

# Forbes

## **Don't Add Montenegro To "Obsolete" NATO: Senate Shouldn't Sacrifice U.S. Security For Balkan Mouse**

Doug Bandow

January 16, 2017

To the shock of European leaders, President-elect Donald Trump has reiterated his attack on NATO as “obsolete.” He’s right. The U.S. once created military alliances to advance its own security. These days, however, Washington treats them like social organizations, which every nation should be invited to join, irrespective of qualification.

So it was with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s vote last week to admit Montenegro, a quaint but geopolitically irrelevant Balkan state, into NATO. If the measure is approved by the full Senate, Americans will have yet another essentially useless defense dependent, this one a corrupt, long-time one-party gangster state. Quite a model for future alliance expansion.

NATO was established to shield war-ravaged Western Europe from the Soviet menace after the end of World War II. However, Dwight Eisenhower warned against turning the alliance into a welfare program, with the Europeans forever dependent on U.S. defense subsidies. Alas, his successors didn’t listen and today a continent with a larger population and economy than America skimps on its own military while expecting Americans to come to its aid whenever the slightest problem arises. Truly the U.S. dominated alliance is “obsolete.”

It was bad enough that Washington felt the need to protect larger, wealthier European nations. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union NATO acted like a gentleman’s club which every civilized European state wanted to join. Thus entered former Warsaw Pact nations and Soviet republics, extending the alliance up to Russia’s borders. That included Poland and the Baltic States, all essentially irrelevant to the security of the rest of the continent and the latter almost indefensible, at least at reasonable cost, as the U.S. and other Europeans finally have come to recognize.

More recent proposals to bring in Georgia and Ukraine suggested that Washington had gone slightly mad. The two prospective members would offer nothing to America’s defense but would bring along potential conflicts with nuclear-armed Russia. Both would be security black holes, almost all obligation and no benefit. (Small military contingents offered for misguided U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq are no recompense for confronting a nuclear-armed power in its neighborhood over interests it considers to be vital.)

What now? While tossing out members mistakenly inducted, like the Baltics, would be difficult, Washington should at least stop adding members who add nothing to America’s security.

But the alliance, whose bureaucratic interest is to ever expand, even to the detriment of its members' actual security, has invited Montenegro to join. It is a postage stamp country with about enough people for one U.S. congressional district. Montenegro deserves its own novel, like the fictional Duchy of Grand Fenwick in *The Mouse that Roared*. But Podgorica shouldn't be part of NATO.

Montenegro's advocates attempted to rush its inclusion through the lame duck session, but were blocked by Sen. Rand Paul (R-Kty) and others. Now, like horror villain Freddy Krueger, NATO membership back. Again, the Senate's usual hawks are attempting to wave the duchy lookalike through before Donald Trump is inaugurated. After all, there is a chance that he would put America's security ahead of that of Montenegro and kill the move.

What is the case for adding Podgorica to America's lengthy defense dole? Rather hilariously, the Heritage Foundation headlined a recent study "Support for Montenegro's Accession to NATO Would Send a Message of Strength." Yes, it would be tragic if the U.S. and entire European continent had to face the Russian hordes without Montenegro at their side.

The duchy, er, country has 2080 men under arms. To transport them are eight, count them, eight armored personnel carriers, and seven operational helicopters. But NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg discerned that "Montenegro has some military capabilities which are important also to NATO." Apparently all those years of declining European defense spending finally had an effect, leaving the rest of Europe dependent on Podgorica!

Seriously, if the West's survival depends on Montenegro's inclusion in NATO, we should all be heading for the bunkers. And any capabilities which the country develops are likely to be paid for by American taxpayers with funds to upgrade the Montenegrin legions. If America and Montenegro step forth to conquer the world, it will be in a fantasy movie, not a reality show.

If rebuffed by NATO, it has been argued, Grand Fenwick, er, Montenegro might offer Russia a naval base on the Adriatic. Such an inconstant partner would be a dubious treaty ally. Exactly what the inferior Russian navy would do with such a base is not evident. And such a facility, surrounded by NATO members and on waters dominated by NATO members, would be even less defensible than the Baltics.

If not useful for military purposes, is there any other reason to bring Podgorica into NATO? Last year Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael R. Carpenter testified that Montenegro shared the alliance's "values of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law." It was a unintentionally comedic performance. Whatever Podgorica's virtues, reflecting the best of the West is not one.

For instance, last year the group Freedom House rated Montenegro as only "partly free" in political rights and civil liberties. And the trend was *down*. Civil liberties took a particular hit "due to restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly." There also were concerns "about the independence of the judiciary and the public broadcaster, as well as numerous failures to effectively prosecute past attacks against media workers." Moreover, Freedom House cited "indirect censorship." Corruption is a major problem, yet "NGOs that investigate corruption or criticize the government face pressure."

In its 2015/2016 report, Amnesty International stated: “Threats and attacks against independent media and journalists continued: few perpetrators were brought to justice. Police used excessive force during mass protests organized by opposition parties.” There was unlawful surveillance of critical NGOs.

Finally, the State Department put out a 42-page report last year assessing Montenegro’s human rights practices. While plenty of nations are worse, Podgorica is hardly a winner in the democracy sweepstakes.

State noted “voting irregularities and a state-party confluence that undermined popular confidence.” Corruption was pervasive, “characterized by impunity, political favoritism, nepotism, and selective prosecution of political and societal opponents.” The situation confronting journalists was deteriorating. “There were also governmental and quasi-official attacks on leaders of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in government-controlled media.” Minorities suffered “discrimination and societal violence.” Finally, noted State: “Other human rights problems included impunity for war crimes, mistreatment by law enforcement officers of persons in their custody, overcrowded and dilapidated prisons and pretrial detention facilities, violations of the right to peaceful assembly,” and more.

Alas, Montenegro has gained the reputation of a “mafia state.” Analyst James Nadeau reported that the long-serving Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic, who stepped down after the last election but remains influential, had a “long history of corrupt and criminal activity.” Some uncharitable observers called him “Mr. Ten Percent.”

On his way out of the Oval Office President Barack Obama argued that Podgorica’s inclusion would “demonstrate to other countries in the Balkans and beyond that NATO’s door remains open.” But that frankly is a stupid message inconsistent with U.S. security. The Balkans is irrelevant to U.S. security and only indirectly relevant to the protection of Europe. European peoples worry far more about migrants streaming through the Balkans than recent hatreds reigniting. And the Balkan wars always were more about tragedy than security. Since America should not take on Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia as defense dependents, there is no reason to send the message that the membership door is open.

Instead, Washington should declare that Europe’s cheap ride is over and the U.S. no longer will add nations to NATO like most people accumulate Facebook friends. However attractive Montenegro might be to filmmakers—it provided the setting for the James Bond reboot *Casino Royale*—Podgorica should be told to concentrate on fixing its domestic affairs and preparing for European Union membership.

Most likely the Obama administration is using Montenegro to strike at Moscow. Carpenter argued: “Montenegro’s NATO membership will be a powerful rebuke to Russia’s malign influence in the Western Balkans and demonstrate that no country has a veto over NATO’s decision to admit new members.”

Actually, adding Montenegro is a losing hand for the West. The action is laughable on military grounds and would not enhance U.S. or NATO capabilities. Russia’s armed services certainly would not be bothered.

But the proposed move demonstrates continuing hostility toward Moscow. That won't make America safer. Indeed, it is positively foolish for Washington to seemingly validate the security concerns of a power which allied officials claim threatens to harm America and Europe.

Donald Trump has rightly described NATO as "obsolete" and criticized the cheap-riding Europeans. The Senate should resist the Neoconservative rush to stifle debate and allow the incoming administration to reconsider the issue of Montenegro's membership.

The American people desperately need someone in Washington who cares about defending them, rather than making them forever protect other nations, especially those which won't bother with their own defense. The transatlantic alliance shouldn't include the Balkan mouse.

*Doug Bandow writes about international politics, economics, and development.*