

# The American Conservative

## NATO Welcomes Another Military Midget

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During the Cold War, NATO actually meant something. The Soviet Union was a totalitarian predator, the Western Europeans were exhausted, and Washington did not want to face a Soviet-dominated Eurasia.

Today the transatlantic alliance has descended into farce. Earlier this year, NATO invited the small Balkans country of Macedonia to join its ranks. In what now passes for the historic “Great Game” in Europe, officials anxiously awaited the results of Macedonia’s referendum on a national name change. Approval would allow the Western alliance to augment its collective forces by an astounding 8,000 men and 31 tanks.

For a quarter century, the countries of Greece and Macedonia, a small piece of what had been Yugoslavia, were deadlocked over the latter’s use of what Greeks considered to be their birthrate name. Officials in Athens insinuated that their small neighbor harbored aggressive designs and hoped to revive the historic Macedonian empire of Alexander the Great. With its vast legions, the newly independent nation might go on a militarist rampage and occupy Salonika, perhaps even Athens.

It’s the sort of nationalist nonsense that should cause any normal human being to laugh himself silly.

Instead the dispute quickly took on crisis proportions. As the diplomatic conflict was joined, Greeks referred to their northern neighbor as Skopje and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, or FYROM. More important, Athens blocked The Country With the Disputed Name from joining both the European Union and NATO. In doing so, it inadvertently did America a favor, by preventing another needless alliance expansion. Still, year after year American and European diplomats busied themselves attempting to resolve the dispute.

And then Athens and Skopje finally came to an agreement. After years of angry argument and Western mediation, Macedonia is to be called the Republic of *Northern* Macedonia. Apparently, the ghosts of Alexander dissipate when you move further north. If approved, the pact would lead to Skopje’s entry into NATO and possible accession to the EU. However, any compromise was too much for some nationalists, and the proposal has incited anger in both nations.

On Sunday, Macedonians cast ballots, and things didn't work out as expected. Almost 92 percent voted yes, but turnout was only 37 percent, well below the normal 50 percent threshold. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev remained confident: "I am determined to take Macedonia into the European Union and NATO." However, though the poll was not binding, some legislators may reject the change, given its ambivalent public backing. Nationalists already held enough seats to block the two-thirds majority necessary to change the constitution.

Moreover, the dubious result gives the transatlantic alliance a chance to rethink its invitation. NATO is about war. It is bad enough to induct a military midget and security black hole dependent on other members, most importantly America. It is even worse to add a country divided—Macedonia suffered through a brief civil war between the ethnic Slavic majority and Albanian minority—and subject to international controversy (Russia is intensely opposed to Macedonian accession).

Yet the State Department continues its role as NATO's cheerleader, treating membership as a form of charity. State spokeswoman Heather Nauert observed: "As Macedonia's parliament now begins deliberation on constitutional changes, we urge leaders to rise above partisan politics and seize this historic opportunity to secure a brighter future for the country as a full participant in Western institutions." Defense Secretary Jim Mattis had traveled to Skopje to urge a yes vote.

Does President Donald Trump have any idea what administration officials are doing in his name? After all, NATO's newest member is Montenegro. And while the invitation was issued by the Obama administration, the Senate did not approve Montenegro's membership until President Trump had taken over.

After last July's NATO summit, Fox News commentator Tucker Carlson asked why his son should be sent to defend Montenegro. President Trump responded: "They are very aggressive people. They may get aggressive, and congratulations, you're in World War III." If the president believed that, why did he allow Podgorica to join? He apparently does not comprehend his administration's role in admitting Montenegro.

Small, mountainous Montenegro is most notable for being the movie set for James Bond's *Casino Royale*. With a military of just a couple thousand, it looks like a modern version of the Duchy of Grand Fenwick, the fictional protagonist in the novel *The Mouse that Roared*. Unfortunately, despite the extravagant claims made by NATO officials on Podgorica's behalf, the micro-state won't be able to do much to protect Western civilization from the barbarian hordes.

Although Montenegro isn't likely to start a war by invading Russia, as the president seemed to suggest, smaller states can trigger wars. In 1888, Germany's famed Iron Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, accurately prophesied, "One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans." Serbia became the fuse for World War I.

Nevertheless, the usual Washington elites were horrified by President Trump's remarks. The late Senator John McCain, who after Lebanon never found a war he didn't want the U.S. to fight, complained: "By attacking Montenegro and questioning our obligations under NATO, the

president is playing right into Putin's hands." Former NATO supreme commander and presidential candidate Wesley Clark argued, "Trump's comments weaken NATO, give Russia a license to cause trouble and thereby actually increase the risks of renewed conflict in the Balkans."

The U.S. should enter into alliances only to enhance its security. That means forming defense relationships with countries that can contribute to that security or that otherwise warrant protecting. Alliances should be based on circumstances and treated as a means rather than an end, which means they should be temporary, ending along with the exigencies that led to their creation. Or they should be turned into looser cooperative relationships directed at common but less vital interests.

After World War II ended, NATO was established to shield Western Europe from the menace of the Red Army, which was well advanced into Central Europe. Even then, Dwight D. Eisenhower, the alliance's first commander and later president, warned about the debilitating impact of permanent troop deployments on the continent. After their recovery, European states continued to underspend on their militaries and rely on America. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the alliance's *raison d'être* also ended.

But never mind. The incentives identified by Public Choice economics kicked in, as desperate NATO officials debated new duties for the old military alliance, ranging from the ludicrous to the sublime, including proposals to promote student exchanges and fight the illicit drug trade. Eventually the alliance got engaged in "out of area" activities well beyond Europe, as members dragged each other into bizarre conflicts with little or no relevance to their common defense: intervening in multiple phases of Yugoslavia's and then Serbia's civil war, social engineering in the Balkans, undertaking 17 years of nation-building in Afghanistan, replacing Libya's long-ruling dictator with murder and mayhem.

The record went from bad to worse. Today, members of NATO fight wars to justify the alliance rather than preserve it to prevent wars. And then they celebrate when it inducts the latest military midget enveloped in discord and conflict. With Montenegro and Macedonia in, can Monaco be far behind?

No doubt this would have been the strategy had Hillary Clinton won the 2016 election. But why does President Trump continue with policies that he so sharply criticized not only as a candidate but as president?

His administration admitted Montenegro. His administration invited Macedonia to join. His administration steadily increased financial and military commitments to Europe. He responded favorably to Poland's request for a permanent U.S. base. Every one of these steps undercut his demand that Europeans spend and do more. They are watching what Washington does, not listening to what it says.

The Macedonian people have shown more sense than NATO officials, exhibiting little enthusiasm for a meaningless expansion of alliance commitments. That creates an opportunity for President Trump to assert control over his administration's policy. Only he can say no to

NATO as a fake alliance, with a Duchy of Grand Fenwick lookalike as the latest honored new member.

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