration obliged, committing \$3.4 billion to a "European Reassurance Initiative" and an armored brigade for deployment in Eastern Europe.

Last month Vice President Joe Biden visited the region, where he declared: "I want to make it absolutely clear to all the people in Baltic states, we have pledged our sacred honor, the United

States of America ... to the NATO treaty and Article Five.” That is, the Obama administration is prepared to take the nation into war against nuclear-armed Russia over three countries which are irrelevant to U.S. security. Since America’s safety should be the most important objective policy of any alliance, NATO expansion has turned out to be really stupid policy.

So much for all gain, no pain.

Yet U.S. officials learned nothing from the past. Montenegro already has been invited to join. At least it faces no threats, so it isn’t likely to drag America into war. The country simply is irrelevant. With just 2080 men under arms, Podgorica won’t be rushing troops to America’s defense any time soon. Yet Washington undoubtedly will be paying dearly—financial aid to professionalize the Montenegrin military, at least—for the privilege of welcoming the alliance’s latest Balkan member.

Who will come next? When it comes to NATO, the aspirants fall among the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Counting as good are the most ludicrous ideas, since they aren’t likely to occur. For instance, there have been proposals over the years to add Russia (what is an alliance that brings in the country against which it was formed?) and China (what security interests does the rising Pacific power share with the “transatlantic” club?). Had both joined NATO could have been renamed the North Atlantic-North Pacific Treaty Organization.

Three years ago there was a brief boomlet for Colombia—yes, the country located in the north of South America. That campaign died out: it was a bit hard to imagine, say, the Netherlands rushing troops to save Colombia from an invasion by bankrupt, chaotic Venezuela. Australian accession rated support from Rupert Murdoch a number of years ago. Israel also has its partisans, though as a nuclear-armed regional superpower it doesn’t need support from anyone. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq some pundits proposed that nation as well as Egypt, though the catastrophic outcome of America’s Mesopotamian invasion appeared to end that campaign.

Counting as bad would be the Balkans, which is filled with more plausible, but equally useless, applicants. Macedonia, with all of 8000 men in uniform, wants in, but has been blocked by Greece, which objects to Skopje using a name associated with the former in ancient times. Bosnia’s ambitions remain hindered by internal division and discord. The Serbian government is moving toward NATO, despite that country’s traditional friendship with Russia and role as NATO target for 78 days of bombing in 1999.

There is congressional support for Kosovo’s membership, a step backed by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who supported her husband’s earlier “splendid little war.” Pristina’s membership remains hindered by continuing tensions with Serbia, from which Kosovo split with NATO support, and a reputation as a gangster state run by former terrorists. None of these nations is likely to start a war with Moscow, but none would enhance U.S. security as an alliance member.

Accession by Cyprus has been broached as a means to encourage a negotiated settlement to the island’s division, which dates back to alliance member Turkey’s 1974 invasion. However, Nicosia’s participation would be of little military value, since Russia has no significant naval presence in the Mediterranean and Greece already offers the alliance naval facilities. Turning

NATO into an incentive in other geopolitical disputes would further dilute the alliance's defensive purpose.

More substantive are candidates Finland and Sweden. Both were neutral during the Cold War, with the former enjoying its independence at Moscow's sufferance. Both have moved closer to NATO in recent years, becoming formal partners (a relationship which can lead to membership) of the alliance. Their militaries aren't significant, but at least the two nations have greater economic sophistication and military potential. Yet they, like the other aspirants, would expand America's security commitments without offering countervailing benefits. Although the likelihood of a Russian attack on either country is de minimis, Moscow almost certainly would respond to their accession with hostility.

Indeed, the main case for Scandinavian membership is to back up the Baltics. Explained Aaltola Mika of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, "What is needed from Finland, is for Finland to be able to stop the Russian use of its airspace and maritime areas to support military incursions into the Baltic." But Helsinki would take on Russia only if America was prepared to back Finland in a war. Such a conflict obviously would not be in Washington's interest.

NATO has indicated that its door is open to Ireland, which also long has followed a neutral policy despite (or perhaps because of) its long, difficult relationship with Great Britain. Dublin has participated in NATO-led operations and there is some public support for accession, but the government shows little interest in joining the alliance. And Dublin's participation would do little to augment alliance military capabilities.

Finally, there is the ugly: Georgia and Ukraine, both promised eventual membership in April 2008. Tbilisi long has had its partisans, including the George W. Bush administration, which promised Russia's small neighbor alliance membership. The Europeans always have been less enthusiastic, though they have hesitated admitting that NATO's promise was merely pretense. David J. Kramer and Damon Wilson of the McCain Institute and Atlantic Council, respectively, wrote about "Georgia's frustration," but the latter is of no concern to the U.S. or Europe. So long as alliance membership is about security rather than charity, the issue is the interest of existing members.

And the latter would be foolish to induct Tbilisi. Georgia's ever-irresponsible President Mikhail Saakashvili triggered a short war with Russia in August 2008. Moscow may well have welcomed the opportunity to punish Saakashvili for his anti-Russian perspective, but outside observers reported that Georgian forces started the shooting. Saakashvili is gone—now serving in *the Ukrainian government*—but his successors also hope to join the alliance. Argued Michael Cecire of the Foreign Policy Research Institute: "Between a pragmatic foreign policy outlook and a capabilities oriented approach to defense, Georgia is slowly but surely overturning a reputation as a liability into that of an asset."

However, to bring such a state, even under presumably more rationale leadership, into NATO would offer America no substantial security benefits: Tbilisi's contributions to U.S. missions to Afghanistan and Iraq were welcome but not worth a military guarantee against Moscow. The fact that "Georgia contributes more to international operations than most existing members of NATO," in Kramer's and Wilson's words, illustrates the paltry nature of others' efforts, not the

bountiful role played by Tbilisi. Georgia does not even meet NATO's minimal standard for military spending of two percent of GDP.

Nothing at stake with Georgia should cause America to risk conflict with Moscow. Putin's Russia looks like pre-1914 Imperial Russia, concerned with international respect and border security. That explains Moscow's aggressive behavior toward Tbilisi, which does not warrant an American willingness to threaten war against a nuclear-armed power. Georgia's advocates warn that the country might move toward Russia if rejected by NATO. Why should that concern Washington?

A majority of Ukrainians have come to favor alliance membership and President Petro Poroshenko said that accession remained a "strategic goal." However, Kiev is an even poorer candidate for membership. Ukraine is involved in an active conflict involving Russia. Fear of NATO acquisition of the Crimean naval base at Sebastopol was an important reason for Moscow's annexation of the former Russian territory. Ukraine matters much more to Moscow than America in every way; as a member of NATO Kiev would be seen as a potential security threat to Russia. Thus, Moscow always will take far greater risks and endure far greater costs in terms of relations with Kiev. That would not change if Ukraine joined NATO; only the dangers for the U.S. would increase.

Of course, the decision on alliance expansion is NATO's alone. Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared: "no one else has the right to interfere or try to veto" alliance membership, referring to Russia. However, since NATO is supposed to increase U.S. security, it would be foolish for Washington to ignore Moscow's likely reaction.

The alliance—at least led by the U.S.—is obsolete. The Europeans collectively have a larger economy and population than America, and vastly larger than Russia. There is no reason for Washington, which is very busy in Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, to continue defending its prosperous, populous cousins across the Pond.

At the very least the U.S. should halt NATO expansion. If the European members of the alliance want to defend weak, distant states, that should be their decision *and responsibility*. However, Washington should declare No Mas! The alliance was created to augment American security. Not risk U.S. lives and resources for no good reason.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.