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Montenegro Awaits Senate Verdict: President Donald Trump Should End NATO Expansion Charade

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The postage stamp country of Montenegro expected to be rushed into NATO during Washington's lame duck period before the unpredictable Donald Trump became president. But Senators Rand Paul and Mike Lee, to their credit more concerned about America than wannabe foreign dependents, blocked ratification of the ratification resolution. The president should kill the measure.

Washington policymakers should ponder what alliances are supposed to be about. That's not a question policymakers usually ask. Michael Haltzel of SAIS called for the Senate to wave the micro-state through as "to do otherwise would show the world that during [Trump's] presidency the Kremlin will exercise unprecedented influence on U.S. foreign policy." In Haltzel's view apparently only a traitor would ask whether issuing yet another security guarantee is in *America's* national interest.

But the question recurs, what are alliances for? Most obviously, to increase U.S. security. Adding Podgorica won't do that, however. Montenegro has 1950 men under arms. The 875-man army has eight armored personnel carriers. There also are artillery and a few anti-tank weapons. The navy has half a dozen boats. The air force has four operational planes and a baker's dozen helicopters.

That's not likely to stop the Russian hordes on their way to Berlin or Paris.

Haltzel pointed out that Podgorica sent 45 personnel to Afghanistan. A nice move to try to win acceptance by the big boys to join their club, but such tiny deployments probably cost the alliance as much to manage as they are worth. And four dozen Montenegrins aren't going to change the course of any NATO war.

Still, argued Haltzel, Montenegro "is on a pace to fulfill the two percent of GDP spending for defense ahead of the 2020 target." Which would have boosted the country's 2016 \$69 million

defense budget to about \$84 billion. Alas, the extra \$15 billion would be rounding error in the Trump administration's proposed \$54 billion boost.

Finally, any benefit would come at a high price. Washington would likely spend more money on aid to help Podgorica conform to alliance standards. Moreover, the U.S. would be expected to go to war, real war if necessary, on Montenegro's behalf. No one imagines the latter doing the same to protect America.

So adding the delightful movie locale for the Bond flick *Casino Royale* to the transatlantic alliance would not add to America's security. How about viewing expansion as an act of charity to protect Montenegro from enemies unnamed

It's not clear who they are. Serbia and Montenegro split peacefully several years ago. Russia is several countries away and Vladimir Putin hasn't publicly added Podgorica to his conquest list. No one else has obvious designs on the micro-state—which has fewer people than the typical American congressional district. And why should such a country gain a say in the affairs of what is supposed to be a serious military organization, one in which Washington is expected to do the heavy lifting whatever the conflict?

Gordana Knezevic of RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty argued the Balkans' importance to European security by citing Otto von Bismarck's famous warning that war would start because of some damned fool thing in the Balkans. But he viewed that as a reason to keep Germany *out of potential conflicts* and he successfully separated the potential belligerents, Austro-Hungary and Russia. Only later, when he was out of power and the two states ended up in opposing alliances, did war erupt. Even then, Bismarck had made his view clear when he observed that the Balkans were not "worth the bones of a single healthy Pomeranian Grenadier." He wouldn't have taken Imperial Germany into war over the status of Montenegro.

Haltzel argued that Podgorica has "earned the right to join NATO," but Washington has no obligation to defend any other state. The decision should be based on what best serves the interests of the American people, whose defense is entrusted to the U.S. government.

The Hoover Institution's Kori Schake claimed that the invitation demonstrated that the "West can actually take a stand in defense of its values and security." How they are promoted by inducting Montenegro is not obvious. Podgorica is not a European-style liberal democracy, meriting only a "partly free" rating from the group Freedom House. Better would be to encourage the country to focus on fulfilling European Union membership criteria, which would satisfy Schake's desire to draw states to the West.

Moreover, Montenegrins are sharply divided about politics and NATO: a December poll found 39.7 percent against and 39.5 percent for membership. That's hardly a strong commitment to what remains a military alliance with theoretically serious security responsibilities. Would Montenegrins want to risk their future in a war started by America?

The alliance is not the international equivalent of a gentleman's club to which every respectable citizen aspires to join. It is a solemn commitment to put a nation's wealth and lives at risk. For the U.S. to do so its security should be at risk. The Defense Department should not be treated as a source of international welfare.

One of the Senate's most belligerent, militaristic members, Lindsey Graham, touted membership as "a clear signal to our friends in Montenegro and to the Russians about how we feel." He has a curious view of military alliances, which are about going to war, not sharing feelings. And with Moscow not threatening to invade Montenegro it is not clear what the signal might mean.

Podgorica claimed that Russia recently promoted a coup, though the truth is unclear and political divisions within the country are real. Anyway, NATO membership offers no guarantee of democratic governance, just ask the tens of thousands of Turks jailed and fired by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, well on his way to creating a Putin-style presidency in NATO-member Turkey.

The only argument for Montenegro's inclusion that has any logic is to signal that the alliance is continuing to accept new members, no matter how irrelevant and insignificant the country. No doubt, that's what Podgorica's membership would demonstrate. But Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia no more belong in NATO than does Montenegro.

NATO was created during the Cold War to prevent the Soviet Union from dominating Eurasia. Washington was determined to prevent a Soviet advance into western Germany and beyond, not to liberate nations in the east already occupied. Nor was America's participation in the alliance conceived as a means to guarantee the independence of distant lands of great significance to Moscow but virtually none to America.

Unfortunately, expansion for the sake of expansion is a stupid policy which already has gotten America and "Old Europe" into trouble. During the go-go expansion years no one thought NATO would ever have to fight so most new applicants were accepted. That included the Baltic States. Recent realization that the alliance's defense promise could be called appalled much of Europe, since few NATO members have the slightest interest in fighting over those nations. It's even harder to imagine a U.S. president making a compelling argument for staging a nuclear showdown with Russia over, say, Estonia. Had anyone stopped and asked, are we prepared for war over the Baltics?, their membership would not have been approved.

Bringing in Georgia and Ukraine would be even more dangerous, since both have been involved in shooting conflicts with Russia. Moreover, as border states once part of both the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, their status matters far more to Moscow than to either Washington or Brussels. Neutralization rather than participation in NATO would be far more likely to promote regional peace and stability.

The U.S. should stop handing out security guarantees like some hotels distribute chocolates on pillows. NATO already is too big and has added countries that never belonged in the alliance. Instead of regurgitating the conventional wisdom, the Trump administration should insist that U.S. foreign policy be based on a more realistic perspective focused on America's interests. The president should withdraw the Obama administration's Resolution of Ratification for Montenegro.

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